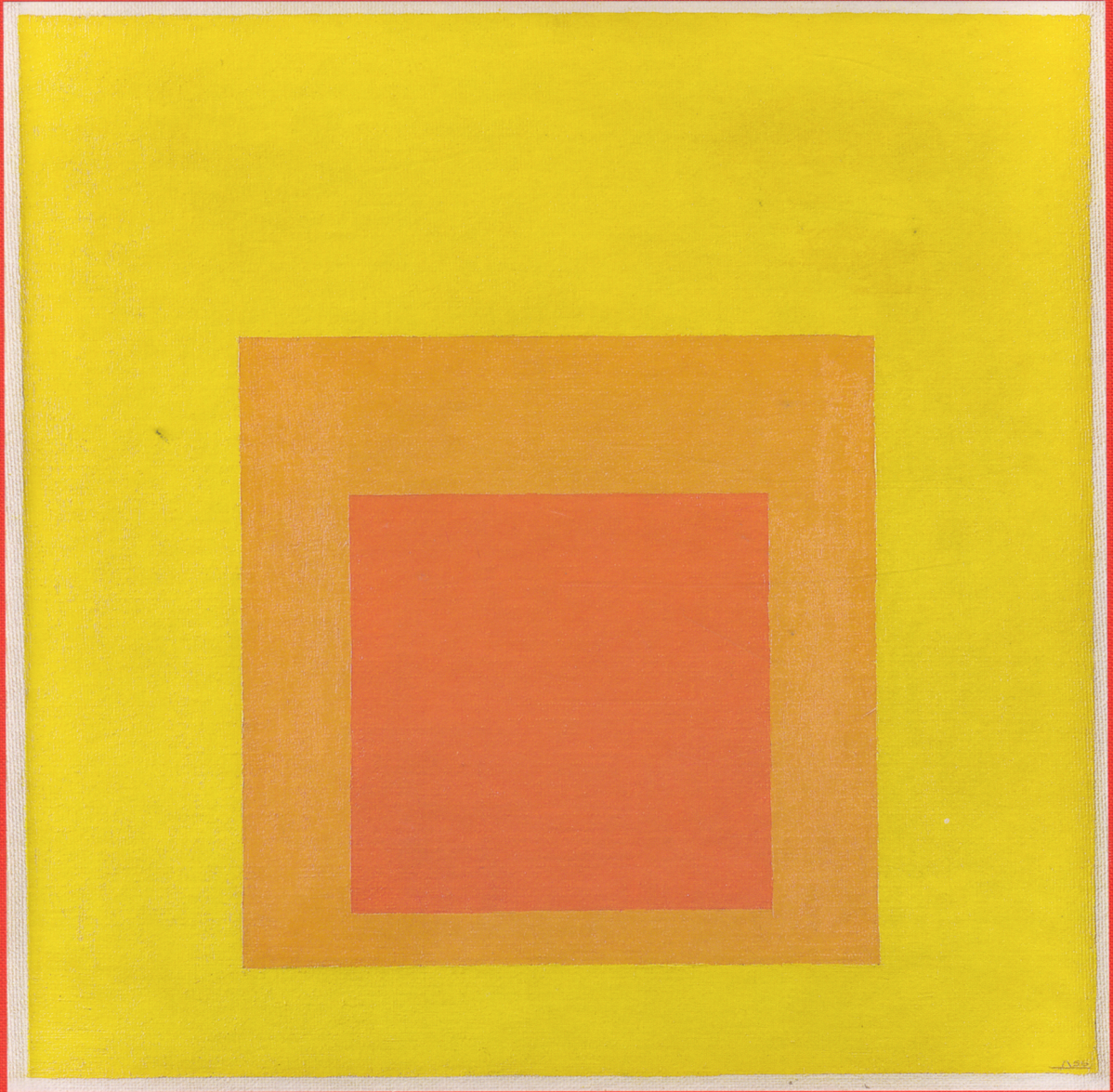


Josef Albers



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Dear Josef

Doug Ashford

Dear Josef,

Last night, as I leaned out my bedroom window a bird flew right past my face. It was so close to me that I could smell the metallic tang of bugs on its breath. It was a hummingbird, the one with a patch on its throat of a strange luminous black. A color brighter than I thought possible; and I say "brighter" because it is a color that shows a kind of promise, not because it sheds any light. How can dark things engage us as hopeful?

I wanted to respond as quickly as I could to your letter, not to let you know that I am okay, but for my own state of being—to make a description. The effects of rehab are slowly wearing off, and I fear that if I do not write more in the upcoming sober days I will return to the club and to the curb—to the drug dealer that I know is so easy to find. The optimistic words in your last letter, chronicling the interactions of color in your experiments, have me thinking of the fluctuations of despondency as an array of colors themselves. What color is helplessness? Your belief in the inter-dependency of color suggests everything I see could be conditioned by the context in which it is happening. Even my factual responses to the world would finally be understood as what they are: delirium.

My proposal to you today, dear Josef, is that there is a correspondence between disability and color. Not in the sense that any one color is "like" the feeling of loss and longing trapped in this insatiable psyche, but that color itself, its full shifting nature, is a key to understanding the vibrant story of mood.

It is cliché that each time of the day has a color, but for me (and it turns out for other junkies as well), this changing spectrum allows us to entertain the proposition that we can regain our senses, to enable a return. Where I live there is fleeting moment around 5:30 in the morning, immediately after the streetlights go out and the early twilight of morning is allowed to take over. In this split second, the brown-orange of the streetlamp illumination gives way dramatically to a blackish-green of a not yet dawn. Strangely, the transition is from a barely illuminated night to an even darker shine, or one that only appears darker in its newfound lighting from the oncoming sun, a lustrous foreboding kind of darkness.

Before my stint in rehab, this bright change, experienced day after day upon the built-up shakes of all night binging, was one of the ways I could remind myself how to face a return to the living: one barely nameable color of the unending party replaced by another. The artificial brightness was enveloped by a much darker sense that was to become the "day after." But who would know this change? Does only the junkie see the relative blacks that make life barely bearable, especially the impossibility that presents itself at the end of every night?

The gospel that color is only known in the places where we have it in front of us becomes clear whenever an experience of feeling and chroma is forced into language. Is this sense I have of the color of a streetlamp any darker really than the catastrophic green light of dawn? And is this catastrophe only something perceived by those addled by addiction? It is then a kind of well-worn wonderment that nothing is true about color except the different truths in how we use it.

Josef, the mountain of your "interactions" flooded the scene of every painter's imagination, washing out the sense that their's was the truest blue, or the only yellow not inflected with some other corrupting hue. It makes me think that the feelings we are supposed to share, of place and time and nation, and even familyfiction, are only things written out for us by convention. Never in the scrupulous reductions of the scientist's sense of measurement and memory can I see a true color I would know. But, when I do finally recognize that a structure of fear retracts and reconstitutes itself around all memory, I am glad to fall, even crumple. This is a bathos into a remaking that every color becomes in its telling; or in the analogy written to accompany its telling—the desperation of not being able to ever communicate its truth in just words. What orange-black? What yellow, red, and blue?

My newly sober self dreams that this beautifully ambiguous un-telling of color also undoes history and place. How do I know who I am if my black-green of the dawn is the same here as it is there for you? Or if it ever will be? I realize in my new sobriety that this un-sameness is only made tolerable by the delirium of the drugs: the washed white burden we carry from one hopeful remaking to another. Is it the falsely neutral background that allows us to deny that pain has been turned into sadistic pleasure? The trauma that catapults the color of this second onto the next is irreconcilable with the context in which it becomes all of time. The fight between moments is one that I have always fled from—first with the perjury of always being high, and now with the intoxication of a another kind of lie: the fiction of this correspondence, an invention among many others, that allows me to live outside of “real” time.

After the contrast of streetlamps to green dawn, the morning's bright darkness gives way to gray. It is the brilliant gray that seems to have come from too many colors, from a field of tulips or a parade of flags in my new immigrant nation, all trying to become light. This kind of gray undoes any reasonable response, and replaces it with a frustrating rupture between responsibility and existence; or as you say, Josef, between the factual and the actual. The comparative exhibit of color that makes this gray embodies a proposal that there are many places, and there are many memories working in this room right now, fully lit by the sun. It is an impossible grey that glows. Sentences seem incommensurate in describing something that is both dark and lustrous—and they fail existence in what we think is real time. But as I write this, I am overcome with a light that allows me to propose that on some plane of experience we live in the same moment.

If I remember, Josef, your green Mercedes is the “hunters green” one—a color that seems forever undimmed in its hopeful earthliness, and confuses the difference between the dead and the living, demarcating their overlapping regimes. Someone else could see this green as “life” because we live on this verdant world. But this earth, in its relentless changing of night to dawn, always reminds us that we will return to it, in death, as the same mud. I'm not sure if I oppose this fateful despondence in the fabrication of our correspondence across time, or if I guarantee its inevitable outcome: the color of one moment changing to the next or my desire to live outside of all the moments.

All my love, Doug.
New York, June 6, 2014