

Tango and Passion

A secret trove of drawings of nude dancers reveals a tender and erotic side of Josef Albers

BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER



Anni and Josef Albers, New Haven, 1950.

A few months after Josef Albers died in March 1976, a week after his 88th birthday, his wife, Anni, and I went on an outing. Our goal was to locate a storeroom that the artist had been using for the past two decades.

Josef had been robust until his last birthday, and Anni had often seen him head out on his own with artworks or documents and then return empty handed. She knew approximately where the mysterious space was, because she had often waited in the car in front of the building into which he would disappear to deposit something. She was sure his storeroom was in the basement.

We left the modest ranch house where the Alberses lived, in Orange, a suburb of New Haven (Josef, obsessed with the variability of colors and the imprecision of their names, loved the green-and-white road signs declaring, in bold letters, “This is Orange”), and headed into town.

I was driving the Albers’s dark green Mercedes 240 SL, their only luxury. The popularity of Josef’s work with collectors made it possible for them to “eat caviar every night,” their lawyer told them, but they were appalled at the notion, preferring Westphalian ham, dark bread, and boiled potatoes.

I parked in front of a building that in earlier years had housed Yale University Press, the publisher of Josef’s *Interaction of Color*. Anni remained in the car, as had been her habit. Handing me the keys, she remarked that she hated the word “widow.” “When Juppi was alive,” she joked, “I was ‘that dragon at the door,’ happily, when the self-important ones came, but now that he is gone, I am simply his wife.” She suggested I find the stairs to the basement, look for locked doors down there, and then try various keys until I succeeded in opening one of them.

Since childhood Anni had had a deformation of her legs, which in no way impeded her becoming a great weaver and printmaker—or, for that matter, trekking to Machu Picchu before it was well known—but she couldn’t manage steep steps.

I followed her instructions and eventually matched a key to a lock. The heavy steel door opened into an airless room, about 15 by 25 feet in size. It was lined with paintings and glass constructions and filled with stacks of what appeared to be magazines, portfolios, and piles of drawings and photographs. Lying on a table, as if

it had been recently pulled out and read, was a letter from Paul Klee to Josef and Anni, with a pencil sketch by Klee.

My knees went wobbly. After 15 minutes, I went back upstairs and reported to Anni that her hunch was right. Josef stored a lot of things in his secret room. We agreed that I should start sorting through them.



Josef Albers,
Dancing Pair, ca. 1919.
Is the male figure a self-portrait?

Within the next few months, I found treasures, including folders Josef had labeled as his early drawings. Among them were about 20 nudes. This was surprising, because Josef would not allow his students to draw from the live figure, declaring such work a waste of time.

Most of the nudes were what one would expect from a student at an art academy in Munich, which is where Josef studied in 1919–20, just before going to the Bauhaus. But one afternoon, sorting through the studies of women in traditional poses, I found a bold ink drawing of a naked man and woman dancing. They looked as if they might be doing a tango. Then, underneath, there was a drawing of two naked women dancing, their bodies pressed against one another.

It was like discovering the love letters of a Victorian grandfather. I was shocked to realize that the ever-correct, self-disciplined painter of the “Homages to the Square” had made images that were so incredibly sexy. Looking at those two drawings, I felt that he had been full of fire not only as a young man but all his life.

Then, in the first drawing, I realized that the nude man, seen from behind, was a self-portrait. Josef was about 30 at the time. I had seen photographs of him from that period, and I knew what his head shape and build were like when he was older, and there was no question that the thick neck and lean but muscular body were his. And although we see only the back of his head, we feel the intense regard with which he is eying his dancing partner: the consuming way Josef took in whatever he looked at.

The man’s image is abbreviated, but we can see that he is completely in control of the dance. His posture and pose are confident and graceful. Leading this fiery tango, he is dominating but calm and patient: an unbrutal master. His massive arms are precisely where he wants them to be. His muscles function well. His feet are perfectly positioned. Josef evoked his own presence with minimal outlines, shading only his hair. He made himself extremely powerful, competent, and at the same time relaxed.

Josef liked to dance. At the Bauhaus, a few years after he made this drawing, Anni used to remain seated while he whirled around the dance floor with Nina Kandinsky. Anni wasn’t without jealousy, but she accepted the situation. When, eventually, I showed her this drawing, in which the woman in Josef’s arms is frenzied, almost orgasmic, she simply smiled and said, “Ach, ja!”

Josef as an artist deliberately teases the viewer. He manipulates us, forcing our imagination. Looking at this drawing, we picture what we do not actually see: the sort of provocation the artist cherished. We envision the dancers’

animated features and sense their looks of ardent passion, even though the man’s face is turned away from us and the woman’s is blocked by his shoulder and upper chest.

As is usual in Josef’s work, we are stimulated rather than satisfied. We cannot fathom everything at once: we feel the moment fleeting. The figures that join only at their hands are like the colors in the “Homages to the Square” that touch only along shared boundaries yet are so palpably connected beyond the points of contact.

In the other drawing of two naked figures, however, the embrace is more intimate. When I first saw this second drawing, over 35 years ago, it completely altered my sense of Albers, both as a man and as a painter. The way these two naked people are intertwined, clinging to each other, is passion itself.

Josef creates with a single line the back, hip, and thigh of the woman on the right, and—although he ends the line halfway down the figure and delineates a profile in one stroke—he invokes an entire human being. Her eyes are closed, making clear the emotional power of the moment for her.

Viewers disagree about the gender of the figure whose back is to us. I see the figure’s hair and hips as female, but others read the character as a broad-shouldered man—again, possibly Josef himself. Regardless, this moment of flesh against flesh is both tender and erotic.

Recently, while organizing the exhibition “The Sacred Modernist: Josef Albers as a Catholic Artist,” for the Lewis Glucksman Gallery in Cork, Ireland (up through July 8), it struck me that the Irish writer Colm Tóibín would be the perfect person to write a catalogue essay. He agreed, and we spent a lot of time at the end of last year looking at Josef’s work together.

In his essay, Tóibín elucidates the relationship of color and light in the “Homages to the Square.” He is attuned to the luminescence in Josef’s work and to the artist’s particular achievement in making flat colors appear to glow. He writes, “Albers works as an alchemist as much as he does as a scientist. He allows magic to happen close to logic. . . . He creates his image to hit an uneasy place in the nervous system while suggesting that it comes from the sure mind, the sure hand.”

And this is what Josef’s drawings of naked couples are. Like the art with which, three decades later, he would make his reputation, they reveal him bringing magic into life and, with his “sure mind” and “sure hand,” deliberately hitting “an uneasy place.” Rather than being anomalies, these drawings are keys to his true romanticism, his infatuation with mystery, his immersion in the pleasures that come with a certain tension.



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When, some 25 years after making these sexy pictures, Josef began his “Homages to the Square,” and devoted himself to showing the impact of one color on adjacent colors, he was continuing in a new way with a love of connectedness and of magic that had burned inside him for most of his life.

For more than a quarter of a century, Josef used his format of squares within squares to show the way colors penetrate one another. It was “interaction” — his preferred word — that obsessed him. It’s the same in his drawings of two naked people touching each other. There is a sense of transport.

**Josef Albers,
Embracing Pair,
ca. 1919.
Man and woman
or two women?**

Joy pervades. Josef’s function in life was to take you in his arms as his partner and guide you to new pleasures.

His task was to invoke relatedness: the impact of a color on its neighbor, of a line to another at an angle to it. How engaged it kept him — to show hues embracing, forces touching, hue against hue, like flesh against flesh. ■

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