

Josef Albers
Paintings Titled Variants

Black Mountain College
The Experimenters

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24 Grafton Street, London



Josef Albers, *Browns, Ochre, Yellow*, 1948
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David Zwirner is pleased to present *Paintings Titled Variants*, an exhibition of work by Josef Albers on view at the gallery's London location. Organised in collaboration with The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, this exhibition focuses on Albers's breakthrough *Variant/Adobe* series, a body of work that was inspired, in part, by the art, architecture, and landscapes that Albers observed during his numerous visits to Mexico and the American Southwest. The exhibition follows *Josef Albers: Homage to the Square*, a major 2022–2023 solo exhibition of the artist's work at the Josef Albers Museum Quadrat Bottrop, Germany. *Paintings Titled Variants* is presented in tandem with *Black Mountain College: The Experimenters*. On view in The Upper Room of the London gallery, this exhibition features additional works by Albers as well as several of his colleagues and students from the famed titular school.

Like his *Homage to the Square*, the *Variant/Adobe* works follow a serialised format within which Albers experimented with endless chromatic combinations and perceptual effects. Begun in 1947, while Albers was still a teacher at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the *Variant/Adobe* series initiated a new phase in his work. As Brenda Danilowitz, chief curator of The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, notes, "with this new series ... Josef put aside the linear elements of his paintings and narrowed the medium down to the material of pure paint. He took up the challenge of discovering how paint behaves when subjected to similar restrictions to those that exist in weaving, where it is physically impossible to mix colors, and color change can only be achieved by the illusion created when two or more juxtaposed threads interact in the viewer's eye."¹

¹ Brenda Danilowitz, "From *Variants on a Theme to Homage to the Square*: Josef Albers's Paintings 1947-49," in *Anni and Josef Albers: Latin American Journeys* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), p. 143.

Titled after the first exhibition of the *Variant/Adobe* paintings at Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, in 1949, *Paintings Titled Variants* will feature a range of works from this series, including compositions on Masonite as well as on blotting paper. With their vivid colour palettes, the paintings reflect Albers's keen and studied sensitivity to and interest in opticality, as well as the way in which the relationship between different colours dramatically impacts the appearance and experience of the work. Elaborating on these visual qualities, Nicholas Fox Weber, Executive Director of The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, notes that, "No colour is actually on top of one another, but there are powerful illusions of transparency and translucency.... Albers used equal amounts of different colours—whether four or five or six of them—to create the impression that there are far more of certain hues than of others."²

One of Albers's names for these works, *Adobe*, reinforces their architectural quality and may refer to the "clay house" in La Luz, New Mexico, in which he began making these works. The name also reflects the influence of pre-Columbian art and architecture on the series, which resembles a schematic rendering of a vernacular southern Mexican adobe dwelling. Several of Albers's photocollages from his trips to Mexico will also be on view and further attest to this connection. An important, yet largely unrecognised facet of his work, the photocollages—which often present typologies of architectural forms or decorative patterns—visualise Albers's thinking and illuminate how his travels and study influenced his painterly practise. Highlighting the significance of these works, curator Lauren Hinkson writes, "Albers's photography offers a kind of Rosetta stone for interpreting how his overall body of work bridges the temporal divide between ancient forms and modernist abstraction. The chain of formal correspondence linking the photographs of pre-Columbian ruins to Albers's paintings and prints looks self-evident, almost obvious."³ Albers's connection to Mexico and Mesoamerican art and architecture was the subject of *Josef Albers in Mexico*, a major 2017–2018 exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, that subsequently travelled to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.

Black Mountain College: The Experimenters continues and builds on these themes of close study and formal exploration in Albers's *Variants*, bringing together works by a group of artists whose career trajectories developed around the renowned liberal arts school that in the 1930s and 1940s became, as the writer Amanda Fortini recounts, "the site of a genius cluster."⁴ The presentation features work by a group of artists who overlapped at Black Mountain in the mid- to late 1940s—including Anni Albers, Josef Albers, Leo Amino, Ruth Asawa, Elaine de Kooning, Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, and Ray Johnson—as well as figures such as Sue Fuller and Sheila Hicks, who studied with and befriended members of this group at other notable institutions during the same period. As art historian Eva Díaz observes in her seminal 2014 book, *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College*, "Black Mountain participants' ambitions to transform habits of perception, systems of intention, and patterns of tradition have essential implications for understanding not only modernist but subsequent art practices."⁵

Encompassing a remarkable variety of mediums, sizes, and techniques, the works on view highlight the threads of creative exchange that were interwoven when the paths of these teachers, students, friends, and colleagues crossed. A linen textile composition by Hicks, intricate looped- and tied-wire sculptures

² Nicholas Fox Weber in the didactic wall text for this exhibition, February 2023.

³ Lauren Hinkson, "Ruins in Reverse," *Josef Albers in Mexico*. Exh. cat. (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2017), pp. 16-17.

⁴ Amanda Fortini, "Why Are We Still Talking About Black Mountain College?" *The New York Times* (July 7, 2022).

⁵ Eva Díaz, "Introduction: Black Mountain College between Chance and Design," *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 14.

by Asawa, and a group of abstract prints and works on paper by Anni and Josef Albers reveal these artists' deeply considered shared interest in the art and indigenous cultures of Mexico. Vibrant "refractional" resin sculptures by Amino, diagrammatic architectural sketches by Buckminster Fuller, stylised cityscapes by Sue Fuller, and a suite of early collaged *moticos* by Johnson—all placed here in conversation—outline the nuanced concerns of two- and three-dimensional space, geometry, and form that Josef Albers helped promulgate in his peers and pupils. Gestural abstract drawings by Elaine and Willem de Kooning, who spent the summer of 1948 at Black Mountain, speak to the school's atmosphere of unbridled creative freedom.

As Asawa once recalled, the enduring progressive ethos of this artistic circle could be encapsulated by the way in which Josef Albers, her teacher at Black Mountain, would introduce his course on Basic Design: "Open your eyes and see. My aim is to make you see more than you want to. I am here to destroy all your prejudices. If you already have a style don't bring it with you. It will only be in the way."⁶

Josef Albers (1888–1976) is considered one of the most influential abstract painters of the twentieth century as well as an important designer and educator. Born in Bottrop, Germany, Albers studied briefly at the Königliche Bayerische Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Munich, in 1919 before becoming a student at the Weimar Bauhaus in 1920. In 1922, Albers joined the school's faculty, first working in stained glass and, starting in 1923, teaching design. During his time at Black Mountain College, Albers began to show his work extensively within the United States, including solo exhibitions at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover (1935); J. B. Neumann's New Art Circle, New York (1936, 1938); The Germanic Museum at Harvard University, Cambridge (1936); Katharine Kuh Gallery, Chicago (1937); San Francisco Museum of Art (1940); and the Nierendorf Gallery, New York (1941). The Alberses remained at Black Mountain until 1949 and in 1950 moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where Josef Albers was invited to direct a newly formed department of design at Yale University School of Art. In 1950, too, he developed what would become his seminal *Homage to the Square* series, which he continued to elaborate until his death in 1976. This body of work was featured in a major exhibition organised by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1964 that travelled to twenty-two venues in the United States and Latin America. Albers retired from teaching in 1958, a few years prior to the publication of his important text *Interaction of Color* (1963), which was reissued in two volumes in 2013. Following numerous gallery and museum exhibitions, as well as his participation in documenta 1 (1955) and documenta 4 (1968), Albers became the first living artist to be the subject of a solo exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, with his career-spanning retrospective there in 1971.

More recent exhibitions include *Painting on Paper: Josef Albers in America*, which originated at the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, in 2010 (travelled to Josef Albers Museum, Quadrat, Bottrop, Germany; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark; Kunstmuseum Basel; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Centro de Arte Moderna, Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon; and the Morgan Library and Museum, New York); *Josef Albers: Minimal Means, Maximum Effect* at the Fundación Juan March, Madrid, in 2014 (travelled to Henie Onstad Art Centre, Høvikodden, Norway); and *A Beautiful Confluence: Anni and Josef Albers and the Latin American World* at Mudec, Museo delle Culture, Milan, in 2015 to 2016. From 2016 to 2017, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, presented *One and One Is Four: The Bauhaus Photocollages of Josef Albers. Anni and Josef Albers: Art and Life* was on view at the

⁶ Transcript of a lecture on Josef Albers delivered by Asawa at the San Francisco Museum of Art, 1963. Ruth Asawa Papers, Stanford University.

Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, in 2021, and subsequently travelled to IVAM (Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno), Valencia, Spain, in 2022. At the Josef Albers Museum in Bottrop, Germany, *Josef Albers: Homage to the Square* is on view until February 26, 2023.

Since May 2016, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation has been exclusively represented by David Zwirner. *Sonic Albers*, which was on view in New York in 2019, marked the gallery's third solo presentation of Josef Albers's work, following the exhibitions *Grey Steps, Grey Scales, Grey Ladders*, presented in New York in 2016, and *Sunny Side Up*, shown in London in 2017. *Albers and Morandi: Never Finished*, an exhibition exploring the visual and formal affinities and contrasts between the work of Albers and Giorgio Morandi, was on view in New York in 2021. On view at David Zwirner, Hong Kong in 2022 was *Josef Albers: Primary Colors*, the artist's first solo presentation in Greater China.

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