

Art in America

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Matisse and Decoration, Early and Late/Sculpture/Paris Matisse Show, '75
Four Autobiographical Paintings/American Artists Talk on Matisse
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Prints

Anni Albers and the Printerly Image

BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

Anni Albers tells of a night flight she took into New York from Chile. She felt disturbed and frightened in the clouds and darkness, with blank ocean beneath. Then there was an opening below, and she could see a grid of roads lined with lights. The sight heartened her. Her own kind had been there, and had left a mark on nature.

Anni Albers seeks to express clarity, balance and order through the use of straight lines; her object is to create a microcosmic totality—an accessible wholeness. This attitude underlies her printmaking, a recent undertaking for her. Her printmaking career was the result of an unpremeditated decision: in the summer of 1964, when her husband Josef was working on a print series at the Tamarind Workshop, she was urged to try her hand by workshop director June Wayne. The start of her long career as a weaver—at the Bauhaus in 1922—was similarly unintentional. Largely due to a prejudice against women artists, she could not get into her chosen workshops; the only option given her was weaving. This was a happenstance she has never regretted, however. Once she knew the medium, she developed weaving in her own way, with an emphasis gradually more on pictorial than purely functional form.

In her weaving, she had tried to let thread do what it could to create form. She likes to view herself as a passive rather than an active agent in the realization of a design, as if the medium itself were making the decisions. Her first lithographs at Tamarind, the "Line Involvements," allowed threadlike forms to break out of the horizontal and vertical pattern required by weaving. Retaining the effect of interlacing of woven threads by moving the lines alternately over and under each other, she achieved effects possible only in printmaking. By printing the lines twice, first in positive and then, off-register, in negative, she produced a look resembling incision in stone. Further, she used acid to make a kind of background not obtainable in other print mediums. The "Line Involvements" were a thorough exploration of the possibilities of a particular process and set of tools.

Anni Albers has always been fascinated by the building of a whole out of small, individually neutral elements, a process she admires especially in Seurat and in Klee. Having limited herself, in her Tamarind prints, to threadlike elements, more recently she has introduced the triangle, another motif from her weaving vocabulary susceptible to much freer adaptation in the print

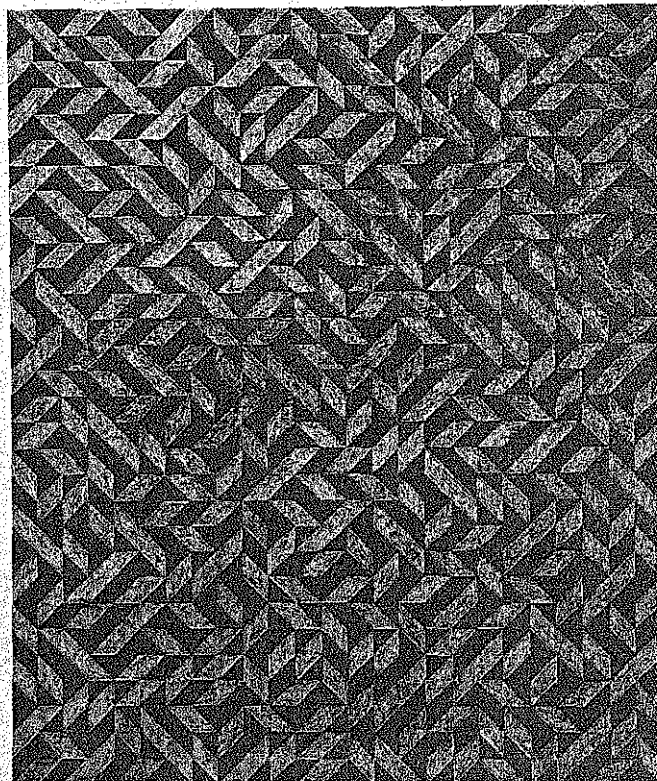
medium. Albers likes to cite examples and analogies of human ingenuity in relation to her own work, and indeed certain scientific ideas seem to relate to her imagery. She recalls reading an account of ancient man's development of metal alloys strengthened by their impurities: alloys are stronger than their component metals because, instead of having regular sequences of parallel crystals that easily slip apart, they have varying crystals which create an "atomic grit." Meditation on such phenomena, she has said, moved her to incorporate some degree of irregularity—impurity—into her apparently systematic patterns of triangles, juxtaposing the bits in ways suggesting strength and dynamism. The arrangements in her "Triadic" series—which consists of both prints and drawings—evoke the beautiful and precise patterns of scientific investigation. Though never perfectly symmetrical or based on static formulas, the patterns in these prints and drawings attain a subtle, over-all balance in their harmonious rhythms and carefully derived weights and proportions. These works cannot be grasped in a moment; their internal irregularities—within-regularity demand repeated looking.

Process and technique are important for Anni Albers. Her print mediums so far include lithography, screenprint, embossing

and photo-offset. All the prints are preceded by pencil studies on graph paper. Photo-offset—the familiar half-tone black-and-white reproduction used in ordinary printing—enables her to retain a hand-penciled effect in a particularly innovative series of prints in which photo-offset and screenprint are combined. The result is a muted gray replica of the pattern of her pencil strokes, interspersed with the opaque colors and rich, impeccable textures of screen printing.

Another group of prints explores the range of the silk-screen medium alone: the maze-like "Meander" series of screenprints went through the press four times: first with a background screen that laid down a solid color, then twice with a design screen in another color placed in two different positions, and finally with the same design screen in yet another position, printed in a new, lighter, overlaid color (difficult to achieve because the ink had to be simultaneously strong and translucent and thus could contain no white). The endless meander of the design, repeatedly superimposed and constantly in motion both linearly and in depth, gains extreme vibrancy through this uniquely "printerly" method—with thanks due in part, according to the artist, to a fruitful collaboration with the printers.

Anni Albers:
W/CO., 1974,
photo-offset and
silkscreen, 15
by 12½ inches;
at Zabriskie.
Her prints will be
exhibited at the
Kunstmuseum,
Düsseldorf, July
10–Aug. 31, and
at the Bauhaus
Archives, Berlin,
Sept. 5–Oct. 20.



Author: Nicholas Fox Weber is a freelance writer and lecturer; his book on Anni Albers (David R. Godine) will be published fall '76.