

Albers's abstracts

Josef Albers aimed to neutralize all elements bar one in his paintings, leaving colour as the only variable. The concept has strong parallels with scientific experiments to test theories.

Martin Kemp

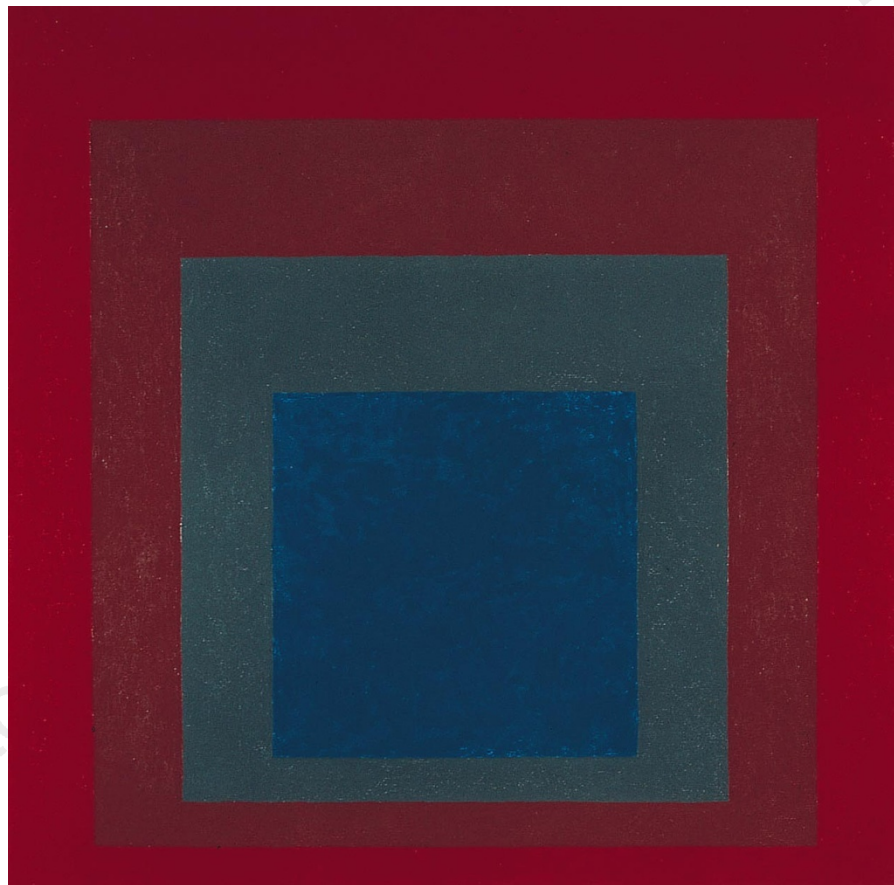
The effects of colour in painting would, on the face of it, seem to be one of the most obvious areas in which to forge a 'science of art'. Yet the colourist's science remains, in the words of a sixteenth-century commentator, the "true alchemy of painting". The colourist-magician compounds base materials into radiant wholes that invariably seem to transcend systematic explanation and predictability.

The old Aristotelian system of colour, which ranged hues along a scale from lightness to darkness, actually worked quite well with painters' practice. A yellow pigment, for example, inherently occupied a position at the light end of the tonal scale, while ultramarine blue stood closer to black. Far from clarifying painters' practice, Newton's spectral division of white light presented sustained problems, not least before Hermann von Helmholtz's elucidation of the essential difference between subtractive colour mixing for pigments and additive mixing for lights.

The key problem for the colourist arises from the high levels of fluidity in our perception and subjective response to the same colours in different combinations and configurations, on various scales and in variable conditions of viewing.

This fluidity continues to provide complex challenges for experimental psychology. A logical response is for the painter to adopt an empirical stance, giving primacy to practical testing rather than theoretical prediction. This is exactly the course followed by Josef Albers in his series *Homage to the Square* and his book *Interaction of Colour* in 1963.

As a student and teacher at the Bauhaus in



Josef Albers's *Homage to the Square* (Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Netherlands).

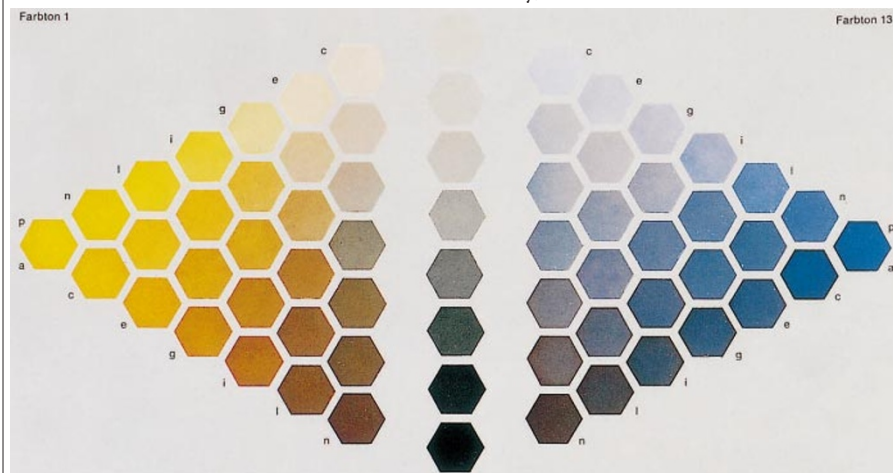
Germany from 1920 to 1933, where he worked directly with Paul Klee, Albers reached maturity in the environment of experimental questing that characterized this extraordinary modernist laboratory for art and architecture.

It was in 1950, while working at Yale University, that he arrived at his definitive fusion

of practice and theory. The square was intended as a neutral container — as "the dish I serve my craziness about colour in". The matt areas of colour similarly aspire to establish a neutrality devoid of the personal handwriting and individual style of traditional painting. The resulting vehicle is akin to a modern scientific experiment in which just one variable — in this case colour — is left unfixed. The 'experiments' and results are then set beside the tenets of colour theories, such as those of Goethe and Wilhelm Ostwald, the Nobel prize-winning physical chemist who published *The Colour Primer* in 1916. The science of colour, for Albers, can inform practice but never provide absolute prescriptions for the making of works of art.

Each work may be regarded as an experiment that is simultaneously dependent on the laws of colour and individually subversive of their predictive power. The elusive complexity of the particular arises from visual means of the utmost simplicity. □

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Albers's *Section Through the Colour Solid of Wilhelm Ostwald* from *Interaction of Colour* (1963).