

fig. I  
*Rolled Wrongly*, 1931  
 Sandblasted opaque flashed glass,  
 16<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 16<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in / 42.1 × 42.1 cm

fig. II  
*Impossibles*, 1931  
 Sandblasted flashed glass,  
 17<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 14<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 1<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in / 45 × 37.7 × 2.1 cm

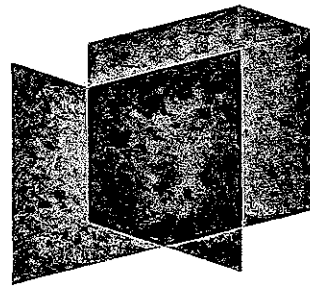
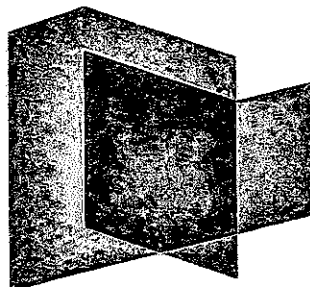
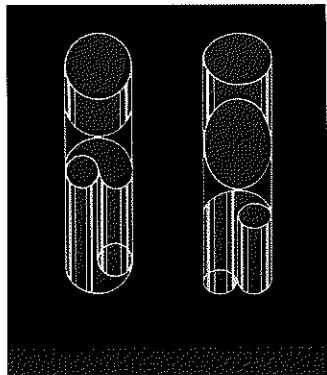
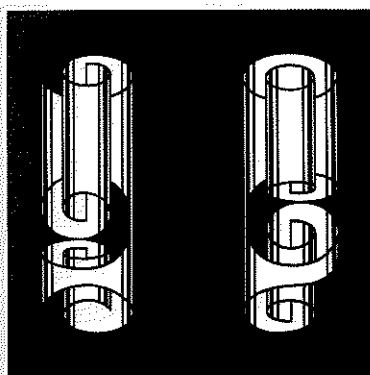
fig. III  
*Equal and Unequal*, 1939  
 Oil on masonite, 18 × 40 in / 48.3 × 101.6 cm

Yin and yang, Janus-heads, flat planes that could be seen from above and below at the same time, a Winsor & Newton Cadmium Scarlet that appears fiery in one setting and pinker in another: the juxtaposition of opposites was among Josef Albers's deepest loves.

The idea of multiple readings, of the simultaneous occurrence of a "this" and a "that"

work *Impossibles* (here two cylinders, of the same circumference at the bottom, have a different circumference at the top, which is impossible because they are straight, and appear to rise upwards and sink downwards at the same time, which is also impossible.) [fig. II] He adored making images that on the one hand seemed real, but on the other hand could not exist in reality.

He named an abstract composition of two textured black forms against a white background *Equal and Unequal*. [fig. III] Those



which were seemingly at odds: these were Josef Albers's magic potions. No wonder he gave a 1931 sandblasted glass construction the name *Rolled Wrongly* (it shows two scroll-like forms that we see from the inside and the outside at the same time, with the implicit understanding that we would picture what they would look like if rolled correctly.) [fig. I] He called another similar

words beg the same question as does the way the floating black shapes seem viscerally to attract one another, with the pull that exists between a strong magnet and steel, but also seem physically to repel one another, forcing themselves apart, the way two magnets do: how can this be? He chose as a title for a book of his drawings the goading words *Despite Straight Lines*. To begin with "Despite" was

a way of setting up an opposition and implying that trickery awaits us. Indeed, those straight lines lead us to territory that contradicts what they are. Albers makes ruler-sharp lines appear curved.

Of his *Variant* paintings and his *Homages to the Square*, he would tell those of us lucky enough to stand at his side in his studio, with vibrantly colored panels of those two bodies of work in front of us, “Look! They go inward and outward at the same time. They are flat and two dimensional” – Josef would hold out both of his hands, starting with them together, and then make a sweeping motion as he pulled them apart along a flat plane and opened his arms like wings – “and at the same time they move back into space, into the third dimension, and then come toward us, in and out, out and in.” Here he would hold his right hand with the fingers stretched out, parallel to the ground, and move it incrementally, in stages, backwards and forwards.

“Up and down, right and left! And it all happens at once. The yellow that is bright and sunny on the sides appears a deeper gold in the middle, where it has lighter surroundings,” he would say, pointing to a *Variant*. “You think the middle square is the one nearest to you,” he would say, turning toward a new green and blue *Homage*, “but a moment later it is far away, really far away, a window open to a distant universe.”

Yet, Josef would explain, he always painted the middle squares first, and always put each color on the white background, never applying a paint on top of another paint, because his father, a house painter, had told him that, “when you paint a door, you always start at the middle, and work out, because that way you catch the drips and don’t get your cuffs dirty.”

The way that the middle square could appear, insistently, to have been painted on top of another color; the way that in a *Variant* the viewer is convinced that a band of color is a translucent, tissue-paper thin coating of paint on top of the two colors that appear, irrefutably, to show through it – while in fact each of these colors is straight from the tube, applied to the white gesso background, with no hue ever on top of another – is what Josef would call “the discrepancy between physical fact and psychic effect.” Those words were his personal “Hallelujah!”

Josef saw these multiple, contradictory readings as being among the miracles that make art central to human pleasure, and to an understanding of the human mind. He considered the essence of his profession – as a teacher and an artist – the revelation of wonderful “lies”. It was serious stuff, fundamental to the work of great artists of many schools and epochs, a capacity he admired in Bavarian Rococo architecture. We often talked

of Balthasar Neumann's spectacular church *Vierzehnheiligen* and the way it infuses plaster and other solid, weighty materials with an impression of lightness, so that the billowing spaces inside are like froth, a splendid whipped cream (Josef would say *schlag*) fixed in place, miraculously, for all time. He would delight in quoting Picasso saying "All art is a lie," and then discuss the notion very seriously, qualifying his remarks by emphasizing that art is, of course, deeply moral, the embodiment of values to live by, and that the lying is a form of artistic deception, a carefully regulated form of trickery, a Houdini-like transformation, not a false representation of the hurtful or venal sort.

He was serious, but he expressed his excitement lightly, just as he painted in a way that was entertaining, uplifting, and never ponderous or didactic, even if it made some very profound points. Much as he loved what the word "dichotomy" represents, for example, he avoided any such terms that fall into the category of academic jargon, the sort of lingo that puts people off. (Josef very much appreciated my idea that "Di-Chotomy" was the nickname of a schoolgirl named Diane Chotomy, and that she had a cousin named Diane Chotomous. He loved most puns, for they are, after all, a form of double meaning. Toward the end of his life, he was overwhelmed

that one of the greatest culprits of the Watergate hearings, John Ehrlichman, had a name which in German means "Honest Man." And he told me that he wondered if the local bakery, called Entenman's, had any idea that, when they sold "Drake's Cakes," the word "Enten" is German for Duck, as if these cakes had been made by male ducks. He and Anni both thought it was hilarious that at the warehouse where he stored his paintings there was a woman in the front office who had a plaque on her desk which simply said "sexretary"; to play with language was like fooling around with line. Josef also told me that Gerald Ford had "a face like a knee"; the idea of a single part of the body looking just like another very different part, with entirely different functions, delighted him. When his cleaning lady's five-year-old daughter said that the air conditioning vents in the ceilings of his house were "just like Yuckie's paintings", he acted as if he had heard one of the most brilliant remarks ever, both because he liked the way she had mis-stated his wife Anni's nickname for him – Jupi, pronounced Yuh-pea – and because of the child's brilliant powers of observation in noting, correctly, that the white grated vents had three squares centered left and right but weighted more at the bottom than the top, just like his paintings. He was delighted to have his profoundly beautiful and poetic art

fig. IV

*View from my window, Stadtlohn, 1911*

Pen and ink on heavy wove paper, with white gouache

11 3/8 × 8 in / 28.9 × 20.3 cm

fig. V

*Hoteltreppen Genf, 1929 (Hotel Staircase Geneva, 1929), 1929*

Photocollage, 11 1/2 × 16 1/8 in / 29.5 × 41 cm

fig. VI

*Paris Tour d'Eiffel VIII '29 (Paris, Eiffel Tower VIII '29), 1929*

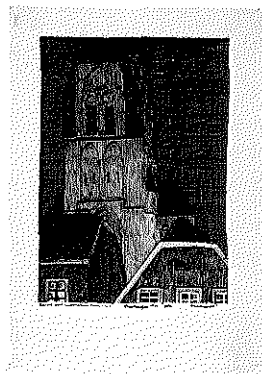
Photocollage, 11 1/2 × 16 1/8 in / 29.5 × 41 cm

works compared to something machine-made, functional, and fabricated anonymously; this, too, was a form of multiple reading.)

The juxtaposition of opposites, the “you see it this way but also that way”, are apparent in Josef’s art starting with his earliest extant drawing. This pen and ink of the church in Stadtlohn, where he taught at a one-room school in 1911, shows

into the pleasures of artistic reversal.

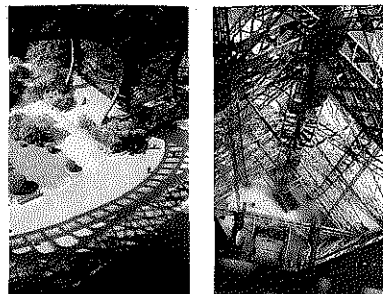
From then on, he would think in pairings and diptychs, always with the two parts being different. There is a superb photocollage Josef made in 1929, at the Bauhaus, in which he presents, side by side, a staircase in Geneva as seen from two very different points of view. [fig. V] On the left, we are looking down at the stairs that wrap around a courtyard; on the right, we gaze at the balconies to which the stairs lead, and which surround another courtyard. The effect is dizzying and mesmerizing. It takes a while to know exactly what it is we are seeing; mainly, we feel the motion, the remarkable rhythm, the dizzying movement of all the black and white. That same year, 1929, when Josef



IV



V



VI

some of the windows with black panes and white mullions, and others with white panes and black mullions. [fig. IV] Since it was not night and day at the same time – although, over half a century later, Josef would entitle a print series *Midnight and Noon*, with the idea that in art you could make both occur at the same time – those two ways of rendering the windows were a deliberate foray

and Anni traveled quite a bit from the Dessau Bauhaus, he made another photocollage of two images of the Eiffel Tower, both taken from within the structure. [fig. VI] The shot on the left is made from above, at a raking angle, of one of the four bases of the enormous structure. The shot on the right looks straight down a shaft of steelwork. Each is a brilliant image, but what counts most of

all is the interaction of the two photographs, the responses and counter responses, the forces that one shot exercises on the other.

Complex dualities, the way that in a pair of forms one plus one equals far more than two: these ideas were part of Albers's lifeblood, essential to a range of paintings he did once he went to America to teach at Black Mountain College. Then, in 1947, he began the series of paintings which he called the *Adobes* or *Variants*. To refer to them as *Adobes* makes reference to the houses in the American southwest and Mexico, to the architecture he came to love as he traveled repeatedly, by car, from North Carolina to Mexico. The name *Variants* is a bit more clinical, more like the terms "sonnet" and "duet" that belong to the realm of artistic exercise. That double-naming is itself perfect, for the paintings are both beautiful and serene – homelike and welcoming and pleasant to look at – while at the same time they are the by-product of serious, carefully calculated color experimentation.

Josef was driving at certain points in these paintings. A change of colors in two paintings of identical format transforms both the emotional character and the apparent physical action of forms. Some of these paintings are restrained, others euphoric; some move at a slow tempo, others at vertiginous speed. There is no right or

wrong, of course, no better or "not as good"; they are all fine jewels. The current exhibition, with which Waddington Custot Galleries focuses, without precedent, on this body of work about which the artist was so personally passionate, gives viewers an extraordinary opportunity to take in all such possibilities.

In these paintings, Josef found his best vehicle to date for demonstrating that colors alter their appearance according to their surroundings; a green has one appearance in a sea of pink, and a very different one when it abuts somber browns and grays. Then there was the illusory transparency that could be achieved when unmixed colors were applied straight out of the tube, directly on the white ground and never on top of one another, hard as the viewer may find this to believe. And now he had a new means of demonstrating that incompatible forms of motion can appear to occur simultaneously. The configurations oscillate left and right along the picture plane but also away from it into mysterious depths. To contradict reality and induce the viewer's incredulity, and to take the viewer into a new kingdom, that of art, was Josef's mission.

One day Josef asked me, in front of one of these *Variants*, which color I saw in the greatest quantity. I hesitated between orange and green. He watched, with delight, as I tried to make up

my mind. Then he explained that if there were twenty people in his studio, rather than just the two of us, one or another person would probably have responded with each of the five colors in the paintings. But in fact, he explained with a magician's delight, there were virtually equal amounts of each color in the painting. "The thing is, Nick, the orange shouts; it makes itself more present than the gray. But that is the property of orange, and affects our perception. Yet someone else might think there is more of the gray, because we each perceive color differently. It is all about perception, not a formulaic recipe for reality." He grinned with joy, and ended his commentary by saying, exultantly, "This is my madness! My insanity!"

Of course it is not primarily their demonstrating of fascinating principles that give these paintings their quality; it is the magisterial charm of their formal grace and spectacular color orchestrations, the enticing blend of serenity and animation. If the *Variants* serve as exemplars of theories, they do so in forms rich in artistic values. The frontal stance of their forms, immobile and fluid at the same time, and their effect as reduced reliefs, which recall the shallow bas-reliefs of Mantegna's grisaille paintings, for example, transfix us.

And light shines from these paintings. They

do not reflect it; rather, they glow from within. The system enabled Josef to make paint as luminous as sunshine.

I was in Josef's studio one day when a devoted collector of his work said she was desperate to buy a certain *Variant* for her husband for a major birthday. Josef said he just did not know; he considered it one of his masterpieces, and was not sure that it should go into private hands. He then referred to the painting as his "Piero". While making it clear that he in no way was claiming equality with Piero della Francesca, he did allow that the rich restraint of the early Renaissance Italian, the refinement as well as the mystery, were among the goals of his art, and he thought that in this particular *Variant* he had achieved a tonality and a movement that came closer than usual to his objectives.

He struck a deal with the collector. She had the idea that he should do a second version of the painting, which she would also buy and would give to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Josef accepted the offer.

It's a happy story, of the pleasures afforded when two sympathetic people find common ground, and when the love of seeing is a unifying force. The paintings reflect the humanity that was essential to Josef, and the sense of enjoyment.

There is a possible interpretation to the *Variants*, albeit a bit off beat. In the mid 1980's, I was summoned to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York by its chief attorney, Ashton Hawkins, who had come to know Josef when Josef was the first living artist in America to have a solo retrospective at the Met. I went to the scheduled appointment, and Ashton introduced me to a pleasant woman who was his aunt. The woman told me that she ran a bed and breakfast in New Mexico, and that Josef and Anni stayed there several times. She asked me a lot of questions about the Alberses, and offered pleasant recollections of the couple.

A week or so later, a black binder arrived for me via post. In it there were pages of poetry. Ashton's aunt had also slipped in a note saying that she thought I could be counted on to hold on to this material and ultimately deal with it as I wanted.

They were love poems, some of them highly erotic, which Josef had written her. In that bed and breakfast, once Anni was soundly asleep, he would, it became apparent, sneak out of his front door – the rooms were all reached directly from the outside – and proceed to the door of his lover. Ever since I learned this, I have from time to time seen the door-shaped forms near the middle of the

*Variants* as those two entrances – to the rooms of his two women.

Those of you who read this with disapproval will be even more shocked, I imagine, to learn that Anni knew about what was going on. She told me that she was raised in a world where such dualism was expected. She astonished me, a New England puritan who was brought up in a very different milieu, when she said that she was once immensely pleased when Josef said he needed her to end a love affair; he could not get an old flame to leave him alone, and the only solution that would work would be if his wife stepped in. Anni did so happily: “I was proud to be of help to him.”

He might have disapproved of the theory of two doors in an adobe hacienda, but here, too, Josef presented side A and side B. Side A was that his art should be seen as having been made with no evidence of the human hand, and that nothing of his life or his emotions comes through in his painting. Side B was the way that he never used tape, thus leaving his lines distinctly handmade, and painted with subtle texture that is the clear by-product of human workmanship. The opposite of his resistance to biographical interpretation was evident in the delight Josef took in the theories about his art offered by a friend who was a psychoanalyst, readings Josef told me about with

joy. The friend saw an abstraction of two large circles and four smaller ones as being a clear reference to Josef's family structure as it had been in his very early childhood, before his mother and his younger brother died.

Josef used the pseudonym of "C'razus" for the poems he wrote to the lady he met during those evenings in New Mexico. The playfulness, the unabashed sensuality, the emphasis on light, the joy in repetition, the acceptance of one's obsessions: the qualities that underscore the *Variant* paintings are salient in his writing. So is the artist's sheer romanticism, which we are coming to recognize more and more in his paintings:

*I can't lie down  
without calling  
again and again  
a name  
and over and over  
again*

*If people could hear me  
they would call me crazy  
but I would not  
mind it  
because because  
I am*

*I can't close my eye  
without seeing  
somebody  
I saw only once  
in too late  
a light*

*But the moon  
is increasing  
and soon  
will be full*

*C'razus*

To have punctuation in these lines would be like having black lines in the painting: Josef wanted flow, not stops. The passing of time, as manifest in light that changes, was to be cherished, not fought. So was the delight in what he called his craziness, while making manifest his supreme intelligence.

Poetry and science at the same time. Propriety and naughtiness. Everything is possible, this beautiful body of art declares!

Nicholas Fox Weber