

## FOREWORD

What a perfect concurrence it is for Josef Albers's *Homages to the Square* to be exhibited at the Casa Barragán. Barragán's architecture is an impeccably refined, simple, joyous vessel for human living in all of its complexity; Albers's squares are meticulous, pared down, vibrant vessels for the performance of color; its many surprises and astounding multiplicity. Albers and Barragán loved seeing, revered craftsmanship, and took immense pleasure in their task of allowing the eyes and soul to feast in idyllic conditions.

The story of the two men meeting will be told elsewhere. Their encounters were the happy exchanges of soul mates, with Anni Albers an important player, sharing as she did her husband's adoration of Mexican culture and Barragán's splendidly well-conceived, effective, visually enchanting architecture, his imaginative deployment of materials, the openness of his forms and the voice he gave vibrant hues. Naturally Josef and Anni loved having Barragán brought to them, and had that rare feeling, akin to what they had known with Klee and Kandinsky at the Bauhaus, of having a coreligionist at their side.

But the get-togethers were single events, the rapport between Albers and Barragán ongoing. Each knew the other was quietly at work in his own orbit, practicing his métier sublimely. These two men were not at ease with a lot that was trendy in their own times—they were happier thinking of the

achievements of the Maya and other masterful ancient civilizations—and they took great comfort in knowing, of one another, that another pure spirit was diligently at work.

Albers's *Homages* were the ultimate achievement of his life, the work he began in 1950, at age sixty-two, and continued until his death twenty-six years later. Barragán knew the body of work well, which is why he hung fabric reproductions of two of the best in his house; Albers, it appears, knew this, and while he might have disapproved of someone else having unauthorized reproductions, because it was Barragán, he was pleased as he would have been for no one else in the world.

Albers saw this group of paintings as “platters to serve color.” They are hymns to the infinite possibilities, both physical and spiritual, of hue and light. Their name—*Homages to the Square*—is the first hint that nothing is quite as it purports to be, that words deceive as much as they guide. Albers enjoyed pointing out the way that spoken and written language could be misleading; when he would drive or give visitors directions to his modest suburban home in the Connecticut town of Orange, he would joyfully point out a green road sign with white lettering that announced “This is Orange.”

It was in this house—hardly a Barragán sort of dwelling, just a contractor's basic raised ranch, of cheap but effective

materials, strong enough to withstand Connecticut's icy, snowy winters—that Albers worked and reworked the paintings that would prove that even a recognizably orange orange looks one way next to a red of similar light intensity, and entirely different next to a cooler gray. He would demonstrate the distinction between two virtually identical paintings where the sole variable is that one has a center of Grumbacher Mars Yellow and the other a Winsor & Newton Mars Yellow; that difference in manufacturer results in one painted panel being buoyant, the other somber. Moreover, the contrast between two paints of the same name but by different manufacturers is so pronounced that the spatial movements of these two panels is completely opposite; in one, the center square appears to be the nearest one, an orb coming toward us, while in the other painting, the center is far away, as if it is distant sunlight seen through a window frame.

It was through a special sense of craft as well as his particular invented format that Albers got these extraordinary optical events to take place. The proud son of a housepainter/carpenter/plumber/electrician/all-around builder, Albers had worked out his system for maximum effectiveness. He always used the wood fiberboard panels; after the first two years of working on their smooth sides, he switched to the rougher reverse sides, finding that they facilitated more exactly the results he had in mind. The panel was coated with between six and ten layers of white Liquitex, onto which Albers applied his paint straight from the tube. With a knife, he spread the paint “like butter on pumpnickel”—he was Westphalian by birth, and loved any excuse to invoke the rich dark bread of his childhood. His father had told him that when painting a door you should start at the center and work outwards to catch the drips and avoid getting your cuffs dirty. And so he always started his *Homages*

at the center; carefully pushing one color up against the next without ever overlapping them. He performed this task on plywood tables on sawhorses, under well-regulated lighting conditions that consisted of having, over one table, an arrangement of four florescent tubes that progressed warm-cool-warm-cool, and, over the other, warm-cool-cool-warm. That precision enabled him to observe the color interaction at a maximum performance level.

There were four formats for these paintings, and he did them in a range of sizes. But the formats had a consistency of measurement. The nested squares are centered left and right, but weighted toward the bottom; the incremental distances underneath the central squares are doubled to the left and right of them and trebled above.

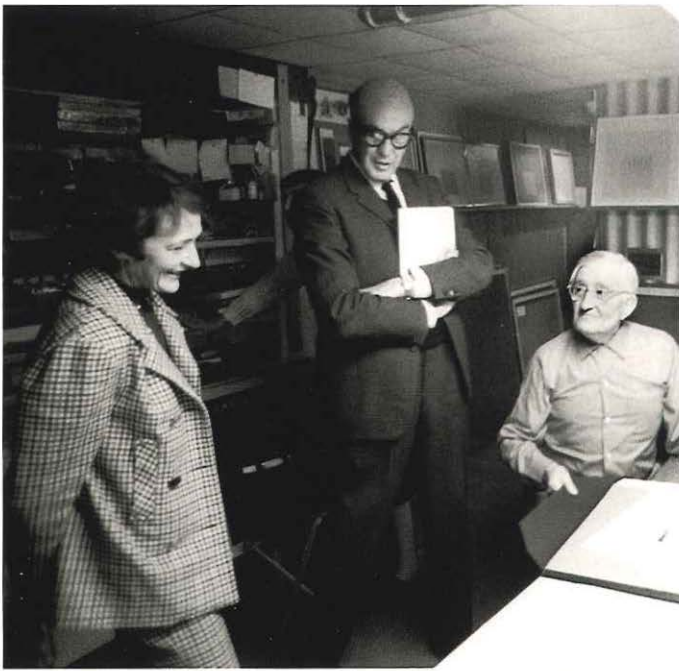
There was a reason for all these rules that Albers followed with such ferocious singularity time and again. The flat colors gain extraordinary movement and three-dimensionality. They offer multiple readings. “In action,” Albers wrote, “we see the colors as being in front of or behind one another, over or under one another, as covering one or more colors entirely or in part. They give the illusion of being transparent or translucent and tend to move up or down.”

This is only part of their magic. The interaction of colors is multifarious; perfectly flat areas appear shaded; the squares grow darker near one boundary and lighter near another. Nothing is as it seems.

As in Barragán's architecture, rigorous technique and firm guidelines yield extraordinary poetry. The inert materials take on vibrant life.

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote of Cezanne's work: “As if these colors could heal one of indecision once and for all. The good conscience of these reds, these blues, their





Annie Damasz, Luis Barragán, and Josef Albers in Josef's New Haven studio, 1967. Photo: Jan Nuar

simple truthfulness, it educates you; and if you stand beneath them as acceptingly as possible, it's as if they were doing something for you." This is the role that Josef Albers (for whom the discovery of Cézanne, in 1908, had been a pivotal moment of his life) gave to his color and that the square format facilitated.

Rilke wrote about Cézanne's "labor which no longer knew any preferences or biases or fastidious predilections, whose minutest component had been tested on the scales of an infinitely responsive conscience". This, too, was how Albers

approached color: utterly humbly, without judgment, only with a notion of awareness and service. He wanted to be the vehicle to allow color to perform. He was reverential, and tried to remove his self, and the concerns of the human ego, in order to achieve his task. Living simply, working tirelessly, married to someone who shared similar passions and a modest sense of diligence, Albers was like a member of an ascetic religious order—bent on delivering the message of the quiet majesty and infinite capability of color.

Rilke said that Cézanne's approach "so incorruptibly reduced a reality to its color content that it resumed a new existence in a beyond of color; without any previous memories." That "beyond of color;" another universe devoid of history or personal association or individual memory: this is what Albers's *Homages* make possible. These paintings are icons for meditation, offerings for both repose and excitement, for the calm of ethereal nothingness and the thrill of a vibrant symphony. They are the "visual resting places" that the art historian Wilhelm Worringer, admired at the Bauhaus, advocated as the goal of abstraction. Luis Barragán made buildings that had their assigned functions, but his work, too, was a creation without precedent that gave a new and glorious visual experience and provided both balm and intense pleasure to the human soul.

Josef Albers concluded of his many hopes for his *Homages*: "How far this has been successful is for others to decide." The presentation of a group of them at the Casa Barragán gives a fighting chance for all the possibilities.