

IN REVIEW | SANTA FE

IN REVIEW: The fun side of a modernist master

'Formulation: Articulation' by Josef Albers at Zane Bennett Contemporary Art



Installation view of "Formulation: Articulation" by Josef Albers at Zane Bennett Contemporary Art.

Photo by Kim Cook, courtesy of Zane Bennett Contemporary Art

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I always had mixed feelings about Josef Albers, the German modernist painter and educator best known for "Homage to the Square." He made over 1,000 "Homage to the Square" paintings between 1950 and his death in 1976. The composition of nested squares remained essentially the same each time; only the colors changed. While I appreciate the series' pedagogical value as illustrations of color theory, I never thought they had much value as art. Albers was famously contemptuous of both conceptualism and self-expression; as a result, his own art is vacuous and cold, containing few ideas and no emotions. Or so I thought.

In undergrad, I took an art course simply called "Color," where each week we made a new piece of art based on one of the exercises in Albers' classic color theory book, "The Interaction of Color." It's a great book, written in friendly, accessible prose, which he breaks into lines for even greater ease of reading. The first chapter, for instance, begins like this:

"If one says 'Red' (the name of a color) / and there are 50 people listening, / it can be expected that there will be 50 reds in their minds. / And one can be sure that all these reds will be very different."

I got a lot out of that book, and I recommend it to artists all the time. But I've never recommended that anyone look at Albers' art. Until now.

"Formulation: Articulation" is a portfolio of 127 prints, which the artist released in 1972, just four years before his death. I was not aware of these works until I saw them at Zane Bennett Contemporary Art, where they are elegantly installed across four rooms of the gallery. What knocked my socks off was how much fun they are.

There's a series of loopy treble clefs with all the negative spaces colored in. There's an anthropomorphic X shape that looks like it's doing somersaults in bellbottoms while casting a shadow made of yellow

'Formulation: Articulation' by Josef Albers

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Tuesday—Saturday; through April 30

WHERE: Zane Bennett Contemporary Art, 435 S. Guadalupe St., Santa Fe

HOW MUCH:
Free, zanebennettgallery.com

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caution tape. Rectilinear polygons bounce around like screensavers on bright orange backgrounds, leaving echoey trails in their wake. He even experiments with woodblock prints but lets the undulating wood grain be the star. Yes, the German rationalist Bauhaus design principles are still there, undergirding everything, but he was clearly enjoying himself, letting his hair down, so to speak. From far-out and trippy to just plain goofy, the works in "Formulation: Articulation" are much wilder than the humorless name suggests.

Speaking of music, I just learned while doing research for this review that Albers designed cover art for music albums a decade before he made this portfolio. Joseph Masheck, the former editor of Artforum, likened one of those designs to a blinking LED sign, calling it "pleasantly loose and improvisatory" in a [Brooklyn Rail](#) review. Loose and improvisatory? Albers? Why, yes! Both the album art and the "Formulation: Articulation" prints confound every stereotype I had of the man. It's like discovering that your local funeral director moonlights as a stand-up comic or a world-famous chef's favorite food is Twinkies. Albers had a fun side? Who'd a thunk it!

These late-career works also demonstrate that Albers was keeping up with op art, a movement he helped inspire. You can also sense the influence of his wife, Anni Albers. I always preferred her maximalist textile designs over his rigidly dogmatic squares. But you know how they say old couples start to resemble each other? I think that was true of their art.

As for the squares, there are 17 double-sheet "Homage to the Square" prints in the portfolio. Because they don't quite fit in with the more adventurous works, I imagine their inclusion was a commercial decision, a way of hedging his bets, like a band that puts out a weird new album but shoehorns in their greatest hits as bonus tracks. Then again, if you're a "greatest hits" sort of art appreciator, you'll be happy to know that the squares are still there.

According to the gallery, "Formulation: Articulation" has never been shown in its entirety anywhere in the Southwest in the past 20 years, so don't miss the chance to see it now.

Logan Royce Beitmen is an arts writer for the Albuquerque Journal. He covers visual art, music, fashion, theater and more. Reach him at lbeitmen@abqjournal.com or on Instagram at [@loganroycebeitmen](https://www.instagram.com/loganroycebeitmen).

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