

Elementary particles

Josef Albers: Minimal Means, Maximum Effect is the largest retrospective on the influential Bauhaus-trained artist in more than two decades, and the first ever mounted in Asia

BY DAVID FRAZIER
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

According to former students of Josef Albers at Black Mountain College, a short-lived experimental school that became a crucible for American modernism from the 1930s to the 1950s, for one assignment the German master asked his students to transform a single piece of paper in a way that would best show off its properties. One student gave the sheet a single fold and then stood it upright, and this was the solution Albers praised the most.

Albers was one of a group of mid-20th century artists — including architect Mies van der Rohe, musician John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham — who stripped their respective art forms down to their most basic units, and then sought to build new art forms and styles from the fundamental principles. Albers' most famous works dealt with colors — for example, how a single shade of brown could look dark next to a bright yellow, but almost tan if next to a medium blue. His most famous paintings were a series entitled *Homage to a Square* begun in 1949, each showing three or four concentric squares of different colors and, more importantly, different color relationships. Such works inspired the minimalism and op art that came in Albers' wake, and his methods and ideas about color and form are some of the most influential in art education in the last half-century.

Josef Albers: *Minimal Means, Maximum Effect* is a wonderfully realized exhibition now on display at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts. It is the largest retrospective on Albers in more than two decades anywhere in the world, and the first ever mounted



Josef Albers, *Set of Four Stacking Tables* (1927).
PHOTO COURTESY OF KAOHSIUNG MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

in Asia. It also offers a marvelous counterpoint to another exhibition just upstairs, a retrospective of Taiwanese minimalist Richard Lin (林壽宇), who worked with similarly minimal ideas. [See article on Page 14.]

This Albers exhibition not only presents a terrifically complete oeuvre, it also keeps it alive within the context of history while also managing to peer into the artists' own mind.

Albers, born in 1888, became an early student at the Bauhaus in 1920 and went on to become a professor there in 1925, teaching furniture design and glass craft. A room Albers designed at the Bauhaus — Walter Gropius' waiting room — is recreated in full in Kaohsiung's galleries, as are several marvelously minimal chair designs and furniture sets.

After the Nazis closed down the Bauhaus in 1933, Albers moved to the US and taught at Black Mountain with a few other refugees (including Willem de Kooning), before going on in 1950s to chair the design department at Yale University and helping to define what we now call

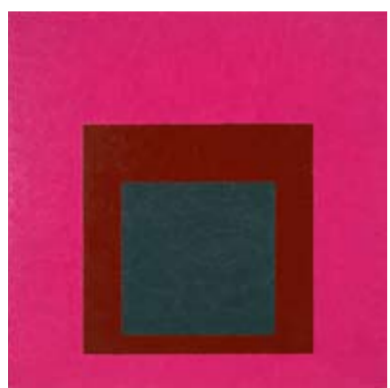
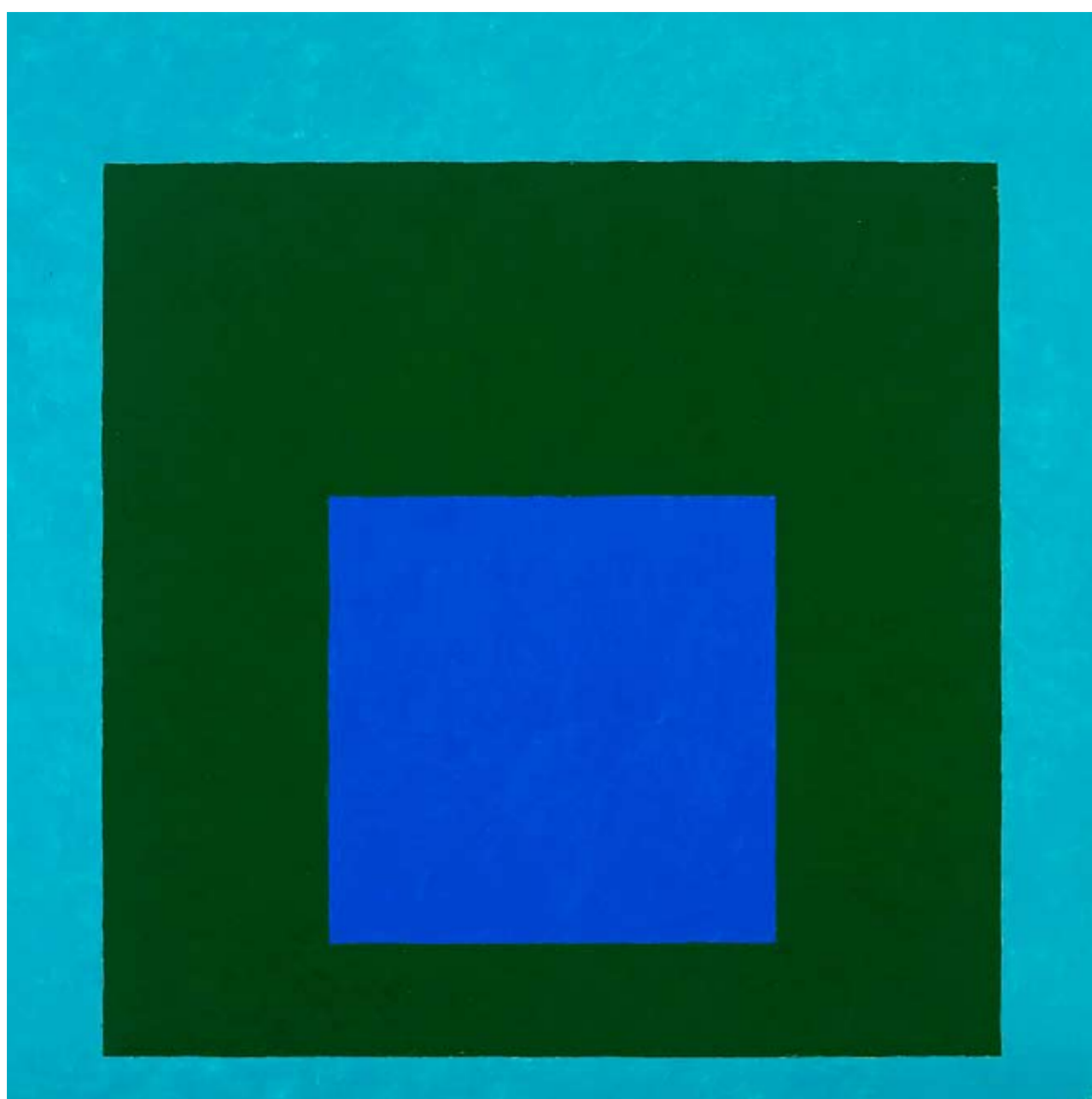
the "graphic arts."

His color studies and paintings of squares may be his most famous works, but in this show we also see a complete catalog — geometric studies on glass, a typeface Albers designed, patterns of brickwork and (indeed!) constructions from single pieces of paper. These are paired against photos Albers took both of his well-known contemporaries and the forms, from waves to Mexican pyramids, that inspired him.

The most surprising fact of this show, however, may be that in spite of the ostensible purity of the geometry and color in Albers' art, his works maintain an indelible humanity. Even in the seemingly perfected *Homage to the Square* paintings, the hand of the artist is never disguised, and the scale is always intimate. Albers may be ready for elevation into the pantheon of high modernism, but his modern visions were never cold, detached or dehumanizing. In the end, that may be his greatest legacy, and it certainly offers one of many reasons for going to see this fine exhibition.

EXHIBITION NOTES

WHAT: Josef Albers: *Minimal Means, Maximum Effect*
WHEN: Until Aug. 1
WHERE: Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, 80 Meishuguan Rd, Kaohsiung City (高雄市美術館路80號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9am to 5pm. Tel: (07) 555-0331
ADMISSION: NTS\$200, NTS\$150 for seniors and students

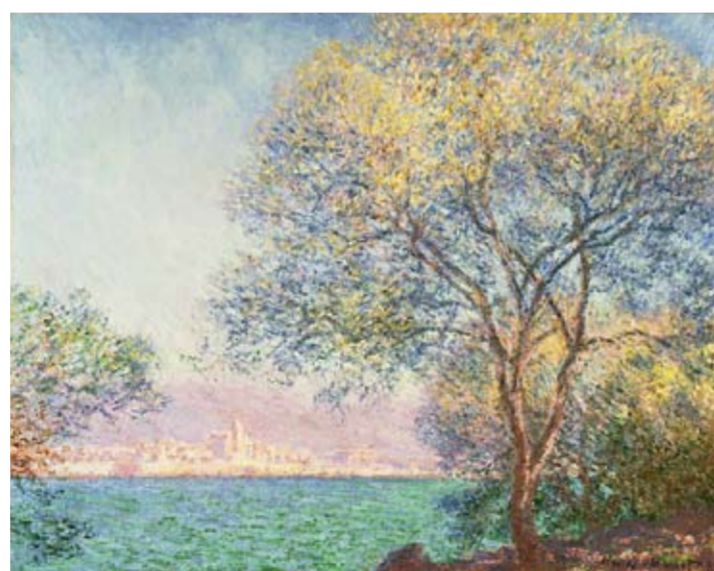


Clockwise from top: *Homage to the Square: Renewed Hope* (1951), *Homage to the Square* (1959), *Study for Homage to the Square: With Aura* (1959), *Homage to the Square: Guarded* (1952).
PHOTOS COURTESY OF KAOHSIUNG MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

What's the big idea?

TFAM's Manet to Picasso exhibit deftly links the visual experiments of early impressionism with the dreamlike creations of surrealism

BY NOAH BUCHAN
STAFF REPORTER



Claude Monet, *Morning at Antibes* (1888).
PHOTO COURTESY OF TFAM

Museums in Taipei have gone out of their way over the past year to collaborate with their European and American counterparts to mount exhibitions of modern art.

Manet to Picasso: Masterpieces From the Philadelphia Museum of Art, currently on view at TFAM, is a group show of paintings and sculpture from the modern period, beginning in the 1870s and moving up to the 1960s.

The exhibition brings together 53 paintings by masters such as Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Joan Miro, Marcel Duchamp and Georgia O'Keeffe, as well as bronze sculptures by Jacques Lipchitz and Auguste Rodin, Picasso, Degas and Henri Matisse.

Arranged in four sub-themes — Daylight presents landscape painting, Beauties ponders the female form, Shapes exhibits work that reinterprets the still life, and Dreams displays paintings that explore the subconscious — the exhibit offers museumgoers a chronological glimpse of the period's aesthetic preoccupations and reveals how early

landscape painters set the tone for later modernist experiments.

An essay in the exhibit's catalogue states that the philosophical ideas of positivism (the notion that knowledge can only be verified if derived from sensory experience) developed in the early 19th century and laid the foundations for and had a lasting influence on modern art.

No longer constrained by a visual and textual tradition handed down from the classical period, these artists felt free to rely on their own perceptions to depict the phenomenal world.

Landscape painters did so through two basic motifs: pastoral landscapes associated with leisure, and urban scenes that portray factories and manufacturing. The outlined houses filled in with thick swaths of solid color found in Paul Cezanne's *Quartier Four, Auvers-sur-Oise* (*Landscape, Auvers — 1873*) and Claude Monet's brilliant lighting effects in *Morning at Antibes* (1888) are examples of the former, while Camille Pissarro, employing the neo-impressionist pointillism of Georges

EXHIBITION NOTES

WHAT: Manet to Picasso: Masterpieces From the Philadelphia Museum of Art
WHEN: Until Sept. 26. Open daily from 9:30am to 5:30pm, closes at 8:30pm on Saturdays
WHERE: Taipei Fine Arts Museum (台北市立美術館), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號). Tel: (02) 2595-7656
ADMISSION: NTS\$250
ON THE NET: www.tfam.museum

Seurat to depict a port scene in *The Effect of Fog* (1888), is an example of the latter.

Artists applied their new aesthetic to the growing participation of women in the period's public sphere. Mary Stevenson Cassatt's *Woman With a Pearl Necklace in a Loge* (1879) is emblematic of this tendency. The play of light and shadow cast by artificial light emphasizes the ravishing beauty of a woman at the theater.

Begun by the early impressionists, optical experiments in still life paintings can be found in Georges Braque's

Basket of Fish (1910), an early cubist work, and *Chessboard, Glass and Dish* (1917) by Juan Gris, which is composed of overlapping geometrical objects of different visual perspectives.

The curators of Manet to Picasso should not only be commended for mounting an accessible exhibit that gently expounds the thesis that landscape artists kicked off the visual experiments of modernism, but also for picking paintings and sculptures that give a valuable insight into life in late 19th and early 20th-century Europe.

EXHIBITIONS

In *City Cracks* (城市隙縫), curator Sean Hu (胡朝聖) brings together 10 artists working in paint, digital photography and installation to ponder changes in the urban environment. Rather than exhibiting the works in a building, Hu created a temporary gallery that emphasizes the transitory flux between new and old.

■ Mobile Gallery, 5 Jinxi St, Taipei City (台北市錦西街5號)
■ Until Aug 15. Opening tomorrow at 6:30pm

In The Delicacy of Collage

— *Polar Region* (拼湊的極地), Chen Sung-chih (陳松志) employs metal, paper and mirrors to symbolize the distances people travel.

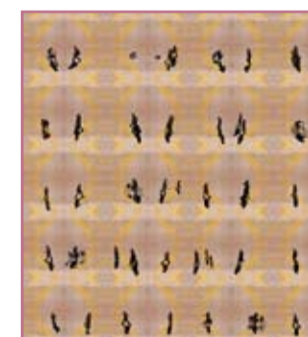
■ Project Fulfill Art Space (就在藝術中心), 2, Alley 45, Ln 147, Xinyi Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市信義路三段147巷45弄2號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 1pm to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2707-6942
■ Until Aug. 15. Opening this Saturday at 3pm

Emerging artist Su Meng-heng (蘇孟鴻) presents 21 of his recent paintings, silkscreen prints, installations and sculptures in *Manjusaka* (彼岸花). Drawing on the Chinese tradition of flower (*manjusaka* means "heavenly flower" in Sanskrit) and bird painting developed during the late Qing Dynasty, Su's vibrant, almost gaudy works, offer a satirical take on the refined styles prevalent during that era.

■ Tina Keng Gallery (大未來歌畫廊), 15, Ln 548, Ruiguang Rd, Taipei City (台北市瑞光路548巷15號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 7pm. Tel: (02) 2659-0798
■ Until Aug. 1

Form/No Sign: Works by Taiwan's Established Ceramicists

(形·無形 — 臺灣中堅輩陶藝家系列特展之一) offers an in-depth look at the artists and trends that have emerged in the local ceramics scene since the 1980s. The museum states that no understanding of contemporary ceramics would be complete without looking at what immediately preceded it because of the unprecedented opportunities to play with tradition and the



Chen Wan-lin, *Shimada Summer Dancing* (2009), on display at Mobile Gallery.
PHOTO COURTESY OF MOIS

influence of Western practices it afforded Taiwanese artists.

■ Yingge Ceramics Museum (鶯歌陶瓷博物館), 200 Wenhua Rd, Yingge Township, Taipei County (台北縣鶯歌鎮文化路200號). Open daily from 9:30am to 5pm, closes at 6pm on Saturdays and Sundays. Tel: (02) 8677-2727
■ Until Aug. 15

Mobility Sound and Form is a sensory experience comprising 10 audio-visual works that transform sound through digital media. Curated by France's Centre National de Creation Musicale, the exhibition, which also includes video, installation and performance art, challenges viewers' preconceptions of music.

■ Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), 181, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市中山北路三段181號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 9:30am to 5:30pm, closes at 8:30pm on Saturdays. Tel: (02) 2595-7656
■ Until Aug. 15

The National Museum of History is holding a retrospective show on the life and work of Lalan (謝景蘭), a China-born, France-based artist who died in 1995. Entitled *Fragrance of Mind* (蕙景蘭心), the exhibit comprises 60 landscape oil paintings that combine Chinese aesthetics and Western painting styles created by the artist over her 45-year career.

■ National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2361-0270. General admission is NTS\$30
■ Until Aug. 8