

"I don't want to waste time and money teaching them in front of naked girls to draw," Josef Albers habitually explained of the educational methods with which he had unequaled influence for over half a century. At the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, Yale University, and the myriad of institutions in Germany and in North and South America where he taught such future well-known artists as Eva Hesse and Robert Rauschenberg as well as thousands of other students who would be among the architects, graphic designers, painters and sculptors to transform the appearance of the modern world, the great teacher eschewed live models and the other traditions of art education like outdoor sketching in favor of exercises that developed the eye and the hand with the rigor of laboratory experiments. It was as if the old-fashioned ways of learning how to make art simply had nothing to do with him. What counted was manual dexterity, a sure grasp of the materials, and an eye for visual phenomena unrelated to the usual subject matter of pictures; to accomplish that goal, the students learned how to manipulate lines, and did studies of specific objects, just never of anything alive.

But Josef had a secret. I had a hint of it one day when I was seated in his austere white kitchen in Connecticut. With nothing whatsoever to interrupt the blank hospital whiteness of the

four walls except for the small thermostat near the door, and with the furniture a mix of white Formica, white plastic, and metal, everything Josef and his wife Anni did and said took on the significance of Shakespearian theatre on a bare minimalist stage. In that impeccable setting where all that was said seemed to have echoes, Josef revealed to me the contents of a manila mailing envelope he had just received from Germany. Brushing aside his strudel crumbs and moving his perfect white porcelain half-globe of a coffee cup to a safe distance, he put on the kitchen table a simple, vigorous drawing. The single, broadly brushed line, which had the charge and authority of Arabic calligraphy, suggested a man's profile, but on closer inspection it was the shadow behind such a profile, so that the blank white paper became the man's head seen from the side, the magical brushwork defining the void that had been created.

"This just came from my brother-in-law," Josef explained to me. It had belonged to Josef's sister, who had died about six weeks previously. "He thought I should have it. It's a self-portrait I had given to Lena before I went to the Bauhaus. You see, I too drew faces—and all those things. And, you know, I wasn't half bad. I was better than I thought I was."

He beamed with delight. For once Josef

allowed me to compliment him without his shrugging off my observations. The drawing, I pointed out to its maker, had many of the same qualities of the *Homages to the Square* which, at age eighty-seven, he was still painting in his studio downstairs.

Like the *Homages*, the self-portrait was utterly refined and simple and sure of hand. It was about the subject and about appearances, and it succeeded in its goal of presenting a lot of information succinctly and effectively. At the same time, as if without trying, it had its rich poetry. Just as the paintings revealed color, both in an absolute and unadulterated state and for its alchemical and emotive qualities, and the interrelationship of hues, not because the artist had an agenda, but, rather, because he presented things with such deftness and clarity, the drawing showed what the man looked like, the shape of his head as well as the arch of his nose and the precise angle of his chin, and evoked, palpably, the impression a human face makes. That a quality of bravura, a remarkable determination and will, a consuming intensity, were also brought alive by that single, masterful brushstroke, was because of the excellence of craft and perfect synchronicity of technique and goal, rather than a deliberate wish at expression.

I asked Josef if he had done a lot of other

drawings in the period when he made this one. The question did not interest him very much, except for prompting him to furnish one detail. At the Bauhaus, he and Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky had discovered that, quite by chance in their eyes, they had all studied with the same famous art instructor in Munich, Franz von Stuck. Von Stuck had had them draw "naked women". They all thought it had essentially been a waste of time in regard to the explorations they were undertaking at the Bauhaus at the time they had the conversation.

Josef died about a year after we looked at the wonderful self-portrait together. Following his death, I helped Anni deal with all that he had left behind. We were quite far along in the process of going through the contents of his studio and his warehouse space when, one day, she handed me a large bunch of keys. One of them, Anni said, was for, she believed, a storage room Josef had been given many years earlier. About fifteen minutes by car from their house, it was in the basement of the building in New Haven that had formerly been the headquarters of Yale University Press, the publisher of Josef's best-known opus, *Interaction of Color*. Anni, whose feet were malformed at birth and whose legs had never properly developed, told me that she had not ever been able to get down the steep stairs to

this storage room, but she often used to wait for Josef in the car when he went in and out, and she was confident that if she showed me the entrance to the building where she often waited for him I would be able to find the stairs and figure out where the door to the room was, and then what key or keys would be necessary to open it.

We drove into New Haven together in the dark green Mercedes Benz 240 SL that had been the Alberses' one concession to luxury in their everyday lives. While Anni waited for me in the parked car, I went off to find and open the room, all a fairly easy task. But nothing could have made me anticipate the treasure trove that lay behind a functional steel door. The cavern was probably about eighty square meters. In it there were piles of magazines and newspaper clippings spanning a successful artistic career of over half a century; what was far more thrilling, though, was the sketch and letter from Paul Klee that was sitting on top of a pile of catalogues, the Bauhaus period glass constructions stored along a wall, the boxes of photographs and photo-collages and film that were all taken by Josef himself, and the sense that, beneath or behind everything I apprised in that first dipping into the treasure, more gems awaited me.

I returned to the car to give Anni a report, and then descended again for further exploration.

It wasn't long before I found a large folder marked, in sprawling penciled handwriting, "my early drawings". A number of sheets were carefully placed in the folder. Josef may not have shown them between 1920, the year he went to the Bauhaus at age thirty-two, and 1976, the year of his death, but he certainly cared enough about those drawings to store them carefully and make sure they were preserved for posterity.

Eventually I would find further drawings and put together the chronology. Enough was known about Josef's formative years to make certain facts clear, and he had annotated some of the drawings with important details about the date, location, and circumstances of his making them. The development of Josef's cross-hatching, and the way the drawings he had done in Berlin resembled the work of Durer, which he was able to study in the local museums at the time, also made it possible to determine what had been done where and when.

Josef's first drawing that remained extant was of the town hall in a village near to the city of Bottrop, where he was born and where he subsequently became a school teacher. He dated it 1911; he was twenty-three years old at the time. From 1913 until 1915 was when he was a student in Berlin learning the teaching of art; certain drawings clearly date from that period. Then, over

the next four years, when he was back in Bottrop and was teaching art and making lithographs, he sketched the sights of his everyday life, the local farm animals, and the people he knew. In 1919, he went to Munich for his work with von Stuck; he remained there until 1920, which was the year he went to the newly formed Bauhaus. The drawings of the Munich period have a looseness and sweep that had been absent in the previous work.

Once Josef went to the Bauhaus, he never again drew or painted representational images.

Both as an abstract painter of minimalist panels of color, or a figurative draftsman, Josef Albers was a brilliant observer of everyday life. He was a humanist who took things in with his eyes; when he looked at other people, he saw gesture and appearance, and details like clothing, as extremely telling, and cared more about this visual information than about what the people said.

I remember once when I arrived at his house on a bracing winter day and he, the octogenarian who had just been the first living artist in America to have a solo retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, was out in his driveway shoveling snow. With his *vivella* tattersall shirt buttoned all the way to the top at the neck and his neatly creased khakis, he looked up to accomplishing the task in style. His full head of

fine straight hair, ruddy complexion, and firm, placid, purposeful features gave him a resemblance to the American actor Spencer Tracy, as did his rugged yet boyish figure and quality of being undaunted. He explained that he and Anni were yet again having problems with their icy driveway; the northern exposure and the angle of the asphalt, poorly engineered, caused ice to melt into puddles that refroze. Just as he was about to break up some sheets of ice that were forming, I asked him to give me the shovel and let me take over, but he refused. I implored him, saying I was used to doing this task; without also mentioning that I was more than sixty years younger than he, the point was clear.

Josef acquiesced, but he remained standing in the open garage while I cleared the slush and snow that had accumulated and heaved it onto the lawn. The artist's presence made most people want to shape up, to do their best in front of someone who always did his. He had given generations of students the feeling that they should perform to maximum capacity. I knew that here was a man who preferred good shoveling to bad painting, and I shoveled as if my life depended on it.

"Marvelous ... wunderbar," he exclaimed. "You know, Nick," he observed, "Sometimes the schoolboys in the neighborhood do this. The boys

are half your height"—he indicated this with his hands—"And their shovel throw only goes half as far as yours. They have young boys' stroke. You have a man's."

It was not meant as flattery. He amplified; the difference in shoveling style had to do with the extent of the sweep of the arms, the way I bent my knees, and the way I uncocked my elbows in throwing the snow onto the lawn.

These were the sorts of facts and observations that fascinated him. Josef was a connoisseur of daily moments, and he cared about effective methods and pertinent details, whether the slope of a driveway, the nature of a shovel stroke, or the thickness and texture of a pen nib. He cared intensely about how things were done, and he cherished what could be seen and observed with the eyes, and then the ramifications. This is what his drawings are about: sharp, cogent observation, and then the effective rendition of what his eye had taken in so that a whole story can be grasped. His relationship to color, to which he gave voice in his *Homages to the Square*, depended on the same main ingredients: careful studying, and then a method that assured effectiveness in realizing his goals.

As a school teacher before he went to the Bauhaus, Josef had drawn the girls in his classroom with their feet coming out of their

open-backed wooden Dutch-style shoes. He had paid attention to the way tired students rested their chins on their hands with their elbows on their desks. He captured all such details in his drawings, and when he sketched a woman's head, he recorded the precise tilt of her chin, the angle of her cheekbones, and the subtleties of her coiffure. He craved exactitude, even if his style of sketching betrayed ease and relaxation.

Josef also had particular awareness of the relationship of his position to the object of his observation. When he drew nudes—those naked women he would not let his own students work with—he would do a first-rate sketch, impeccably realized, completely evocative of its subject, from one angle, and then shift his own vantage point ever so slightly to do yet another rendition. The sitter had not moved an iota, but the difference in perspective invited important, if in some eyes modest, differences in what could be seen of the subject. Sometimes he would do a third rendition. This musical concept of “theme and variations” was vital to him.

Decades later, in his paintings of color, he would, similarly, pay keen attention to the difference between a Grumbacher Mars Yellow and a Winsor & Newton Mars Yellow, sometimes making two paintings where the sole variable would be his use of one manufacturer's pigment for one,

and the other manufacturer's pigment for the other. Or he would pair two *Homages* in which the first two colors, working from the middle out, were identical, but the outermost one in the nest was a muted gray in one *Homage* and a vibrant red in the other.

This way that variations in some elements make the overall results so different, the way that making art is constantly an issue of refinement and attention to nuance, was Josef Albers's obsession in the early drawings as in the late *Homages*. The essentiality of effective methods, the marvel of eloquence and of true artistry, the delicious experiences that are available to anyone who is awake and sufficiently unencumbered to be able to observe acutely and to pay sharp attention to subtle moves: all of these wonders are shared by these two seemingly disparate aspects of his life's work.

The drawings and paintings jointly beg us to look carefully and to relish the act of visual discovery. They never call attention to the man who made them; rather, they bring into focus the nature of lines and colors, the crisp facts, and, at the same time, the thrilling ambiguities. The result of a serious process, Josef Albers's work, invariably, early or late, drawn or painted, is playful just as it is profound, entertaining while richly instructive, inviting of discovery without

being remotely teacherish.

It is the achievement of this exhibition at Waddington Galleries to put together two such seemingly different, yet fundamentally akin, aspects of the artist's work by juxtaposing the revelatory early drawings with some of the most moving late paintings. The *Homages* shimmer in their clarity and richness, evincing the mysterious poetry that makes them such sacred icons that now rivet audiences all over the world and provide a bounty of inspiration that only grows with time. The drawings, little known to the public until now, show the artist's immense skill from the start, his engagement with the process of seeing and with rendering art where the craft is sublime and the goal and the result in perfect tandem.

Josef Albers declared that the goal of his art, teaching, and writing was “to open eyes.” This exhibition provides that experience in abundance.

**Nicholas Fox Weber**

Executive Director

The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation