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## Josef Albers's Drawings: The Linear Obsessions of a Color Theorist

Nicholas Fox Weber

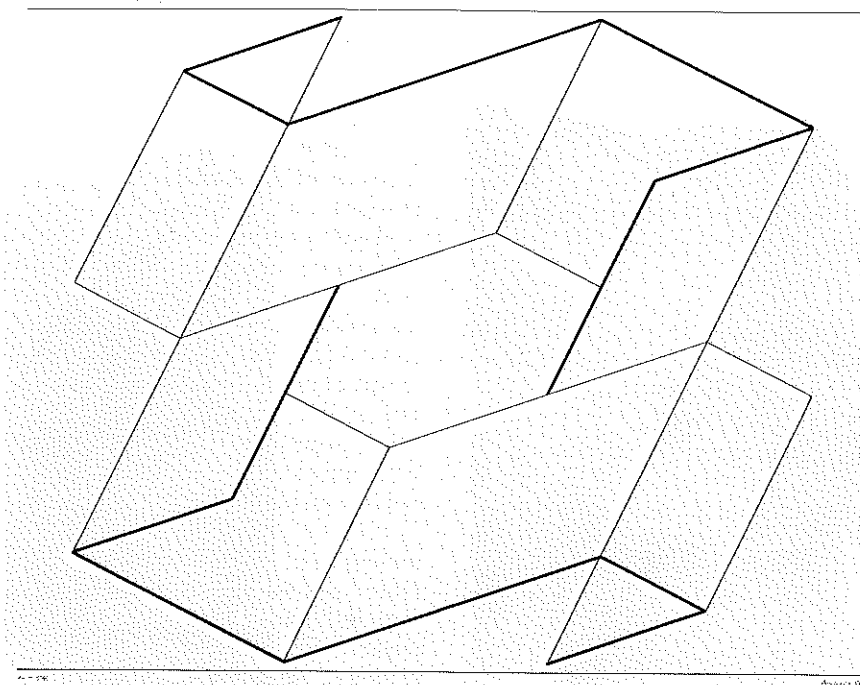
The surprise—the surprising surprise, that is: the one you weren't anticipating—when you get close to one of the *Structural Constellation* drawings of Josef Albers is how rich the texture of the line is (Fig. 1). You are aware of the pen nib and of the jar full of lush China ink; you feel the presence of the human hand that delighted in these materials. Albers ran his splendid instrument—a

Mont Blanc, probably purchased in Germany—along the side of an immaculate steel meter stick and seems to have derived palpable delight from the process. The consistently velvety line is as black and densely perfect, moment to moment, as Beluga caviar: fine, exquisite, rare, luxurious, and full of punch.

Generally, we see these geometric images by Albers reproduced into other media rather than in their earlier incarnations as ink drawings (Figs. 2-5). Translated, they still manage to do all

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Fig. 1. Josef Albers, *Structural Constellation*, c. 1956, pen and ink, 18 x 22 in. (45.2 x 56 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.



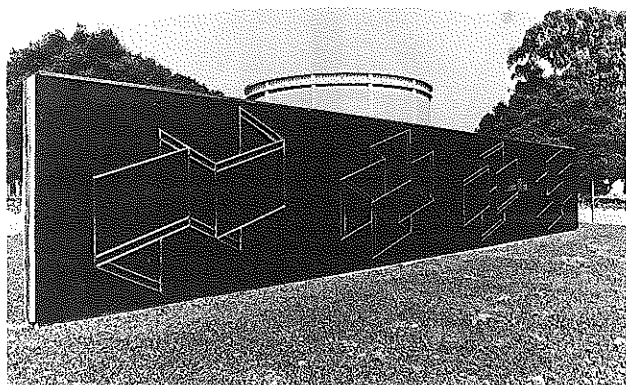


Fig. 2. Josef Albers, *Stanford Wall*, 1980, African granite and steel, 8 ft. 8 in. x 54 ft. x 1 ft., Lomita Mall, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif. Photo courtesy Stanford University.

the tricks Albers wanted them to perform. A single form offers multiple, contradictory readings; first you think you can enter it one way, then another, but never both at the same time. Flat planes appear bent. The rectangle that you think you were viewing like a tabletop from above then flip-flops to become the identical surface from below. All of these surprises—the surprises we can count on—occur when the images appear in books ranging from Albers's own *Despite Straight Lines* to E. M. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*. The delightful twists and turns also happen in the artist's architectural murals where the lines are rendered in chrome piping, in his engravings where black vinylite is incised with white lines (like the nameplates worn by the staff at roadside diners), and in his spare and elegant white line embossings. In those forms, everything is machined, the personal touch deliberately gone. Albers often said that he did not want his own handwriting to show, he just wanted the lines and shapes to have their fullest voice. Those other media served him well in achieving that distance, and the desired visual activity, impeccably. But it is in his actual drawings that we feel not just that Josef Albers was a brilliant technician and a skillful magician, but that he was an artist.

Unless there is some scrap of evidence yet to turn up, he did not, in fact, exhibit these drawings during his lifetime. He was proud as could be when his geometric imagery appeared over a museum entrance on one of the main public squares in Münster, Germany; on the exterior wall of a skyscraper in Sydney, Australia; as murals of marble

etched with gold leaf in the Corning Glass Building on Fifth Avenue; on a free-standing wall at Stanford University. But the versions in China ink belonged to his private domain. Yet they are perfect and immaculate, far more so than what most of us would make just to keep at home. And they are the size of bona fide art objects, of easel paintings, most of them eighteen by twenty-two inches. He made one after another of these lovely works on paper and then stacked them and stored them in a flat file. Looking at them now, we feel as if he was a closet Romantic.

These pen and ink drawings that Albers produced throughout the 1950s and 60s—the same years that he was

teaching at Yale and painting his *Homages to the Square*—belong, in fact, to a larger strain of his personality that he kept from the general public. He was, in a very traditional sense, someone who loved to draw. He doodled, he sketched, he recorded the sights to which he traveled, and sometimes he drafted as meticulously as an engineer. He went the gamut, from impromptu portraits and village scenes done in pencil, to abstract monkeying around of the type other people do when they are on the phone (but to which Albers devoted uninterrupted energy), to precise and immaculate linear creations for which there had been lots of preparation and preliminary forays. As these eloquent *Structural Constellations* show, he drew because he treasured the act, not so much to demonstrate principles as to create art.

Albers probably began to draw as a little boy, but his parents were not the sort of people that kept juvenalia, so nothing remains from the early years. Albers's father, who was a carpenter, house painter, glazier, electrician, and general builder and fix-it man, was more concerned with his son's ability to hammer a nail properly and clean his brushes than with any knack the child might have had for spontaneous expression. So there is no testimony of the type that exists with Klee and Picasso showing Albers's initial artistic instincts. The earliest extant drawing is a pen and ink,

Fig. 3. Josef Albers, *Two Supraportas*, 1972, stainless steel on granite, 59 in. x 107 ft., entrance of Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Münster, Germany. Photo courtesy Westfälisches Landesmuseum.



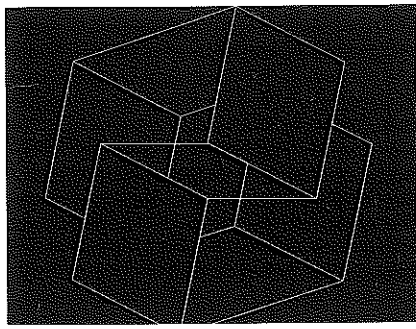


Fig. 4. Josef Albers, *Structural Constellation*, c. 1950, machine engraved vinylite, 17 x 22½ in. (43.2 x 57 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.

executed in 1911, when he was twenty-three years old, of the view from his window in *Stadtlohn*, the Münsterland town where he was living and teaching at the time (Fig. 6). He absorbed every possibility of the sight. He enlivened the angles of the unspectacular late nineteenth-century St. Otgerkirche church and gave it and the humdrum structures around it a rich complexity. The background of the drawing pulsates with Albers's almost visceral reaction to the force of right angles and to architectural massing.

This early drawing is also a foray into the realm that Albers would eventually investigate with far more knowledge and sophistication in the *Structural Constellations* as well as *The Homages to the Square*. In *Stadtlohn*, he simultaneously animated two-dimensional and three-dimensional space. The viewer is moved sideways and up and down, as well as into and out of the background. Another link to the later geometric works is the degree to which the artist basked in the possibilities of black and white. He used unmodulated black lines and white paper to create a range of gray tones, demonstrating a point that would be so essential to his personal philosophy and his teaching: that, in art, one plus one can equal more than two. He also treated black and white as a motif for some joyful playing around, for the sort of reversals and variations he would always prize. So some of the church windows have black panes and white mullions, whereas another is equally convincing with white panes and black mullions. The tower is white with black detail; the wall of the house in front is black with white detail. The crisp reversals are deliberately playful. We feel that the artist relished the pro-

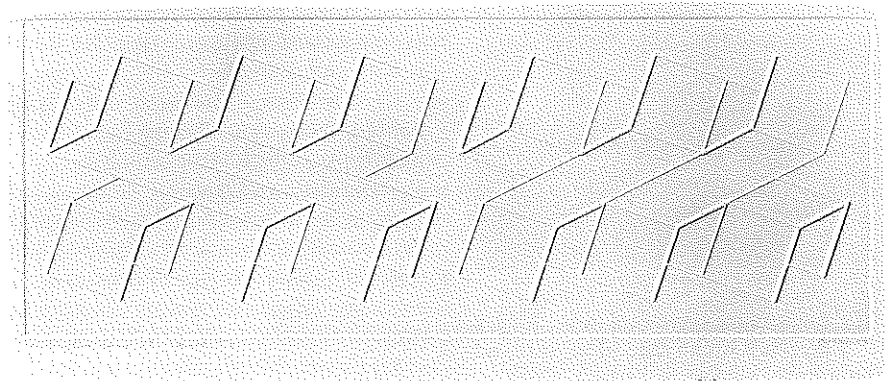


Fig. 5. Josef Albers, *Duo C*, 1958, inkless intaglio, 22 x 30 in. (56 x 76.2 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.

cess of creating them. And we are reminded that sharp perception mixed with imagination can transform limited sources into a treasure trove.

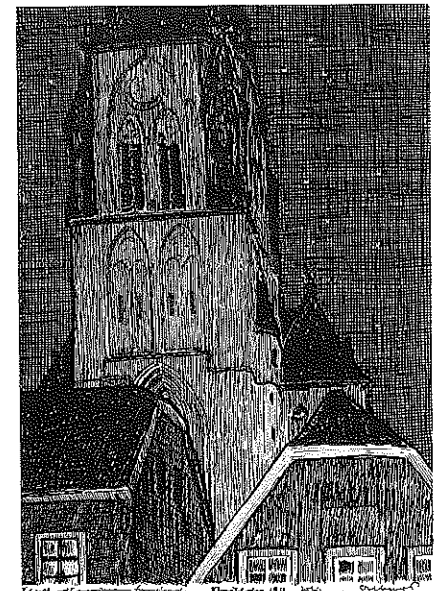
It did not take long for Albers to replace an almost painstaking style with a freer, livelier shorthand. His drawing technique quickly began to show greater confidence and verve. He was also on his way toward the simplicity that would reach its ultimate refinement in the geometric art. Having taught general subjects at an elementary school level in the Westphalian regional teaching system, and then studying in Berlin between 1913 and 1915 so that he became qualified to teach art on a high school level, he returned at the age of twenty-seven to Bottrop, the town where he was born in the heavily industrial Ruhr River area. While teaching he also found time to study at the School for Applied Arts in nearby Essen, to make woodcuts and lithographs, and to do a sizable number of drawings of the local area. The work he produced at this time (exempted from the army during wartime because of his teaching position) was less inhibited than *Stadtlohn* or the Düreresque drawings he made in Berlin. Albers was newly stimulated, happy to be home, head over heels in the empowering process of making art. In *Study for "Ostring I"* of c. 1917 (Fig. 7), every stroke is loaded with significance and intensity and with a new ease. He had developed a rapid shorthand that enabled him to capture observed forms and sum them up without a gratuitous dot.

The air in Bottrop was heavily polluted by coal smoke during those years and life for the working class community was fairly bleak. Yet without glamorizing or falsifying the nature of

his subject, Albers rendered it without any hint of negative or cynical commentary. Rather, he achieved the quality of his later geometric works: a celebration of line, of forms in space, of visual experience. He captured the inherent complexity and the true character of this street in the miners' neighborhood with an almost ebullient voice. The sparse quantity of short, rapid strokes put the road and buildings solidly within our grasp. Every spontaneous yet controlled movement of the lithographic crayon serves a purpose and reveals a trained hand.

The jagged line of this and other drawings of the period reflect contemporary technique. Although Albers was part of no particular artistic movement and assiduously denied being influenced

Fig. 6. Josef Albers, *Stadtlohn*, 1911, ink, 11⅓ x 8 in. (29 x 20.3 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.



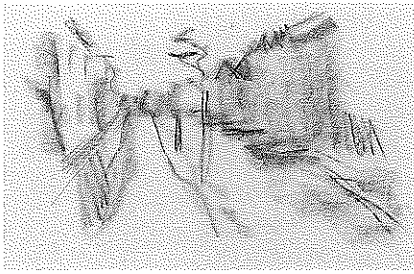


Fig. 7. Josef Albers, *Study for "Ostring I"*, c. 1917, lithographic crayon on tissue, 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 12<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (20.5 x 32.6 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.

by the various sources to which art historians diligently (in his eyes gratuitously) pointed over the years, he spoke the language of the time. He worked with the feverishly intense, linear style developed in part by Van Gogh and assimilated to varying degrees in Art Nouveau, *Jugendstil*, and German Expressionism. But he was equally true to his personal credo of "maximum effect from minimal means." By making very few moves with the point of the crayon here, and elsewhere dragging it or twisting it on its side, he captured the street. The medium accurately established the atmosphere of the town, so sooty that Albers used to claim that even one's spit was black there. Viewed individually, each sweep of the crayon is abstract. In context—and context is the key to Albers's lifelong treatment of lines and colors—they define the roadway, its buildings, and the lone tree that is such a poignant moment of nature in an otherwise manmade environment. These spare elements work in correct combination. And as we know from the *Structural Constellation* drawings, the way that each line functions relative to the next and the interdependence of the separate units was a fundamental of Albers's art—with line as well as with color.

In the summer of 1919, Albers journeyed to Munich to study under Franz von Stuck. Coincidentally, Klee and Kandinsky, both of whom would become Albers's cohorts at the Bauhaus, had also studied, some twenty years earlier, with this highly emotional painter. In time they would all come to belittle the experience. Nonetheless, Albers produced some impressive drawings under Stuck's tutelage. Most of them are of single nude females. One pen and ink, *Dancing Pair* (Fig. 8), is remarkable for its depiction of a naked man and woman dancing, a surprising

image from a painter generally perceived as impersonal and unerotic. The work is fiery and sensual.

Abbreviated and seen only from behind, the man in *Dancing Pair* is completely in control. His posture and pose are confident and graceful. Doing what appears to be a tango, he is sturdy and dominating while calm and patient: an unbrutal master. He has his massive arms precisely where he wants them. His muscles function well. His feet are perfectly placed. Albers, who liked to dance, has shown us a good dancer, under whose guidance the woman is wild and frenzied, almost orgasmic.

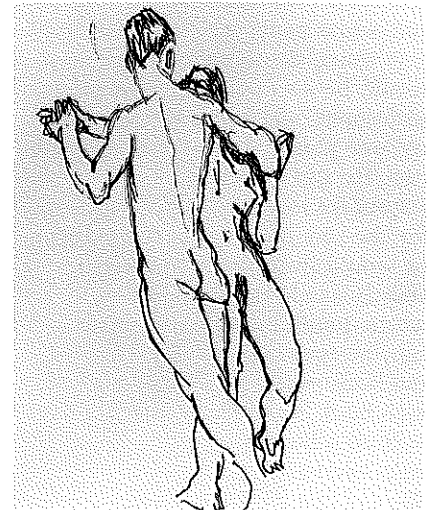
The man, in fact, is very probably a self portrait. The neck, head shape, and build are Albers's own. And the scene probably came from his imagination. Stuck provided the students with nude women as models, but it is highly unlikely that he would have had a man and a woman embracing one another nude before the students.

It is fitting that this would be a self portrait. Albers liked to tease and manipulate, to force our imagination; this was a lifelong trait that reached its *apogée* in the *Structural Constellations* and the *Homages*. So why not show himself as the one leading a dance, guiding others to excitement and pleasure? And how in character to present himself without full revelation, to produce an authentic but faceless self portrait. We are left, as with the geometric drawings, in a state of excited ambiguity. We picture the dancers' faces and sense the looks of passion, but do not actually see them. As in so much of Albers's work, we are stimulated rather than saturated. The deliberate enigmas of *Dancing Pair* anticipate the unresolved mystery of concurrent but contradictory readings of the *Constellations*. We cannot fathom everything at once; the work moves us through time. We engage in a process for which there is not yet any resolution; the dancers are joined only at their hands, so that the full extent of their connection is implicit rather than explicit.

Ambiguity, playfulness, the *esprit* of a dancer kicking high: these qualities could soar in abstraction as they had in figuration. Albers discovered the world of abstraction at the Bauhaus, where he went in 1920, shortly after the pioneering school had opened its doors, and where he remained through every stage of that institution's existence, in

Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin, until the Gestapo padlocked its doors in 1933. The world fell apart, and Albers, married since 1925 to the brilliant weaver Anni Fleischmann, had to redefine his life. Or at least he had to adjust to totally different circumstances. In 1933, he and Anni set sail for America, so that, with a meager salary and scarcely a deutschemark or dollar in his pocket, he could take up a teaching position at the newly formed Black Mountain College. But the role of art was a constant. Having produced drawings as studies for glass constructions during the Bauhaus years, in 1936 he executed a group of abstractions that conjure thoughts of the concurrent work of Ben Nicholson and other modernists, but that are still entirely in the Albers mode. As would be the case in the *Structural Constellations*, the artist had begun to work in lines of unvarying width. In *Untitled X*, two such continuous lines are juxtaposed (Fig. 9). One is a shieldlike form, while the other circumscribes three more acutely angled shapes. For all the simplicity, the longer we look, the more complex the arrangement becomes. The aggressively active angles of the second line make it move both in front of and behind the shieldlike shape. This simultaneous presence of active and static forces would become a mainstay of Albers's work. The juxtaposition of placid stillness with perpetual motion, of serenity with liveliness, reached a greater sophistication in the *Adobe* and *Homage* paintings he would produce a

Fig. 8. Josef Albers, *Dancing Pair*, c. 1919, ink, 12<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 10<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (32.3 x 25.7 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.



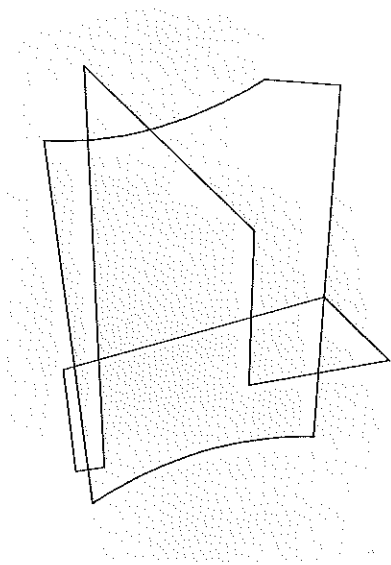


Fig. 9. Josef Albers, *Untitled X*, 1936, pen and ink, 15<sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (40.3 x 29.2 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.

decade later. In those formats, each element assumes both roles at once. In *Untitled X*, activity and passivity are expressed by separate shapes.

Spatial ambiguity grows as we look at *Untitled X*. Parallel lines flip-flop in position; lines are angled away from us and then back. Complex games are played by the small trapezoidal plane bisected at the corner by the right side of the shieldlike shape. At one moment this plane slopes toward us so that we can see it from above, and at the next instant it slants away, revealing its bottom side. This activity occurs as a func-

tion of the surrounding structure, but for reasons that defy precise explanation.

In *Untitled X*, an ethereal quality is established by the way gravity is transcended. The simple, unmodulated lines soar or drop, shifting direction as we look. The actual movement of pen on paper is not evident; the lines seem to have functioned, on one level, free of the artist's hand, although on another they betray it as surely as a virtuoso violinist's performance betrays his bowing and fingering of the strings. Shapes seem suspended from other shapes. The drawing becomes a mobile built from strings and thin wires. Drawn lines acquire slackness or tension; the straight horizontals seem stretched tightly, while the curved ones are loose and relaxed. Whether the lines are limp or taut had nothing to do with the way that Albers drew them, since he applied equal force to his pen throughout. Rather, alterations in shape—pivotal relativity—produce changes in tactile qualities and in internal musculature. Had Albers torn his pen across the paper at one point or grazed it at another, none of this would occur. His even tempo and constant control were the essential ingredients behind the motion and physical variations. His grace and refinement give the drawing a combination of elegance and high spirits. Organized and correct, this drawing—and much of the graphic art that would follow it—is also gay and cheerful. Like a well-played Mozart concerto, or a glass and steel skyscraper by Mies, or the church in Stadtlohn, it

shows that the beauty that results from intense rational control can pulsate with life and movement.

These are the qualities that Albers would explore tirelessly for many years to come, above all in the *Structural Constellations* (Figs. 10–11). It was a deeply humanistic pursuit. The artist's personal, emotional engagement—what he was seeking, what he was achieving, and how much the journey mattered to him—is what guided his hand to such steadiness and reverence as he moved that impeccable, resonant stretch of China ink across the paper in these spare but luxuriant drawings.

The combination of the active and passive in *Untitled X* and his subsequent graphic work parallels factors that Albers was keenly aware of in everyday life. And he put these elements in admirable alliance. One of the major goals of human existence is to find a balance between the hunger for action and accomplishment and the need for calm and restful meditation. Albers's geometric drawings are metaphors for due proportion in life. They blend hardness with softness, aggressiveness with receptivity. They allow for the coexistence of polarities. They call to mind the need of all hard-driven people, Albers having been a quintessential one of the type, to counteract the pace of their working lives with a restorative sense of calm. These drawings are perfect symbols of the combination of Albers's own restless, intense search with the soothing quiet and clear focus of the art that was its goal and product.

Fig. 10. Josef Albers, *Structural Constellation*, c. 1958, pen and ink on graph paper, 18 x 23 in. (45.2 x 58.4 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.

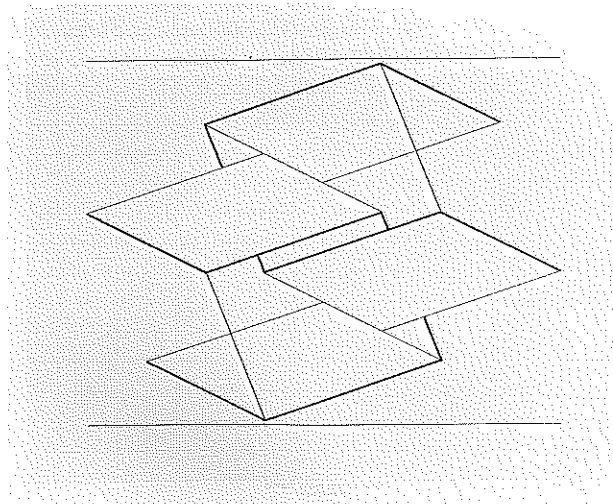


Fig. 11. Josef Albers, *Structural Constellation*, c. 1958, pen and ink on graph paper, 18 x 23 in. (45.2 x 58.4 cm.). The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Orange, Conn.

