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BOOKS & ARTSART REVIEW

'Anni Albers: Work With Materials' Review: Abstraction With Weft

The often overshadowed German textile artist receives the recognition she deserves in this exhibit of over 100 drawings, prints, weavings and rugs that showcases the mystery and playfulness of her work



By Lance Esplund

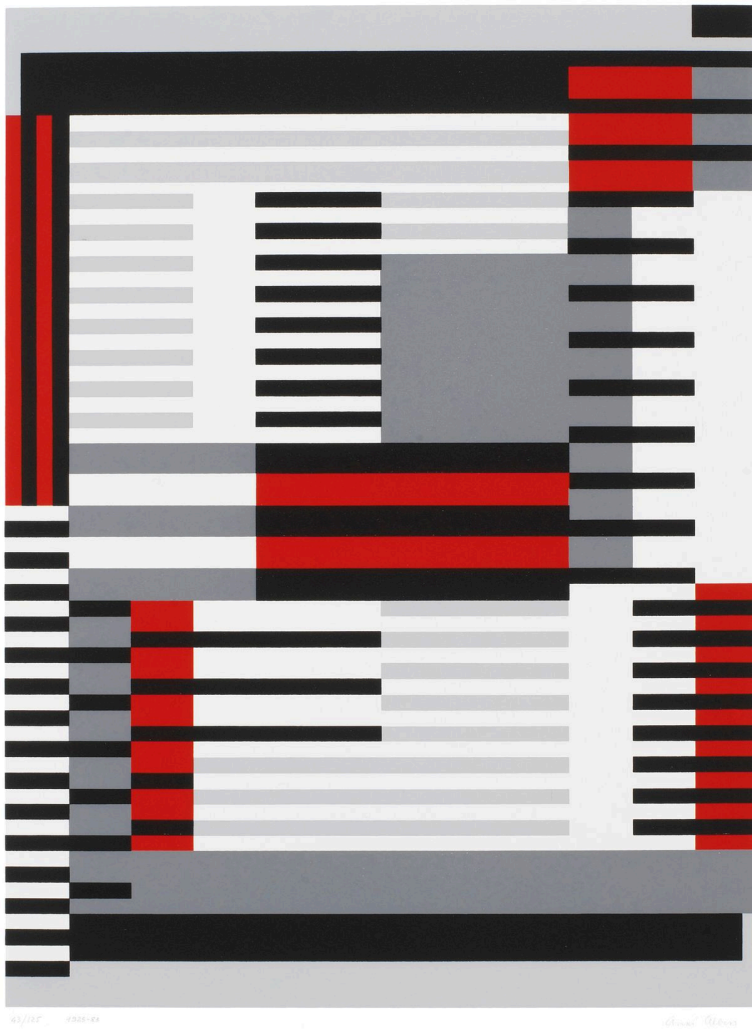
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You might not be familiar with the stunning, innovative, abstract weavings of Anni Albers (1899-1994), the Berlin-born textile artist, printmaker, designer and Bauhaus and Black Mountain College professor. But you've probably heard of her husband, Josef Albers (1888-1976), whom Anni (then Annelise Fleischmann) met while they were both Bauhaus students.

Josef, the prominent Bauhaus master, influential color theorist and Black Mountain College and Yale University professor, is celebrated for his "Homage to the Square" series of abstract paintings and for his book "Interaction of Color." Nothing against Josef, but to my eye his pictures close down at times into the tasteful, color theory exercises that they are, whereas Anni's abstract textiles, what she called "pictorial weavings," continually open. Unassuming, energetic and tactile, they reveal layered, polyphonic complexities of color, texture, pattern and rhythm—living threads, working out their own fates.

Anni, a minimalist before Minimalism, was appreciated early on. She enjoyed a one-person show at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1949 (MoMA's first exhibition devoted to a textile artist). Today, however, she isn't the household name she deserves to be. Frequently paired with Josef, Anni unwittingly shoulders the subordinated role of craftsperson. In reality, she's immeasurably responsible for the 20th-century revival of fiber arts.

"Anni Albers: Work With Materials," a beautiful, diverse, well-paced retrospective at the Syracuse University Art Museum, sets out to re-establish her position as a major modern artist. Curated and impeccably installed by Fritz Horstman, "Work With Materials" refers to Albers's 1937 essay of the same title and to her practice of honoring the qualities and laws inherent in a given material. It comprises more than 100 of her drawings, prints, designs, textile samples, fabrics, weavings and rugs from the collection of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, where Mr. Horstman is education director.



Weaving and its relegation to second-tier women's work have long histories in Western culture—which has been traditionally dominated by architecture, painting and sculpture. The

Bauhaus was progressive (women could enroll). And Anni, trained as a painter, sought to enter the stained-glass workshop (taught by Josef). But like most women, she was consigned to study weaving—a Bauhaus workshop she eventually ran, but a medium she herself initially dismissed as a “sissy craft.” However, working under Bauhaus master Paul Klee—who headed the weaving workshop’s design, form theory and color theory curriculum—she quickly warmed to the loom. Klee taught that the grid’s dynamic, interwoven energies of warp and weft were essential to all pictorial structures. Anni, a master weaver, became a master abstractionist.

Gorgeous from the start, “Work With Materials” opens with “Connections” (1983), a set of nine easel-scale screenprints, startlingly varied in style, in which Albers re-explored earlier works she created from the 1920s to the ’80s. “Untitled” is muscular, spirited, elastic. It resembles a meandering white thread repeatedly snaking around itself on a bold black ground. “Study for Nylon Rug” is lyrical, jovial, suggesting ribbon candy. “Orchestra III” — childlike, a jumble of red, yellow and blue confetti—darts like a school of fish. And “Smyrna-Knüpftteppich,” comprising hard-edged red, gray, black and white rectangles, reinterprets the design for a large rug Albers originally conceived as a Bauhaus student. Produced posthumously, it hangs nearby.



Albers reimagined and merged elements of world art—Native American baskets and blankets; African weavings and wood carvings; Islamic ornamentation; Greek pottery; Coptic, medieval, Andean and pre-Columbian textiles—with Modernist abstraction. She reinvigorated weaving with mystery, universal structures and a playfulness that culminated in what she called “a quite barbaric beauty.” Albers wove not only with linen, jute, cotton, raffia and hemp, but revived the use of metallic threads and incorporated unconventional materials including synthetics and cellophane—creating modern abstractions that conjure fantastical chain mail, primitive, ritualistic objects, imperial fabrics and religious vestments.

In 1944, Albers designed soft, glittery, rough-hewn drapery fabric—in copper, cellophane and chenille—for Philip Johnson. In the 1970s and early '80s, she created translucent, wispy machine-embroidered cotton and acid-etched polyester fabrics—in white, pewter-gray and shiny silver—that are as light and delicate as they are vibrant. Also in the 1970s, she embossed zinc-plate geometric patterns on silkscreen and metal laminate in works that suggest gleaming ancient Aztec and Egyptian goldwork. And, in the 1990s she embossed similar geometries on heavy white paper, like footprints in snow.



Working with these lively, infinitely varied geometric patterns (in weaving, gouache, pencil and black-and-white or colored prints), Albers orchestrated interlocking triangles, checkerboards and rectangles into vibrating mazes. Some, such as “Triangulated Intaglio II” (1976), are as sturdy and dense as brick walls. Others, including “Triangulated Intaglio IV” (1976), have a wormy, creepy-crawly vibe. The screenprint “Camino Real” (1967-69), a design for a wall hanging at Mexico City’s Camino Real hotel, is an immensely complex, free-form arrangement of tiny shimmering pink and crimson triangles that appear to blush, shiver and breathe.

“Work With Materials,” a bountiful introduction to the breadth of Albers’s experimental genius, suffers only from its modest scale. (Studies, prints and small textile samples outnumber major weavings.) The show should be twice as large, further revealing how Albers, expanding the possibilities of thread as a living medium, elevated the applied arts back to their rightful place as high art.

—*Mr. Esplund, the author of “The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art” (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.*

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