Josef Albers

Homage to the Square
Variant
Structural Constellation
Print

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“As if these colors could heal one of indecision once and for all. The good conscience of these reds, these blues, their 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.”

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this of Cézanne, whose work drew him back day after day. It’s also what happens before the color abstractions of Josef Albers. Confidence emanates from the work. Here is the art of someone who overcame normal human ambivalence and knew both his methods and his course. The decisiveness penetrates.

Nowhere is the ineffable certitude as complete as in the Homages to the Square, the magnificently obsessive conclusion to Albers’s life and art. He worked on them for over a quarter of a century. Restricting himself to four closely related formats, he painted over a thousand of them, and created hundreds of print images. These arrangements of solid-colored squares nested within squares became synonymous with his name. His diligent (to some), maniacal (to others) repetition became sufficiently well known to enter popular culture: Life Magazine, Réalités, Vogue, a public television special; cartoons in New Yorker. The Homages become clichés of the best sort. They entered the everyday vocabulary of modern living.

Albers’s abstractions attained this significance because they gave both calm and diversion, focus and ambiguity. They also put pure, unadulterated color on a new level. Here colors refer to nothing but themselves: not to a subject, mood, or era. They have no connotations unless we have choose to read associations into them. And, thanks to the precision of the arrangements, the interaction of color—the mysterious effect by which one color appears, deceptively, to penetrate its neighbor—occurs in full force. On one level the Homages are an art stripped bare, pared down to the minimal essentials. On another, they are enormously complex, betraying considerable forethought and suggesting vast visual and philosophical possibilities. It is an enduringly potent combination: this simultaneous mix of being and nothingness.

Aside from the works themselves, the act of making them, the painstaking repetition, was a powerful statement. “Sit on your own behind,” Albers used to shout at his students, too inclined, in his eyes, “to jump on bandwagons.” His own labor was completely beyond the caprice of fads or styles. While most of us are forever confronted by too many choices, here was someone who knew his own worth and was certain of his goals. He was pleased to have developed an ability, and he wanted to take it further. In this he was in good company: with Cézanne and his mountains, Morandi and his bottles. Tireless perfectionism was, after all, as old as art itself. The idea of variations on a theme had always been there: medieval madonnas, ornament at Pompeii, the horses at Lascaux.

“As acceptingly as possible”—Rilke’s posture before Cézanne—is how we must face those Homages to the Square. It is how Albers regarded color and all visual experience. Adamant of opinion about art and morality (which were the same to him), insistent on consummate craftsmanship, he lay prostrate before the possibilities of the spectrum and the mysteries of optical
phenomena. His own emotions would not interfere with his efforts to understand and convey something he considered infinitely mightier than himself.

To reveal his opinions of colors did not concern Albers. His job was to present them and encourage their effects. The task was similar to what he had felt as a young man drawing farm animals, wanting to encapsulate their essence rather than to show his tastes. Albers's is not an art of memories. Describing timeless phenomena, it goes past individualism. The paintings become, in a very generalized way, living beings—faceless and nameless ones. As such, the Homages bear the trademark of much great late work: a grappling with ultimate essentials, a powerful spirituality. Grounded solidly in their craft, they search for the sublime.

In these Homages to the Square, Albers also had a key point to make about the mutability of color perception. Sometimes he made two paintings in which the middle and outer colors of one are identical with those in the other, but where varying colors in the interval make those identical colors look dissimilar to one another. Albers always listed all his colors, with their manufacturers' names, on the reverse side of each Homage panel. By turning to those codes, one learns how brilliant he was at making the same colors look different and different colors appear the same.

The ramifications of the way that the same colors can look different are put nicely by the British critic Paul Overy: “Colours change constantly according to their juxtaposition and relationship with other colors, like human beings who cannot be isolated from their social environment or from each other. ... Albers ... used colours as an analogy for the way in which he believed human beings should live together ... independent yet interdependent, individual yet social.” People appear one way alone, another with a group of family members whom they resemble in looks and personality, and yet another when surrounded by strangers. Their relatives often mitigate their distinctiveness, while companions whose traits are foreign emphasize certain characteristics by contrast. Even if people themselves do not change, our perception of them does; so too with colors.

What Albers was investigating was a concept long known. In about 1175, Reginald, a monk in Durham, England, described the decorated textiles with which the remains of St. Cuthbert had been wrapped in the local cathedral. “He was clad in tunic and dalmatic... The style of both of these, with their precious purple color and varied weave, is most beautiful and admirable. The dalmatic, which as the outer robe is the more visible, offers a reddish purple tone, quite unknown in our time even to connoisseurs... Its appearance is varied by contrasted sprinklings of rather uncertain color that proves to be yellow. The charm of the variation comes out most beautifully in the purple cloth, and fresh contrasts are produced by the play of scattered spots. The random infusion of yellow color seems to have been laid down drop by drop; by virtue of this yellow the reddish tonality in the purple is made to shine with more vigor and brilliance.” In his eye for both color relativity and the emotional effects of color, Albers had simply come back to ancient truths in a new way. In more recent times, there were the findings of Goethe,
Chevreul, Ostwald, Bezold, Munnsell, and Weber and Fechner, all of which Albers knew and referred to in his writing. What he brought to their body of knowledge was an approach that stressed experimentation, and married science to art, as well as a form of painting that made the previously implicit into the main focus.

Albers craved light in both his working situation and the finished product. He was so desperate for it that, rather than subject himself to the hazards of the natural world (which would have forced him into the situation of someone like Bonnard, who simply would not paint on dark days), he painted inside a studio where he was assured of an ideal brightness. He invariably did all of the Homages to the Square under fluorescent lights. The paintings lay flat on simple work tables—four-by-eight-foot plywood panels on sawhorses. Over one table the fluorescent bulbs were arranged warm, cold, warm cold; over the other they were warm, warm, cold, cold. He wanted to see each painting under different conditions, but, in both cases, highly luminous ones. Although his paintings in fact look best in natural daylight, he would in no way be victim to its vicissitudes in his working method.

Not only was there clear light in the process. It is always there in the finished art. Even when Albers worked in nothing but blacks and dark grays, as he occasionally did, at least one of the grays is luminous. Often the blackest of blacks shines as well. To have had the darker tones do otherwise would have been to impart a negative aspect to his painting, which was antithetical to Albers's entire approach. Not only is there lightness in the tones, but also in the physical nature of the forms. Heaviness would have denoted encumbrance. Murky colors or weighty masses would have suggested internal doubt or a bowing to external forces. The function of art was to provide an alternative to uncertainty, to surmount rather than succumb.

The luminous character of Albers's paintings spiritualizes them. It removes them from human reality and puts them on the celestial plane. They have a godlike, other-worldly aspect. In a century when many artistic movements and trends in thought have stressed a probing of the self, Albers's work is geared toward transcendence.

In the Homages, irreconcilable motions occur in the same way as opposite moods. You feel stretched across that picture plane, your arms pulled taut, and at the same time you jump upwards. You are looking at a flat, two-dimensional object, its single plane carefully sub-divided and decorated; suddenly you find yourself on a complicated course through a proscenium stage. You go inward and outward at the same time, and then you move simultaneously to left and right. The confluence of opposites occurs with color as well as the physical motion of the paintings. Especially in the Homages, Albers would often juxtapose a midnight black with the blue of a noonday sky, a cold, distinctly manmade, steely gray with a verdant green and sunny yellow. Art was to do what nature could not. This unchartable diversity of experience is the result of careful, scientific pre-meditation. It comes from the tandem functioning of color and line.

A coincidence of divergent elements, and the sense of progression in time, are apparent in the way that the overall composition of the Homages appears
both grounded and ascendant. These paintings (as well as prints) deliberately eschew earthly forces in deference to the heavenly. They start as paint on panels or ink on paper and become ethereal beings; and through the 1:2:3 system on which they are all based, they have their feet on the earth and their heads in the cosmos. The central, or “first” square, is like a seed : the heart of the matter, the core from which everything emanates. The intervals underneath that first square, created by either two or three larger outlying squares, are doubled to the left and right of it and tripled above it. In the four-square format, for example, which is ten units wide and high, from left to right each of the outer squares is one unit wide, the middle square four units. Underneath the middle square, each of those outer squares is half a unit high. Above, each is one and a half units high.

Rudolf Arnheim, in The Power of the Center, explores the effects of this ratio, the way in which it shifts the normal equality of earthly (horizontal) and heavenly (vertical) elements of a single square in favor of the heavenly. “This asymmetry produces the dynamics of the theme, a squeezing below, an expansion above. It promotes a depth effect, which would be counteracted if all the squares were grouped symmetrically around the same center.” The asymmetry is subtle—the squares are almost centered—so consequently the upward thrust is gradual rather than pronounced. Thus the spiritual element is achieved with a soft voice rather than a loud shout. Like all true spiritualism, Albers’s is achieved in poignant, muted tones, rather than with evangelical ardor.

This simultaneity of being earthly and reaching heavenward was of course a hallmark of Gothic cathedrals. That Albers’s work has massive, sanctuary-like bodies, and the attributes of steeples, is consistent with his earliest artistic tastes. As a young man he made prints of the Gothic cathedral in Münster and drew the one in Cologne. Lyonel Feininger’s woodcut of a Gothic cathedral was his main calling card to the Bauhaus School, where he studied and eventually taught between 1930 and 1933, being part of that institution almost from beginning to end and in all of its three locations of Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin. Walter Gropius, the founding director of the Bauhaus, regarded the attitudes behind the building of such “heavenly cities” as exemplary. The relationship of artists and artisan, builder and architect, glass maker and stone cutter, all working anonymously and in unison as they had in the Gothic era, was one of the goals of the school. What the cathedral represented to Albers personally was harmony through planning, and a combination of technical proficiency with holiness.

The area below the central square was, in the artist’s own words, “downstairs;” above it was “upstairs.” “Downstairs” is the mundane, the foundation of the building, the legs on which we stand. “Upstairs” is vastness, the world of the mind. In it lie diversity, hope, infinity. The two elements co-exist with splendid grace, in large part because the transition between them—the spaces to the left and right of the central square—has such equanimity. It is in a very quiet, gradual, almost imperceptible way that upstairs outscales downstairs.

There is both resolution and dissonance: a paradox akin to the simultane-
ous flatness and depth, the moments that are both midnight and noon, and the front light that appears to come from behind. Tension results. While much abstract painting of the 1950's was devoted to the unbridling of emotions, Albers clearly wished to create puzzles. Rather than an explosion here, there are undercurrents and ambiguities.

Yet for all of the inwardness and complexity, it is the ascendant quality of the *Homages* that prevails. Arnheim points out that if we follow the four diagonals created by the corners of the squares within squares, they converge on a point precisely one quarter of the way up the painting. If you take the diagonals created by only the two bottom sets of corners, and carry those diagonals all the way across the panel, you have an X that delineates a rectangle that is precisely the lower half. According to Arnheim, “The bottom edges lie on the diagonals of a rectangle that divides the total space safely in half. A solid base is thereby provided on which the sequence of squares can rise with confidence from step to step—not so different from the coffin in Piero’s *Resurrection*, from which the movement toward heaven takes off.” Emphatic as the foundation is, it is not so different from the waves in a seascape by Courbet; its submission to gravity serves largely to emphasize the weightlessness above.

The flow and positive movement in the *Homages* is in large part a product of their color relationships. As essential as the layout is to the effect of the *Homages to the Square*, it is color that has the greatest say about the nature of the transitions and their ultimate character. Arnheim recognizes this as well: “Cosmic harmony comes from color, earthly impediment from shape—the message of a colorist.” The format was, after all, intended as a vehicle to give color its voice. Paintings of identical form have very different effects, thanks only to color variation. The nature of their movement depends largely on the palette. Some *Homages* proceed with bangs, others on tip toes. The ultimate mood of the work, determined in part by the nature of the movement, ranges, through color alone, from unbridled jubilation to deep sobriety.

The technician/scientist who subjugated his own ego and eliminated the intrusion of his personality, in order to reveal the principles of color, was also the passionate romantic ever able to evoke symbolism and the inexplicable. Adhering rigidly to his set of rules—the lighting, the tubes of paint, the knives, the formats of the squares—Albers found endless surprises. The *Homages*, too, offer comedy and tragedy. Just as no color was absolute, neither is an artist or his work totally one thing or another.

Labels therefore fail with this artist. “Constructivist,” “Father of Op-Art”: all do him a disservice. We should apply his understanding of color to our understanding of him; words, and the attempt to pinpoint diversity, fall short. All that is certain is variability. Albers used to say that no two people pictured the same thing upon hearing the word “red”. Like the controls of language, all of Albers's precision and system were only a guide to, and a celebration of, mystery. To accept, and revel in, ambiguity, seems the great message of this poetry of the laboratory.

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Albers teaching color course at Black Mountain College, August 1948.

Photo by Rudolph Burckhardt