Josef Albers ▒ Prints 1916-1976

Josef Albers was hard on other artists, and he was hard on writers discussing his work. Most of the analogies and comparisons critics applied to his art made him pound his fists in rage and turn beet-red, a skin color accentuated by his shock of smooth white hair, as if to exemplify his beloved point that the intensity of certain hues depends directly on the tones adjacent to them. People would compare his early prints to German Expressionist woodcuts. In response he might point out that, in the dictionary which he kept over his desk, he had tucked a note defining the word 'swindle' as 'like Max Beckmann.' His biomorphic etchings of the late 1940s reminded many observers of Jackson Pollock's graphics of the same epoch, but for Albers, Pollock was the one who 'paints with his tail' – he found the perceived disorder, and deliberate emotionalism, intolerable. And spare Albers the minimalists and color field artists to whom some people likened his pristine and opulent *Homage to the Square* lithographs and screenprints – he deemed their work empty. Not only did he assiduously deny being influenced – 'I come from Adam and my father, that's all' – and did he insist that students similarly follow their own way – 'sit on your own behinds!' – but he also saw other artists as less truly devoted to technique and craft and to the miracles of vision that were his lifeblood. Discussing color and line, or lithography and painting, he was like a religious apostle, one who would give up his life for the faith, and who treated his designated heathens as deserving to be burned at the stake. When a scholar whom Albers greatly admired, and who wrote an excellent book about him, subsequently authored a volume about Max Ernst, Albers ceased speaking to him.

If he was a grouch and a curmudgeon, it was because he was such a true believer. And even though he accused Max Bill, as a sculptor, of simply taking forms from the basic Bauhaus courses and executing them in expensive materials (marble and bronze), he admired Bill as a teacher and afficionado. He relished Bill's observation, applied especially to his graphic art, that Albers was 'a direct follower of the line Cézanne-Mondrian.'[1] Here was an aesthetic camp in which he would willingly be placed.

When Albers wrote out his own chronology, he confined it to a few key events.

Besides his birth and vital educational details, there was his listing of 1908 (the year he turned twenty) as the occasion of his first exposure to work by Cézanne. The setting of the pivotal event was the Folkwang Collection in Hagen, not far from Bottrop, the Westphalian city where Albers was born and not far from which, at the time, he was an elementary school teacher. Cézanne's influence is clearly evident in Albers's early graphics; it remains present, if less obvious, in his entire body of work: in the solid dashes and blocks of color just as in the emotional restraint. Albers's primary concern – whether in the early lithographs of farm animals, the abstract woodcuts he made after moving to America in 1933, the dynamic and oscillating *Structural Constellations*, or the *Homages to the Square* – was visual experience rather than psychological revelation or historical reference: the aspects of color and line and form, as well as of nature and man-made objects, that are universal and valid in any place and at any time. As Roger Fry wrote of Cézanne:

> 'Whatever the technique we find . . . a tendency to break up the volumes, to arrive almost at a refusal to accept the unity of each object, to allow the planes to move freely in space. We get, in fact, a kind of abstract system of plastic rhythms, from which we can no doubt build up the separate volumes for ourselves, but in which these are clearly not enforced on us.'[2]

The openness, the underlying systematization and the resultant freedom, the dissolution of matter only to unleash well-ordered motion and flux: these were the concerns that would dominate Albers's work as a printmaker throughout this life, whatever his medium or his subject.

And then there is the other half of the line cited by Max Bill: the continuum to Mondrian. Albers knew Mondrian and indeed invited him to Black Mountain College. The invitation was declined because Mondrian was too busy preparing work for a show at Sidney Janis, the Gallery in New York where both artists exhibited. Having been refused, Albers advised Mondrian that he might speed up his working methods by using black electrical tape to get the thickness of his lines just right, rather than having the burden of reworking them in black paint. Albers claimed that this suggestion prompted Mondrian to declare that this could have saved him years of unnecessary work if only he had

entertained the idea earlier. This story may be apocryphal, but Albers told it with evident glee and pride. The important point is that Albers had found another soulmate, who shared his aesthetic philosophy.

Mondrian wrote:

> 'All the art of the past shows an exaggeration of the tension of lines and forms, changes in the natural colors and proportions: a transformation of reality's natural aspect. Art has never been a copy of nature, for such a copy would not have been strong enough to evoke human emotion. *The living beauty of nature* cannot be copied; it can only be *expressed* . . . .
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> The culture of art is the *continual search for freedom*. As in human life, it is *continually in search of freedom of thought and action*.'[3]

Not only did Albers revere Mondrian's crisp geometrics, his skill as well as his passion, but he shared the Dutchman's faith in the need to go beyond nature in art, (in Albers's case to make one plus one equal more than two, to make flat colors give the illusion of being shaded, to make straight lines curve and static planes flip flop); in the wonder of freedom and the beauty of the search, especially when the quest is grounded in technical know-how and a disciplined sense of one's means.

And so Albers took that Cézanne-Mondrian aesthetic, more by intuition and instinct than by conscious plan, and applied it, from 1916 to 1976, to a range of printmaking processes that he loved, whereby woodblocks or copper plates or fabric screens meticulously covered with the wondrous substance of ink, were imprinted on paper, free of the artist's direct hand yet revealing his hand, devoid of explicit persona yet divulging his faith as well as the world he loved: the seeable, and the art to make it visible.

[1] Eugen Gomringer, *Josef Albers*, New York, George Wittenborn Inc., 1968, pg.12

[2] Roger Fry, *Cézanne : A Study of His Development,* London, 1927, pg.78

[3] Piet Mondrian, 'Art Shows the Evil of Nazi and Soviet Oppressive Tendencies' in *Mondrian Drawings Watercolors New York Paintings,* Stuttgart, 1980, pg.31

The Early Works ▩ Figurative Prints and Intimate Subjects

Albers was extremely proud of his craftsmanship background. His father, Lorenz Albers, was a house painter who was what we would think of today as a jack of all trades. He did electrical work, carpentry, plumbing, etc. Josef was apprenticed to Lorenz and trained in all these fields. When he first seriously took up printmaking in 1916, at the age of twenty-eight, he was similarly intent on mastering technical skills; initially those of lithography and linoleum-cutting. By then he had developed a strong and definite technique as a draftsman, with an instinctive grasp of plastic action and an authoritative, forthright style. Having attended the Royal Art School in Berlin from 1913 to 1915, he had clearly responded to the Northern style of Cranach, Dürer, and Holbein, whose work he had ample opportunity to see in the study room of the Drawing Department of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. In 1915 he moved back to Bottrop and by the next year was teaching high school and studying at the School for Applied Arts in nearby Essen, which is where, having already tried his hand at rudimentary printmaking in some bookplates and greeting cards, he made his first true print series. He focused on everyday subject matter – Gothic churches, farm animals, the sand mines that were the basis of Bottrop's economy, his own face – and rendered his themes as he would later render color, capturing above all their essence and their poetry, and relegating ideas of style or of his own persona to the distant background.

'I was thirty-two, . . . threw all my old things out the window, started once more from the bottom. That was the best step I made in my life.'[1] So Josef Albers declared about his move to the Bauhaus in Weimar. To gain entrance to the experimental art school which stressed the interconnectedness of art and craft, he had assured the Westphalian authorities, who funded his way, that he would return to Bottrop to resume his art teaching; but he never went back. At the Bauhaus – in its incarnation in Weimar, as well as in Dessau and Berlin – his media included glass (both broken bottle fragments and sandblasted layered glass panels), metal, wood, and paint. And it was then that his credo became abstraction. Preoccupied by other matters – Albers was the first Bauhaus student to become a master there, and he remained at the school for longer than anyone else – he did not resume work as a printmaker until 1933, when he made a remarkable group of woodcuts and linoleum cuts that are bold, playful, decisive, and charming. Albers's life was in turmoil. In June of 1933 the Bauhaus closed under the pressure of the Nazis, and in a matter of months Albers and his wife Anni were on their way to a completely unknown life at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where they no longer had money, family, or, in his case, even the ability to speak the local language – but he turned to printmaking as the medium in which he could most easily continue to explore the possibilities of abstract form and line, afforded by the sharp cutting tools which he had previously used in his glass and metal works.

When Albers's recent graphics were shown in Italy at the end of 1934, Wassily Kandinsky wrote the preface to the exhibition catalogue. Kandinsky declared, 'These beautiful sheets . . . reflect all Albers's qualities: artistic invention, clear and convincing composition, simple but effective means: and finally a perfect technique.'[2]

[1] Quoted in Neil Welliver, 'Albers on Albers' *Art News* 64, January 1966 : pg.48
[2] 'Silographie recenti di Josef Albers e di Luigi Veronesi', exhibition catalogue, Milan, Galerie del Milioni, 1934-5. Translated by Nora Lionni.

American life and the pioneering atmosphere of experimentation at Black Mountain College infused Albers and his work with a new informality and spirit of relaxation. He loosened up and took straight lines and geometric forms further than he had at the Bauhaus, while delighting in the irregularities of wood grain and cork and the possibilities they lent to his printmaking. Texture came to fascinate him more and more. And so did certain human and mythical themes. For, despite his continued avowed preference for machined forms and controlled technique, Albers was increasingly drawn to the richness of Mexican culture and Mayan and Incan religions (Anni and Joseph Albers made fourteen trips in all to Mexico), to the humor and humanness of pre-Columbian art (which they collected, acquiring, with hardly any money at all, a remarkable cache of objects, of which Josef's personal passion were the tiny and erotic Chupicuaro figurines), and to vague references to the themes of birth, maternity, and family. All of this came through in his printmaking of the period, as it did in his collages made from autumn leaves, and in the relatively informal and highly charged brushwork of his paintings.

By the late 1940s, and for the rest of his life, Albers worked in accordance with Mondrian's notion that art was to accomplish what nature could not. Through color midnight and noon could exist simultaneously. Irreconcilable elements exist with particular punch – a combination of humor and alchemy – in the body of work that the artist called his *Structural Constellations*, as they do in further series such as the *Transformations* and *Solo* and *Duo* prints. As Albers said in an interview with the English critic and writer Paul Overy, 'Though my paintings and linear constructions are not connected, they stem from the same attitude, the same urge to achieve from a minimum of effort a quantum of effect. While I was still teaching in Europe, I used to say to my students, *Do less in order to do more.*'[1] In the work where he used a spare amount of simple ruled lines to create forms of great life and mystery, he pursued linear geometry in a more refined format than ever before. The subjects are always ambiguous forms, which simultaneously appear to be flat and three-dimensional, and are penetrated and read in a variety of incompatible ways.

In their multiple approaches to the picture space, these prints descend directly from Cubism. Like certain Picasso drawings, they use simple, well-drawn, unmodulated lines to make planes that shift perpetually and forms that appear to unfold first one way and then another. The discrepancies seem on the one hand magical and on the other like accurate reflections of the variables in the human grasp of reality, both psychological and physical.

[1] Quoted in Paul Overy, 'Calm Down, What Happens, Happens Mainly Without You', Josef Albers *Art and Artists*, London, October 1967, pg.33

Italo Calvino wrote of his character Marcovaldo, 'He would not miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse's back, no worm-hole in a plank, or fig-peel squashed on the sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn't remark and ponder over, discovering the changes of the season, the yearnings of his heart.'[1] This is also true of Albers's approach to color. Trying not to be judgmental, he saw possibility in every hue, a different nuance in every shift of tone. Color was what it was, and nothing more, but contradictorily it could also symbolise myriad sides of nature or represent a whole range of human emotions. And what possibilities were opened up by ink! Having developed the particular formats of the *Homages* initially in oil paintings on white masonite panels, and relished the application of paint straight from the tube, which he then worked with a painter's knife on the inviting background of white gesso, Albers saw vast new potential for what he called these 'platters to serve color' when he began to make them as lithographs and screenprints. As with the paintings, he used the carefully conceived arrangements of shapes to create simultaneous in-out motion, to make near appear far and vice versa, to use color to create plastic action, to give yellows and greens and grays the same richness that Marcovaldo recognized in those worm-holes and fig-peels. Extending his territory to include the graphic realm, Albers came to enjoy working with collaborators (Ken Tyler and Norman Ives especially), learning from them about the methods of applying undiluted color, of getting the expanses just right, and of exploring the precision as well as the richness facilitated by the latest printmaking technology. In the last days of his life, he was still making prints and he left behind a series of twelve in which he had signed all but the last four images. In this last series he was celebrating the seemingly endless possibilities of grays against grays in his rare *Mitered Squares* with their bevelled corners. As he had learned in those early studies in Essen and at the Bauhaus, art and craft could be the loosest of allies, and printmaking a unique, and endlessly rich, means for expressing the visual wonders he cherished with such unequivocal zeal.

[1] Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo*, William Weaver, trans., San Diego, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983, pg.1.