Introduction

Nicholas Fox Weber

In Farmington, Connecticut, a bucolic town west of Hartford, one of America's finest small museums, known only to a few, contains gems of Impressionist painting that seem all the more sacred because they are never allowed to travel. That is among the rules established long ago by the owners of this elegant, white wooden Stanford White Neocolonial mansion, called the Hill-Stead. This marvellous residence caused Henry James, who in general had few good things to say about his homeland, to write that it was one of the finest places in the United States.

I like to think that part of what was so seductive to the often recalcitrant James was that inside the Hill-Stead Museum hang two works from Claude Monet's *Haystack* series. There are, in all, twenty-five or twenty-six of these fabulous horizontal oil paintings, depending on how you characterize one of them. The Hill-Stead's two gems were the only *Haystacks* that were absent when the rest were exhibited as a group. A pilgrimage to Farmington to see these marvellous outliers is well worth the trip.

I felt that way for the first time more than fifty years ago when, at the age of sixteen, I had recently obtained my driving licence and made the Hill-Stead, not far from where I grew up, my destination for multiple visits. And I feel it just as strongly now, because in those two canvases you see, crystal clear, the same glorious purpose for which Josef Albers was inspired to use a single subject repeatedly as part of a series. I discovered back then, with these riveting Monets, that images that are in many

Josef Albers discussing prints for *Formulation : Articulation*, 1972

Josef and Anni Albers's home at 808 Birchwood Drive, Orange, Connecticut

ways the same nourish one another because of both their close resemblance and their rich differences.

About a decade after my initial visit to the Hill-Stead, I had the privilege of discussing the pair of Monets with Josef. We were talking about the idea of art made in series. He was just in the process of completing *Gray Instrumentation I*, a sensational portfolio of a dozen screenprints of closely related images (see pp. 118–23). One could say of those prints that in all instances the 'subject' – what we see represented graphically – is the same: squares within squares. Josef had by then made, in oil paint on white fibreboard panel, more than two thousand paintings belonging to the body of work that he called 'The Homages to the Square'. All of the paintings, like the *Gray Instrumentation* prints, have certain points in common. Each is comprised of three or four nested squares in the same proportionate arrangement. Whatever the dimensions are underneath the central square are doubled to the left and right of it and tripled above it. That system causes movement to occur, as he told me with the delight of a schoolboy demonstrating a magic trick, 'inward and outward,

The living room of Josef and Anni Albers's home

up and down and left to right, all at the same time'. What we know to be a flat piece of art appears three-dimensional. And, in Josef's prints as in Monet's paintings, a mundane subject is luminous, so that light seems to project from it.

I brought Josef small coloured postcards of the Monets. It amused me to go between two such very different environments while in both instances focusing on strikingly modern, rebellious paintings. The Monets, in their ornate gold frames, belonged to the world of landed gentry: the Chippendale furniture and superb Chinese porcelains set the tone of their environment. Their caretakers back then were two petite, grey-haired ladies in flowered dresses and tennis sneakers, who were so gracious to the teenager who was an anomaly in his choice of destination that one day they invited me to sit down at the desk in the library and read the handwritten letters that Henry James had sent to the original owners of the house. The Albers works, on the other hand, were in an austere, bare-bones ranch-style house, its spartan insides having only a few pieces of furniture that one would have expected in a hospital.

Josef Albers, *Ostring I*, *c.* 1917, paper transfer lithograph, 10⅝ × 16¼ in. (27 × 41.3 cm).

Josef Albers, *Ostring IV*, *c.* 1917, paper transfer lithograph, 10½ × 16¼ in. (26.7 × 41.3 cm).

But in both places, I was looking at art that was audacious and brave, pioneering in its concept, and, above all else, seductively beautiful.

Josef kindly humoured my carrying on about the similarities of him and Monet. Two artists obsessed with light, masterful in technique, determined to open eyes while deliberately avoiding elements of the self. Two artists who realized the wonder of taking multiple approaches to a single subject. And Josef had, he said, admired Monet's work ever since he first saw it, in 1908, when he went to the private Folkwang Museum in Hagen, which housed the collection of the intrepid Karl Ernst Osthaus. It had been Cézanne who changed his life for ever, Josef reminded me, but the work by Monet that was there was wonderful.

It had been Monet whose work so captivated the young Wassily Kandinsky, a recent graduate from law school then practising 'peasant law', to change the course of his life and become a painter. He could not fathom the way that a large painting of waterlilies that he saw in Moscow was so coherent at a distance yet so abstract close up. Kandinsky and

Josef Albers, *Standing nude*, *c.* 1919, ink on paper, 12⅝ × 10 in. (32.1 × 25.6 cm).

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his Bauhaus friend Albers used to discuss Monet, but it was for different reasons that the Frenchman held such sway over them. Josef marvelled at the different paintings of the cathedral facade in Rouen, as well as at the haystacks, both for the beauty of the individual works and for the brilliance in presenting a single subject in different light conditions. And for that tenacious adherence to the idea of series.

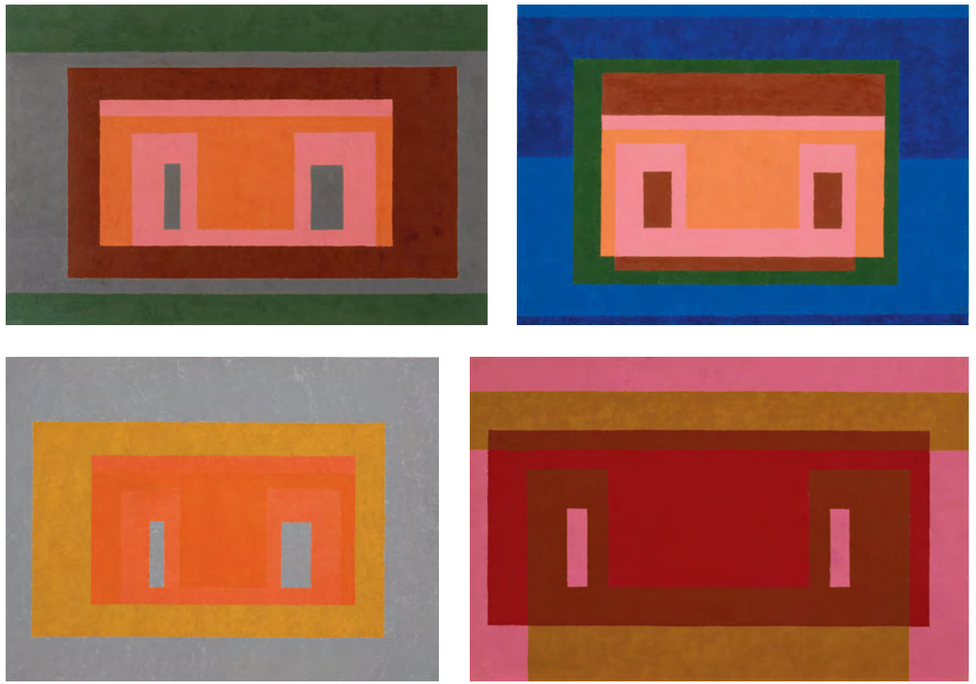
Josef had begun to work in series even before he went to the Bauhaus. When, at age twenty-nine, he made lithographs of workers' houses in his hometown of Bottrop, they were related images of similar streets or of the same street seen from different angles. Two years later, having moved to Munich, where he was taught to draw from live models, he would sketch a nude woman from three different vantage points: the subject always the same, while what one sees is totally different.

Josef Albers, *Treble Clef*, *c.* 1932–5, gouache on paper, 19½ × 13 in. (49.5 × 33 cm); *Treble Clef G i*, *c.* 1932–5, gouache on paper, 14⅞ × 10⅞₁₆ in. (37.8 × 26.5 cm); *Treble Clef*, *c.* 1932–5, gouache on paper, 15⅝ × 11½ in. (39.7 × 29.2 cm); *Treble Clef G 1*, 1935, gouache and pencil on heavy wove paper, 15 × 10⅝₁₆ in. (38.1 × 26.2 cm).

Then, at the Bauhaus, he created a group of gouaches called 'the treble clefs'. The outline of this G-shaped symbol that signifies the higher notes is essentially always the same, but the interior lines, and the forms that they create, vary from work to work. He did perhaps twenty of these treble clefs in all, a lot of them wonderful excursions in the territory of black, white, and grey, with other variations utilizing a larger palette, the colours mostly luminous pastel tones. What is amazing is how similar and how different the works are from one another, simultaneously.

The principle of a theme and variations, or of a known form having multiple incarnations, is, of course, well known in music. The treble clef represents an underlying ordering principle that in turn facilitates imagination and play. The same idea pertains to sonnets, with their fourteen lines and rhyming schemes and regulated number of syllables per line. This idea of a system suited Josef completely, as a form of balance and constancy.

The notion of series became even more part of Albers's lifeblood once he moved to the United States in 1933. He would take a single visual

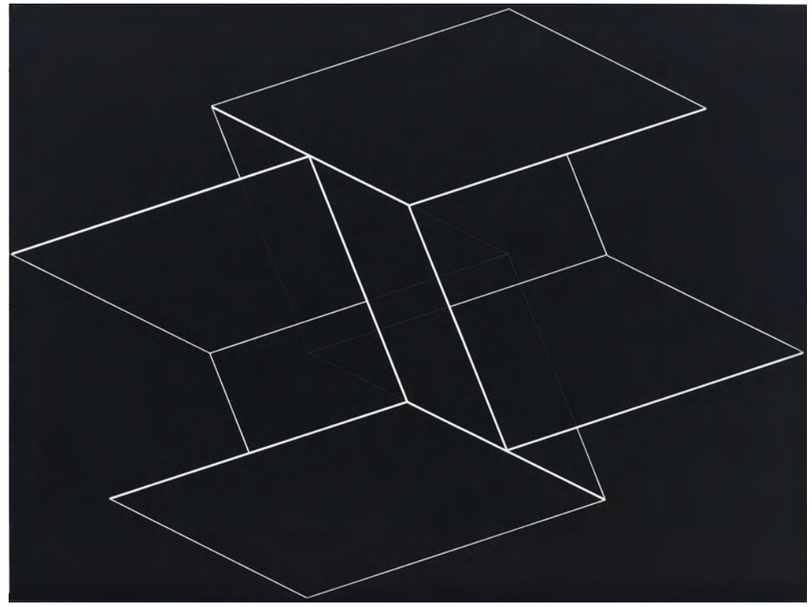


Josef Albers, *Variant / Adobe*, 1947, oil and pencil on blotting paper, 20 × 26½ in. (50.8 × 67.3 cm); *Variant / Adobe*, 1947, oil and pencil on blotting paper, 19 × 24 in. (48.3 × 61 cm); *Variant / Adobe*, 1947–52, oil on Masonite, 18½ × 23½ in. (47 × 59.7 cm); *Reds + Ochre with Pink*, 1948, oil on Masonite, 17¾ × 25⅝ in. (45 × 65 cm).

theme and make various permutations of it. This reached a new high point in the late 1940s when he did a great number of paintings all from the series that he entitled *Variants* but also referred to as *Adobes* because of the connection of the lovely geometric layouts, all horizontal, with the architecture of adobe buildings he saw in the American south-west and Mexico. Going through them is a beautiful experience in many ways. You have the joys of beholding one splendid artwork after another, and you are reminded that when a colour changes, everything else changes as well: the plastic action, the movement into space.

Three Chupícuaro figurines in the collection of Anni and Josef Albers, from Chupícuaro, Guanajuato, Mexico, Late Formative period, 400–100 BC.

At the same time that he was making these paintings, Josef began to collect Chupícuaro figurines. These small Mexican clay objects, generally around five centimetres high, are all, roughly, similar: each is a buxom naked woman, a sort of fertility goddess. To be tiny and exaggerated at the same time is a very particular capability, and they are a fascinating body of work, each with its own charm, the aggregate amazing. Josef relished the idea of this large group of work consisting of so many emotive small figures all so similar that you could easily mistake one for another but, at the same time, each ever so slightly different from the other, the disparities being in the angles of the legs, the girth of the middle portion, a millimetre of difference between one face and another.

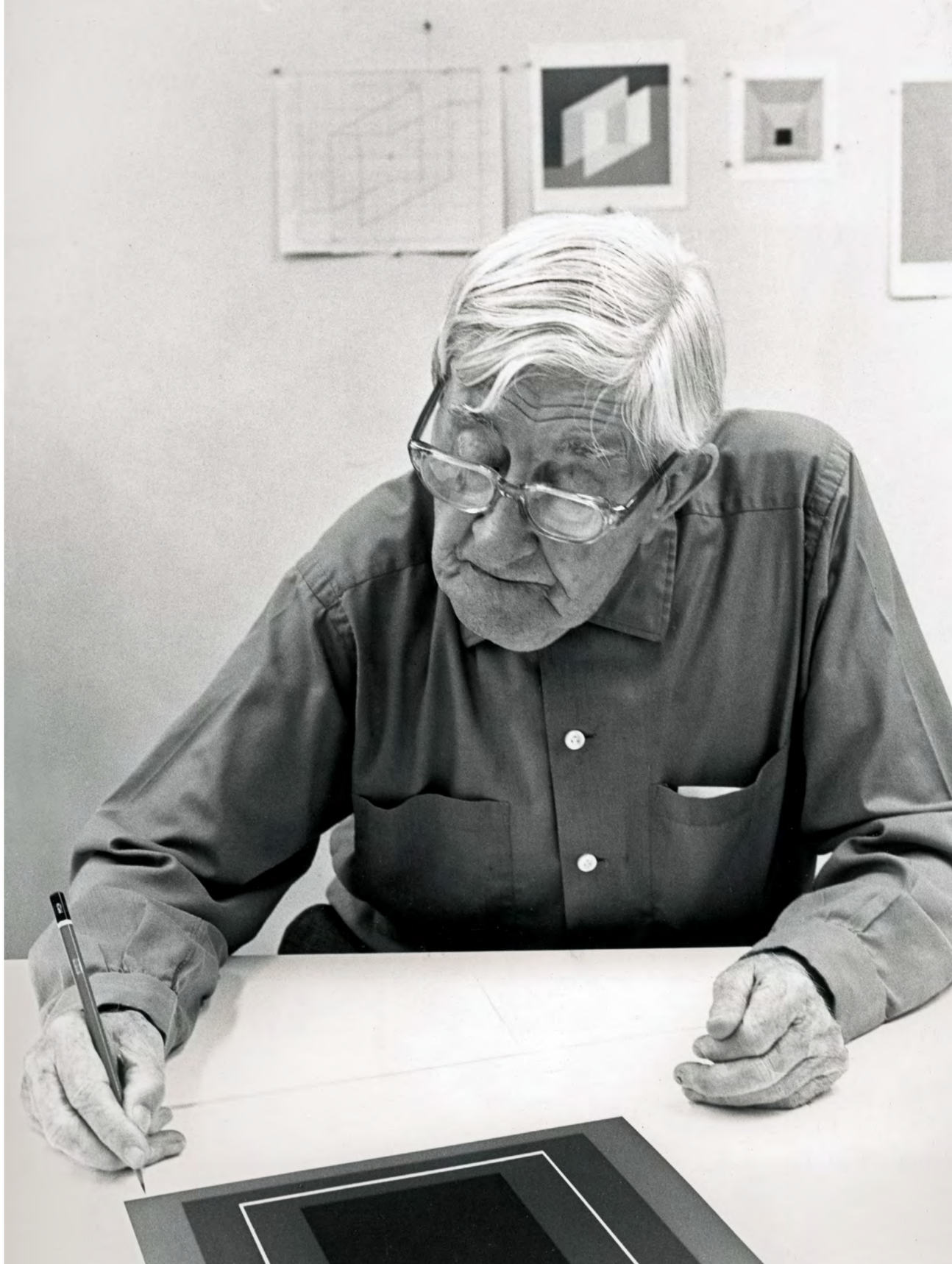


Josef Albers, *Structural Constellation*, undated, machine-engraved plastic laminate mounted on wood, 17 × 22½ in. (43.2 × 57.2 cm)

It suited him emotionally: the consistency with the variables, the sense of nuance. And he realized many of the same qualities in his extraordinary print series on which he worked more and more tenaciously in the last twenty or so years of his life. His *Structural Constellations*, some embossed without ink, others in white lines on a marvellous soft grey, entice us. Further *Adobe* prints, so similar but so different because of the delicious role Josef gave to colour, bring smiles to our faces in their marvellously different moods and inner movement as the palette assumes varying personalities. And then come the *Homages*. There is the series called *Midnight and Noon* (pp. 34–7), encomia to the capacity of art to give us two times of day, in reality twelve hours apart, simultaneously,

as evoked by the sunniest yellows and the most seductive blacks. *Day and Night* is another splendid series that has a particular power when seen in sequence while each print on its own is a treasure (pp. 26–33). And then come the two series called *Gray Instrumentation I* (pp. 118–23) and *Gray Instrumentation II* (pp. 124–9). As a totality, the twenty-four prints that comprise these two portfolios are in many ways Albers's ultimate masterpiece. They realize their lush yet subtle palettes in one triumph after another. To behold just one of them is a luxury, an experience in which calm and stimulation coexist. To follow them in the order in which Josef intended them provides an experience as otherworldly, as exquisite as listening to a late Beethoven string quartet. Everything is weightless and ethereal; the spiritual and the material become one and the same.

How odd it is when life seems straightforward and simple. But when we feel how warm sunlight can empower simple haystacks to produce the most salubrious range of colours, we learn that it is not so complex to make change and continuity coexist. And when we see that the juxtaposition of three solid greys, masterfully chosen, abutting one another in an arrangement of squares within squares, is a glimpse of infinity, we see that the will to work in series is the stuff of paradise.



Josef Albers signing *Gray Instrumentation I I* at the artist's studio, Tyler Graphics Ltd, Bedford Village, New York, 1974