

Excerpts from Conversation between Ken Price and Brooke Alexander

B I'll tell you what started me on this project – I don't remember exactly who told me this, I think it was Henry Hopkins, who said that on an early visit he saw an Albers print hanging on the studio wall.

K Yes, I had one from Tamarind. I had it framed and it was up in my studio for years. I have a set of Albers silk-screens, which I got from Irving Blum in the 60's. There are about ten of them, they're wonderful. And I was impressed by the painting the L.A. County Museum had; a little canvas that was essentially blue, black, and white... I always thought Albers was the most authentic in terms of color theories. His was the real theory, because it was based on practice. He was the guy who really dealt with the colors, and that was it. And it was a natural thing, color that lives on its own. It doesn't need any support from imagery, or art history, or any of that stuff...It's like music, it stands by itself.

B What attracted you to Mexico and the Southwest?

K When I grew up, L.A. had more of a Mexican look and feel to it. At least I thought so. Maybe I was attracted to brightly colored stuff, and Mexicans are not afraid of color. When I was young there was lots of handmade pottery from Mexico around L.A., and later I got into curio stores in Tijuana, which were filled with pottery from Oaxaca, Tonalá, and other parts of Mexico. And a lot of it was great. I think that was one of the high moments in folk pottery. But it was already dying because the potters couldn't make a living. And when people learned how much lead was in the glazes, that really finished it off.

In the 70's with "Happy's Curios" I tried to make a kind of homage to the Mexican Wares, not to make direct copies, but pieces that were in the spirit of the Mexican pottery.

B It seems to me this sensibility continues; the recent lava drawings might be Hawaii, but the high-keyed color strikes me as tilting toward a Mexican sensibility.

K That's right. The color thing, it's very intuitive; it's not some sort of formula. It's how they feel, really. That's why I had an affinity with the Mexican artists: it's (the way they use) color.

B Was there a particular thing you were thinking about when you made the drawing?

K If there was, I certainly don't remember, but it looks like Mexican linoleum or tiles...

B Well, as I got into the relationship between your and Albers' work, it occurred to me that there was a kind of parallel thinking coming from opposite ends. In other words, your Mexican sources were inexpensive curio shop ceramics and the graphics of clichéd tourist posters and Albers was coming from his interest in Pre-Columbian artifacts, and Aztec/Mayan ruins- what we might call the "high" art side. And, somehow, the forms and colors that both of you derived from Mexican culture end up having a certain relationship. That, to me, was very interesting because it comes from polar extremes of the cultural spectrum.

K Right. I probably wouldn't have said Albers before, but it's similar. In this context, it's obvious.

B In a similar way, I saw a relationship between some of your drawings and prints and a group of Albers' work called Structural Constellations. For example these interior scenes that have a city view where, as you look at it, the eye is led out the window and back again. To my mind, there is a similar circular experience in looking at Albers' Structural Constellations.

K [looking at the catalog] Yes, I like the comparison here...I remember this scene; this was right out the window in Venice. I made a lot of these drawings, just looking out the window. I love that vantage point, of being sort of up, seeing all of L.A. from the second story.

B One thing that we haven't approached at all is color. And I noticed these color charts beside the works in progress, and one I counted has 14 colors. What is your process?

K Most of them have 14 colors now. The pieces start off with a grainy surface. And they get painted with lots of thinly brushed coats of a sequence of colors. And after they've been painted enough they get sanded so that the surface becomes smooth and marks appear from the colors underneath. The more they are sanded the larger and more connected the marks become. But they're always different. The reason for the 14 colors is so if you don't like the way it looks you can sand deeper and open up a different color scheme. But you can't really control what the marks will do, they just happen.

B Do you ever have second thoughts about earlier work in the sense that when you look at it now, you have a different take on it or that you remembered it differently?

K I've been making artworks for over 50 years now and can't always remember what I was thinking or feeling in the past. Occasionally I'm confronted with something I must have

made but don't recognize at all. And I'm assuming that memories of earlier works are enhanced or distorted, but I don't have second thoughts about it, or regrets if I don't like it. I'm too involved in what I'm doing now to worry about it. I'm really enjoying the process of making my new work.