An abstract artwork featuring thick, expressive black brushstrokes on a light, textured background. The strokes are vertical and horizontal, creating a sense of movement and depth. The text is overlaid on the central part of the composition.

NEW YORK

PROPERTY FROM THE COLLECTION
OF LEE V. EASTMAN

November 2005

CHRISTIE'S

LEE EASTMAN AND JOSEF ALBERS

By Nicholas Fox Webber

When Lee Eastman entered Josef and Anni Albers's lives, the former Bauhausler were living at a remove from the art world, in a modest house in a quiet residential neighborhood not far from New Haven, Connecticut. The Alberses were by then the last living faculty members of the Bauhaus faculty, having been among those who led the pioneering art school to transform everyday design, as well as abstract art, forever. Although they—Josef especially—were often sought after by photographers and writers and museum directors, they preferred an isolated way of life that allowed them maximum time to keep making art. Yet they needed protection, financial advice, and someone who could be an honest buffer between them and all the people who wanted something from them. This was when Lee Eastman became their guardian angel.

Hans Namuth, who had recently filmed an excellent documentary about Josef Albers, made the introduction. Namuth chose well; he wisely recognized why Lee and Josef, and their wives, would have such rapport. If the Alberses were living away from the world, while the Eastmans were in the swim of it in both Manhattan and East Hampton, they all had a lot in common. Lee and Josef both spoke bluntly and prized candor and intelligence. The two men shared a quality of intense animation, and a passion for the beauty of art and the infinite pleasures of everyday living. And each respected the other's consummate professionalism.

Lee was, in the eyes of both Josef and Anni Albers, a savior. He dealt with legal situations, put their finances in order, and fired and hired the art dealers who could best advance Josef's cause. He worked with the renowned Henry Geldzahler, also a friend and client, in organizing Josef's retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum—the first such show ever

given to a living artist in the Met's history. Lee dealt delicately with the sort of awkward situations that can occur in an artist's life—publications that misrepresented Josef's position in art history; unauthorized reproductions; swindlers trying to take advantage of an old man more interested in making art than in protecting himself. Time and again, their devoted attorney was a hero to two people who would otherwise have felt stranded. Moreover, he and Monique became true friends to Josef and Anni, both of whom reveled in the Eastmans' warmth and charm and good humor.

Lee Eastman and Josef Albers lived very differently from one another, but each had gone a substantial distance from his childhood while reveling in aspects of his familial heritage. Each man was a solo son with two sisters, and each held his father in highest respect—for reasons of the intellectual integrity and emphasis on hard work that had been central to his upbringing. These were two highly successful individuals who remained proud of what was strong and memorable in their modest origins.

Lee was, from Josef and Anni's point of view, the perfect person to represent them in the world. He had the knowledge of the law, and of tax and estate issues, that they knew they needed. He was connected with other artists and with important figures in the world of museums and galleries. More significantly, he was a man of real intellect—someone who prized great works of literature and had ultimate respect for true creators, for the people to whom the making of art was the central issue of life. He lived surrounded by books and paintings, and he saw both as the ultimate expressions of the value of life. He also was courtly and personable, and extremely kind—demonstrating the respect for the people around him (and, concomitantly, impatience

with people who lacked such respect) that was essential to Josef and Anni.

Lee was also a connoisseur, quite distinct in Josef's eyes from many other collectors of his work. The *Homages to the Square* that Lee acquired, in the selection of which Josef aided him, were unquestionably among the finest from that renowned series in which Josef allowed color to perform its magic. The *Homages* in the Eastman collection are all exceptionally rich and subtle at the same time.

When Josef Albers died in 1976, the Eastmans were among the group of eight people Anni chose to have at the intensely private graveside funeral service (the others being her siblings and a couple of very close friends). I had occasion to drive from New York with the Eastmans that morning of that sad event. Anni, ever cognizant of the details of life, had seen to these logistics.

In my late twenties, only having known the Alberses since being at Yale Graduate School a few years earlier, I felt apprehensive arriving

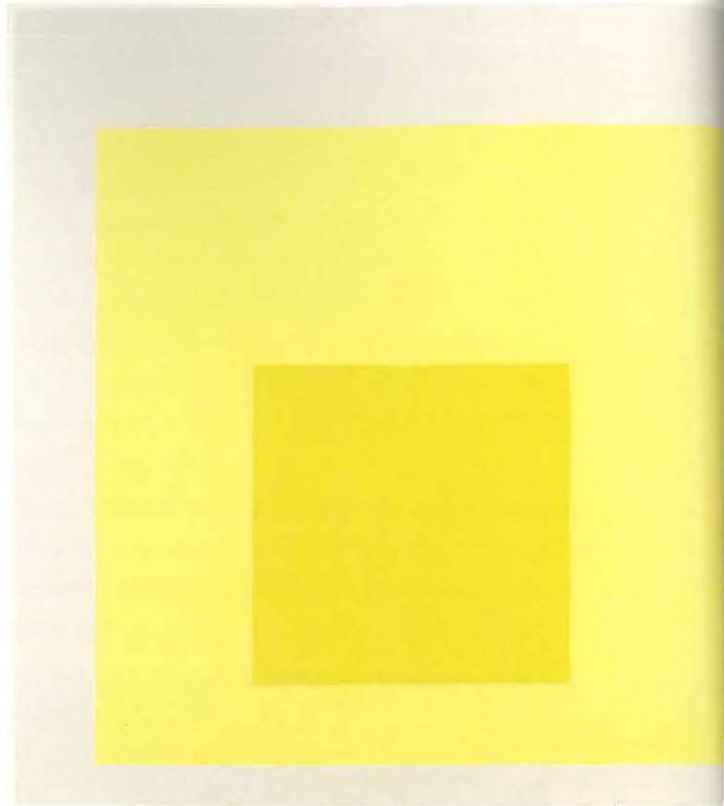


Josef Albers, The Mayor Gallery. Photo by John T. Hill.

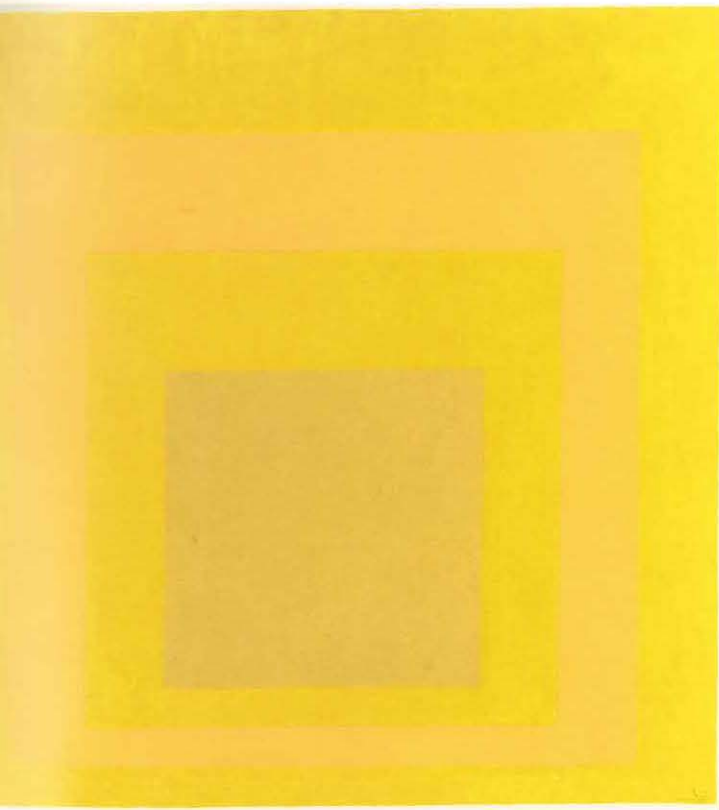
at 895 Park Avenue in order to go up to Connecticut with this renowned lawyer, whom I had met just once before, and his wife. They might be grand and intimidating, I feared. After being let in by the cook, I waited in the entrance of the Eastmans' apartment for about five minutes, delighting in the works by De Kooning and Giacometti in view, and feeling quite at home because of the bank of Albers's Homages to the Square on the staircase, each work a marvel of the interaction of color. Then Lee appeared with a warm smile. He apologized for having kept me waiting, but explained that his daughter (I had no idea at the time that this was Linda McCartney) had been on the phone from Paris trying to figure out where to have dinner that night; he had recommended his favorite Left Bank bistro, urging her to eschew fancier places. We then headed to the car, and as we went northward on the Merritt Parkway, I realized how wrong I had been to anticipate people who might in any way make me feel excluded or apart. They were generous-spirited, full of humor, and feeling the same trepidations about the small funeral service as I was.

We were so early that we stopped at a roadside Howard Johnson's just before the Alberses' exit on the Merritt. The three of us took seats at the counter. I was not hungry and only wanted coffee, but when Lee's food arrived, he was adamant that I take half of his English muffin. There was something about the gesture that I have never forgotten. It became clear that Lee Eastman was someone who liked to take care of other people, who thought about the fellow next to him.

From then on, I saw a great deal of the Eastmans and met frequently with Lee in his office. His earthy wit enchanted Anni when she was present; if she



Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Yes*, 1971.



Josef Albers, *Homage to the Square: Warm Silence*, 1971.

was restrained and austere, he cut right through in a way she relished. He could—always—be counted on to be intelligent, kind, and happy to laugh.

Lee had conceived of the Josef Albers Foundation, which became a marvelous vehicle for disseminating Josef's work and his approach to art. He was determined to see the Foundation achieve its mission of "the revelation and evocation of vision through art," helping to open the eyes of people of every age, nationality, and economic situation. He also wanted to see the work and values of both Josef and Anni Albers flourish.

Lee Eastman had total respect for these two marvelous refugee artists, and deemed their legacy of vital importance. True artists, the Alberses always felt the kindness and knowledge of the man who brought a sense of sanctuary to the last years of their lives, and the world has profited by the way he enabled their legacy to live on for the benefit of others.

— Nicholas Fox Weber