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### Reality versus Abstract: A Study of Simplicity and Color

Both Joseph Albers, in *Homage to the Square*, and Mark Rothko, in *The Rothko Chapel*, have similar qualities in the examination of color. Joseph Albers takes the approach by experimenting with optical effects produced by the juxtaposition of different combinations of colors. By comparing various color combinations, he was able to show that one color placed next to the other can create an entirely different visual experience for the viewer. Mark Rothko, on the other hand, experimented with the expressive power of pure color to evoke a deeply emotional response in viewers. By experimenting with a range of nuances of shades and tonalities in the color black, and by placing his works in an octagonal fashion in the chapel, Rothko produced a powerful installation in which the black paintings echo each other. In his series, Rothko shows how he is able to create this effect. The slightly different shades of black, with slight hues of violet and brown being added, provoke a vibration between this series. The quality of visual vibration is present in both the works of Albers and Rothko, in the former the effect is primarily optical whereas in the latter the effect is largely emotional.

There function becomes more of an experiment than the idea of showing what reality is. Truly they are different in their approaches, but both artists' ideas of what color means the same idea. Both artists challenge current ideas in their experimental work. The only difference is that their approach differs. Albers expands upon this with his fascination on the abstract form of a square, and Rothko has the same fascination in his own work.

Both of these artists have attracted the viewer in a method that is different and unique, and they have done so in an intriguing fashion. The dramatic use of simplicity and precision combined with the focus of color and meaning associated with Mark Rothko and Joseph Albers' series' develop and expand upon the ideas of what abstract and real actually are.

Reality can sometimes be more easily seen when someone truly understands abstraction. In fact, abstraction is as clear as what is directly in front of the viewer. Abstraction can be more understandable than reality, and Joseph Albers (1888-1976), the American artist born in Germany, and Mark Rothko (1903-1970), another American painter born in Latvia, portray this concept through their artistic works. The dramatic use of simplicity and precision combined with the focus of color and meaning associated with Mark Rothko and Joseph Albers' series' develop and expand upon the ideas of what abstract and real actually are.

Understanding a basic principle about Joseph Albers, like the fact that he did not mix colors in the creation of his work, makes it easier to understand the reason for his simplicity.<sup>1</sup> Albers created a process of "restricting himself to a standardized format of only a few superimposed squares..." and this effected his portrayal of abstraction.<sup>2</sup> Also, his history with the Bauhaus played a role in his artistic studies after fleeing Nazi Germany.<sup>3</sup> By examining the growth of his studies toward attempting abstraction through simple forms like a square, his thought process becomes extraordinarily understandable for the viewer.<sup>4</sup> Homage is defined as a great respect; Albers shows, then, his respect for the square.

The growth and maturity of Rothko and his artistic thought processes and the final result were in his final paintings, which resulted in the completion of *The Rothko Chapel*.<sup>5</sup> The nature of his work reaches extreme emotional peak due to the "fourteen canvases on eight walls." This is because *The Rothko Chapel* can be examined not only as one overall work, but also as both fourteen

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1 Hubbard. "Artistic Homage." Arts & Activities 133, no. 5 (June 2003): 27. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed May 18, 2010).

2 Koshalek, Richard. Hirshhorn: Spring/Summer. Washington, D.C: Hirshhorn Annual Circle, 2010: 3-4. (accessed April 18, 2010).

3 Hubbard. "Artistic Homage." 27.

4 Hubbard. "Artistic Homage." 27.

5 Stoker. 2008. "The Rothko Chapel Paintings and the 'urgency of the transcendent experience.'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64, no. 2: 89-102. *Humanities International Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed Apr 18, 2010).

individual works.<sup>6</sup> The octagon formation allows his paintings to be facing each other, communicating throughout the room.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Rothko Chapel*, black is the primary color being used. In the traditional sense, black is not thought of as a color, but instead of the absence of light. This idea is challenged by Rothko because the slight variations of different tints of black create vibrations of light. Many different notions are associated with this friction that begins to form, due in part to the positioning and precision of the paintings in the room, but mainly because black is no longer considered the absence of light. In *The Rothko Chapel*, the viewer begins to understand that Rothko was crating light out of the absence of light. This abstraction forces the viewer to ask questions about the depth of each of the paintings. Even though it is obvious that they are flat, they begin to produce a quality of becoming beyond the natural two dimensions of the canvas. The depth extends and transcends the paintings into a reality of abstraction.

Likewise, Albers creates a similar sense of this quality. The overall idea of a simple resemblance of color and shape becomes much more. In *Homage to the Square*, three squares are shown with perfect precision and craft. The idea of the square as a simple container for the color is one of the main thoughts that Albers communicates in his work. Each work, in the numerous series, focuses more on the comparison between the three colors, instead of what the actual colors are. The vibrations that occur transcend the natural canvas in a sense that elevates the entire work into more than a simple study. In fact, this vibration becomes an abstraction on how reality is viewed.

This vibrating quality that Albers creates is similar to the quality that Rothko produces.

Both Rothko and Albers create a similar sense of the work surpassing the flat plane of the canvas,

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<sup>6</sup> Stoker. "The Rothko..."89-102.

<sup>7</sup> Cooper, Harry. In the Tower: Mark Rothko. Washington, D.C: Publishing office at the National Gallery of Art, 2010: 1-8 (accessed April 18, 2010).

but they craft abstraction in different ways. The most common difference is Albers works from a variety of colors, forcing them to lose their notion of color, until they become a simple comparison. Rothko, instead, takes one color and compels it to reach its full potential until even that is driven too far and similarly loses its value as a single color.

In both series' of works, abstraction is achieved through the boundaries of the canvas being broken. Both ideas excel in the idea of creating depth out of none, and captivate the viewer in the overall notion that what is being seen is not there, and vice versa. The most intriguing aspect of their works is that they both create these concepts in a simple, yet complex, fashion, and both of their works are different enough in their initial approaches. Abstraction becomes simple and in its place reality becomes complex.

It is a remarkable coincidence that both Joseph Albers and Mark Rothko could stumble upon a concept at about the same time in history. Their usage of color and shape with precision and careful examination to detail has made their series' very successful. The concepts from one of Albers' work can be applied to Rothko's, and likewise, the ideas that Rothko has used can be utilized to fully comprehend what Albers communicated in his work. The expressive quality of both groups of work truly delves into the nature of the reaction a viewer has. Abstraction begins to seem more real than reality, and reality the opposite. The expressive nature of the work allows both Albers and Rothko to attract the viewer, maintain their attention, and show them reality.

### **Work Cited**

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Homage to the Square Joseph Albers c1949-1976



Chapel Mark Rothko c1964