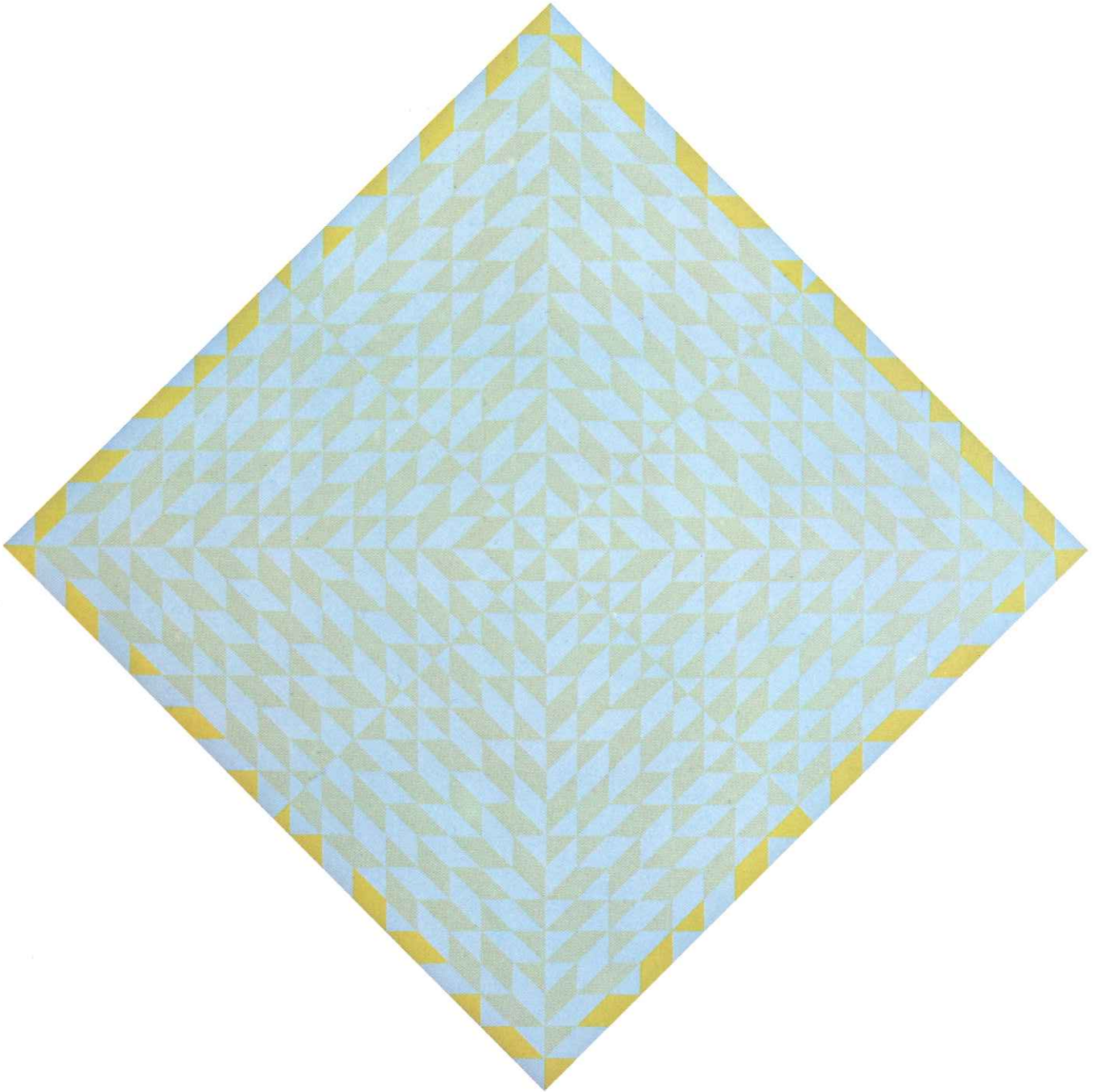


ANNI ALBERS



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Nicholas Fox Weber

Anni Albers wrote in 1947: "The more we avoid standing in the way of the material and in the way of tools and machines, the better chance there is that our work will not be dated, will not bear the stamp of too limited a period of time and be old-fashioned some day. . . . And it will outlast fashions only if it embodies lasting, together with transitory, qualities.

"Not only the materials themselves which we come to know in a craft, are our teachers. The tools, or the more mechanized tools, our machines, are our guides too."

Since the summer of 1964, the machinery of printing has been one of Anni Albers's major guides. After many years of work as a weaver, she was introduced to the new freedom of printmaking. Her husband, Josef Albers, was working on a print series at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop, and June Wayne, the workshop director, suggested that Anni also try her hand at printmaking. With textiles, she always let thread do what it could; with printmaking she was free to take threadlike forms even further and to continue with some themes she had occasionally explored in gouache since 1947.

In "Line Involvements," her Tamarind portfolio of six prints, she allowed these forms to break out of the horizontal and vertical construction required by weaving. She retained the interlacing of the threads by moving them alternately over and under each other, but achieved additional qualities now possible in her newly chosen medium. By printing the lines twice, first positive and then negative, off-register, she produced an effect resembling an incision in stone. She used acid to produce a cloudy background. Like her weavings, the Line Involvements were the result of manipulating the process and the technique and of exploring the limits and possibilities of her tools. Although she retained the thread image, the prints were by no means transpositions from another medium.

As a beginning student, Anni Albers had worked in traditional figurative and Impressionistic styles. She was first attracted to the possibilities of the straight line and abstraction shortly after she entered the Bauhaus weaving workshop at age twenty-three. She liked precision and clarity—exact, finite forms that could be balanced and harmonized. Abstract art, man's invention, allowed a totality and wholeness that could not be grasped in nature,

which is knowable only in parts. Abstraction, organized and finite, could defeat the tyranny of time and the variables of our vision of nature.

For some time a significant straight-line form in her graphic art has been the triangle, which she had explored in weaving. She can use it more freely in drawing and printmaking, where diagonal lines need not be composed step by step from the vertical and the horizontal. She uses the triangle as the individual element from which to build entire organisms. By reducing the elements and then carefully organizing the like components, she has worked to create the sort of order that touches her in the music of Bach and Mozart, in Seurat's drawings, and in some of Klee's paintings.

Anni Albers carefully weights and arranges these components in study sketches, the first small ones often done on graph paper. She organizes without ever allowing repeated series or simple symmetry. Her constructions are full of variation, of a subtle sense of balance that never yields a formula and therefore provides visual exercise and diversion.

She employs subtle systems to strengthen each construction. She allows the rigorous rules of a well-ordered world to guide her toward her goal of clear composition. Systems within nature, rather than the reflection of human anxiety that concerns so many of the abstract artists from whom she stands apart, have pre-occupied her thought.

The basis of her work is visual, but she has been affected by other sources. As a student, she was deeply impressed by Goethe's *Metamorphosis of Plants*, with its inquiry into an underlying system of regularity with modification, in which like units, repeated with variations, make up the structure of entire organisms. More recently, she was similarly intrigued by what she learned about the structure of metal alloys, which are stronger than the tin and copper that compose them because, instead of having a regular sequence of parallel crystals that easily slip apart, they have varying crystals that create an atomic grit. Anni Albers does not directly illustrate these laws, but she did absorb them, and so her work almost unconsciously reflects them. Modestly and intentionally neutral, she transmits patterns as if her "self" is not their origin.

The arrangements in her Triadic prints and drawings reflect a combined precision and irregularity. Never perfectly symmetrical or formularized, these patterns have a seemingly effortless balance in their harmonious rhythm and in their carefully derived proportions and weights. As a result, the prints and drawings playfully puzzle and intrigue the viewer. The works cannot be simplistically grasped all in a moment, but demand repeated looking.

In her ink drawings, Anni Albers has achieved startling variations with triangles composed in solid black or red or from small dots. In her first Triadic prints, *A* and *B* from 1968, she used two colors of screenprinting for the triangles and a third for the background; *C* and *D* of the next year are screenprints of single-color solid triangles against solid backgrounds.

In *Camino Real* of 1967-69 and *TR I* and *TR II*, produced at Gemini in 1970, she again combined colors of screenprint, and in *TR III* she screenprinted the total surface in gold and embossed the triangular design. In her two Fox prints of 1972, she utilized the photo-offset technique of commercial printing to avoid the flatness of screenprinting. Always determined to make use of the process and to let its capabilities dictate the work, she developed the prints as she learned more about what was technically possible. In *Fox I* her handmade pencil strokes were photographically reproduced, and one overall pattern was reversed by a simple photo-mechanical process to create a two-part print. *Fox II* was made by juxtaposing the negative of the opaque (red) pattern of *Fox I* over a velox of it and turning the result ninety degrees; possible only through such technique, this print had no study drawing.

In *W/CO*, *PO I*, and *PO II*, she used a combination of the photo-offset reproduction of her pencil strokes with an opaque color screenprint triangular pattern over it.

Her Domberger series of 1973 is all screenprint. And in her most recent series, "Triangulated Intaglios," produced at Tyler Graphics in 1976, she used etching and aquatint for the first time. For the etching, she worked on a special "soft-hard" ground, maintaining the immediacy of her hand and adding a textural aspect.

In her earlier, mazelike Meander series of 1970, Anni Albers also had used printing technique to achieve results not possible in

another medium. Each of these 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 two different positions in the same color (the color becomes deeper each time it overprints itself), and finally with the design screenprinted in another position in a brighter, dominant color (of limited choice because it had to be simultaneously strong and translucent and therefore could contain no white). The endless meander is full of motion on the surface and in depth; it appears to have layers of shadows that imply many light sources.

As in all of her prints, Anni Albers's attention to the possibilities of the mediums and her positive collaboration with the printers have yielded innovative results. Minimizing self-revelation, concentrating on technique and the voices of her vision, she has stuck to her task of transmitting timeless design to the best of her ability. The results are visual resting places, affirmative solutions that refresh in their purity and order.