

AN
AFTERNOON
WITH

Jan Albers

TEXT MERIT ZIMMERMANN · PHOTOGRAPHY ROBIN HARTSCHEN · PHOTOGRAPHY ARTWORKS THE ARTIST

To an outside observer, the building on Lierenfelder Straße 39 might seem rather insignificant — like just another plain brick house in the commercial area of Düsseldorf. But looks are deceiving: Concealed behind the doors of this building is not just one of the city's biggest artists' studio space, but there are also hidden treasures like the VAN HORN Schaulager. Here, I'm catching a glimpse inside the mind of the fascinating artist Jan Albers.

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Jan Albers doesn't do anything halfway. The Wuppertal-born, Düsseldorf-based artist (*1971) has been known to experiment and challenge himself for over 20 years. His works, of an obviously conceptual nature, upend traditional norms in the fields of visual art to incite strong reactions in spectators. Through a free handling of formal disciplines, he seamlessly blends painting and sculpture into bold, arresting compositions that balance miraculously between geometric, minimal, and biomorphic abstraction as well as expressionism. In other words, it's difficult to label the artist in any meaningful way: Jan Albers has no typical artistic style per se, but a high recognition factor nonetheless.

In a moment of awe at the glory of what Jan Albers affectionately calls a "chainsaw massacre", one of his large-scale wall works inside the VAN HORN Schaulager immediately leaves an overwhelming impression. Like many of the artist's pieces, it's composed of a mixed bag of materials: Polystyrene, wood, and spray paint, complete with an acrylic glass box. "cuttingEdgeEs" has an otherworldly appearance reminiscent of a lunar landscape, depicted in different shades of grey. Its compelling surface topography is the result of Jan Albers's manual labour with one of his favourite sculpting tools: The chainsaw. In a typically expressionist gesture, he deliberately uses its destructive capability to provoke accidents and mistakes. Then, when other artists might be ready to throw in the towel, he chooses to conquer (self-induced) frustration by

taking a deconstructive-reconstructive approach. Breaking points become fuel to course correct, Jan Albers imposes order on the chaos.

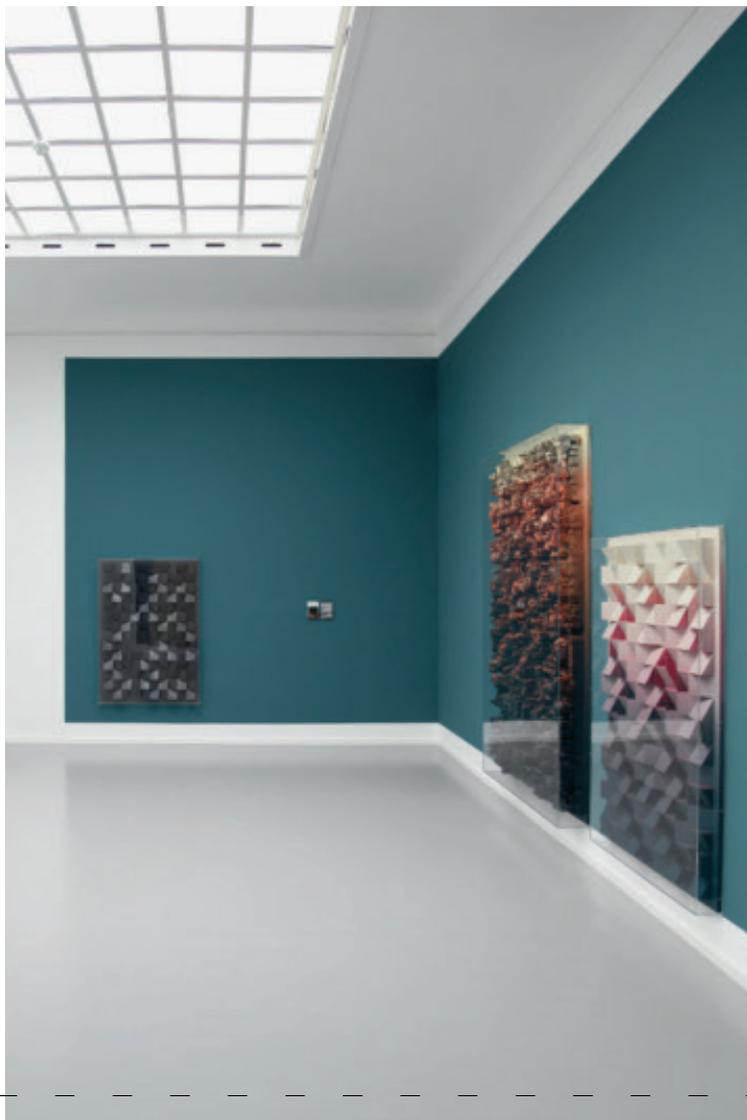
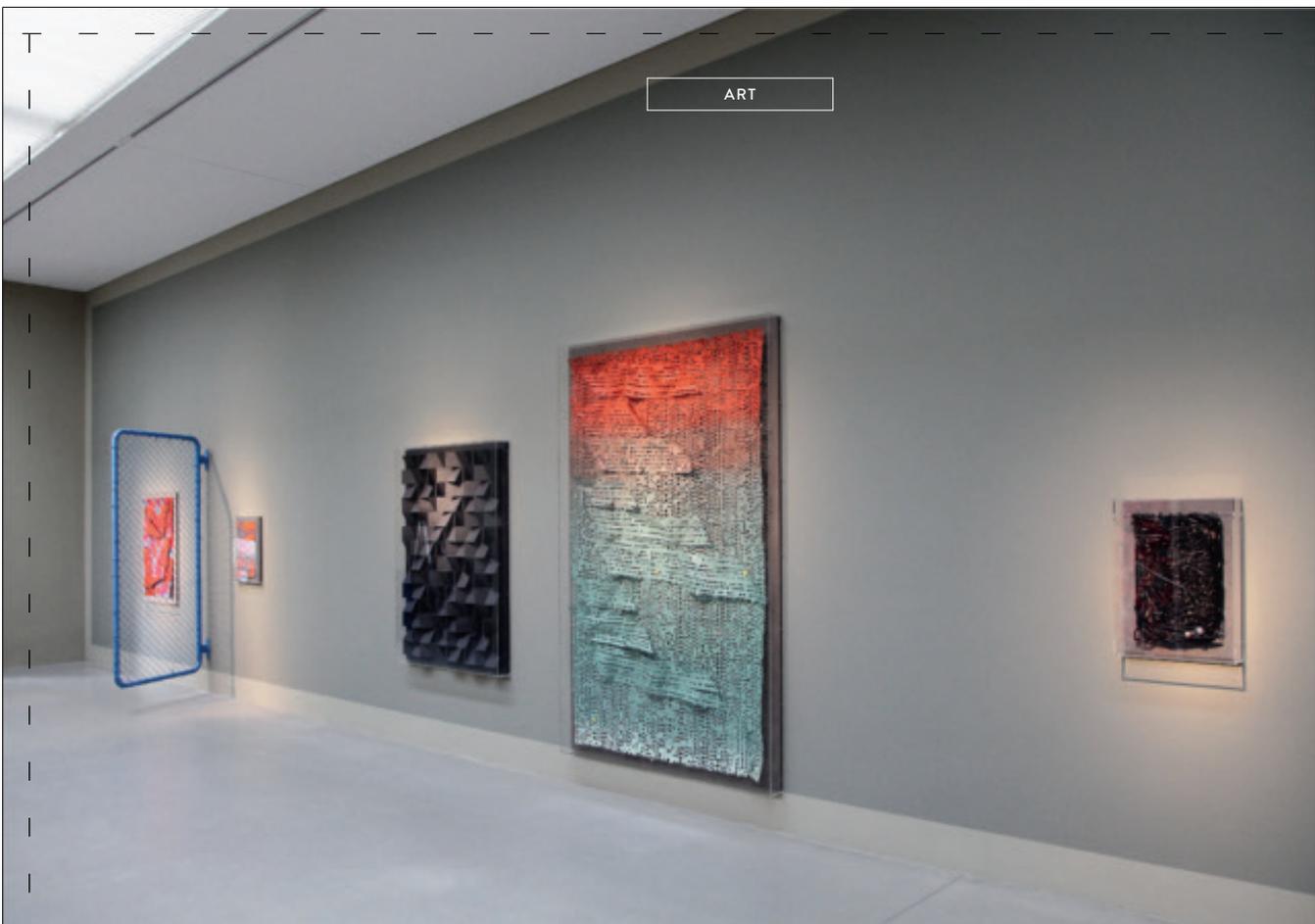
"For an artwork to become exceptional, disasters are sometimes useful." Upon suggesting there's a specific radical potential in disruptive forces, Jan Albers casually takes a sip of rhubarb spritzer. Laid-back and self-confident, he sits on top of a wooden table that adorns the VAN HORN Schaulager — above him, a Markus Karstieß mobile gently twirles in the breeze. With his mysterious demeanor, alert eyes, and gentle voice, it's easy to see how Jan Albers captivates his audience. Flashing a sly smile, he goes on to say that his "artistic opportunities always arise in borderline situations", when seeds of doubt begin to surface. To him, being stuck doesn't give cause for despair, but rather provides an incentive to move forward: "I once jumped into a not-so-great work made from cardboard and then it started going places". In his creative process, maintaining a level of flexibility and a willingness to take action provides Jan Albers with the space necessary to move beyond a normative artistic vision. By accumulating ideas progressively and

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layering techniques upon one another, he breaks through thought patterns, gains fresh perspectives, and finds new approaches — even when the situation seems hopeless.

A small anecdote goes to show how Jan Albers makes the most of whatever life throws at him. One time, he was working on an “apocalyptic landscape” in his studio, using a corrosive liquid to etch away polystyrene. When, hours later, he blew away of a piece of fluff, suddenly there was an explosion. The polystyrene, a highly combustible material, caught fire and produced dark smoke which quickly started to spread across the artist’s studio. Seized with panic, Jan Albers teared off his mask and ran into the bathroom, where he filled a bucket with water to put out the fire. In the (literal) heat of the moment, it slipped his mind that he had a fire extinguisher ready for usage. Two buckets of water later, Jan Albers was able to bring the fire under control — at this point, his studio was pitch-black. Then came the fire fighters: “Are you crazy?”, they asked the artist, trying to talk some sense into him. “You could have easily suffocated in the smoke”. After a night in the hospital with an oxygen mask, Jan Albers began to pick up the pieces by renovating his studio and reworking the damaged artwork with layers of spray paint. “heLLoheLL” was completed just a few days later. “I don’t even have this much misfortune up my sleeve, but somehow, turning the work around wasn’t a problem”, the artist remarks, adding that “a collector of mine bought it without even seeing it”. Needless to say, capitalizing on disaster is a de facto Jan Albers move.



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There is something special about the way in which Jan Albers tames his works in a rigorously controlled manner. While at times, the interplay between ruggedness and tenderness only reveals itself at second glance, the “clash of opposites” is an inherent feature of each work that captures the eye one way or another. Jan Albers depicts harmony as a counterpart of disharmony, even if at the core of their association, there’s nothing but contradiction. More than a mere formal characteristic, this tension between fragility and strength also encapsulates the artist’s view of the world: “Humans can be assholes, but also quite exceptional”. Indeed, the duality of human nature — namely, that everyone is capable of right and wrong actions — is no secret. An attentive observer, Jan Albers channels this complex coexistence between goodness and evilness into his works. “Don’t get me wrong: I’m not an esoteric”, he says and laughs. “But, quite frankly, my works serve as a tool for self-analysis and understanding the world”. As such, the art of Jan Albers illustrates, sometimes subtly and sometimes rebelliously, the essence of human nature.

The son of missionaries, Jan Albers grew up in Namibia in the 1970s before returning to Germany. Experiences of the artist’s early childhood certainly extended into his adulthood: “When I’m working in the studio, I sometimes get flashbacks”, he says and describes a situation in which his

godfather, a member of the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), was arrested in broad daylight. In reaction to such memories, Jan Albers created twisted steel pipe works like "Black Nelson bender", which conjures up images of exclusion fences, and "Black magic", a series of perforated crayon drawings depicting human rights badges. Namibia's war of independence and South Africa's epic landscapes are among the many biographical elements that the artist makes frequent reference to in his works. Intimate and revealing, the art of Jan Albers elicits feelings of unease and discomfort, but also overpowering joy.

When reflecting on his early stages as an artist, Jan Albers emphasizes that working at the Gallery Fischer in Düsseldorf impacted on him just as much as his studies at the Kunstakademie: "It was an education on its own". Seeing the confident precision with which artists like Bruce Nauman, Mario Merz, and Carl Andre handled their work was formative for him because it boosted his



self-esteem, helped with discipline, and showed that working hard leads to results. The stamina and tenacity Jan Albers appropriated allowed him to overcome one or two dry spells in his career. "Before the turn of the century, Düsseldorf was the eye of the storm", the artist recalls, pointing out that people from all over world would come to the Rhineland when gallerists like Max Hetzler showed artists such as Christopher Wool. In the early 2000s, however, Berlin became the place to be. When more or less everyone left for the capital, Jan Albers felt like "a complete idiot — the last artist left in Düsseldorf". Faced with the naked truth that his work didn't strike a significant chord with the peoples of Germany, he began exhibiting beyond national borders, where his art was well-received. While it's really a truism to say that 'nothing great comes easy', an important lesson that the artist learned was to "just keep going". The great thing is: Düsseldorf has become a household name in the international art scene again. What makes the city stand out? "Here, art is appreciated as part of everyday life, no matter if you're a dentist or a lawyer", Jan Albers says, quite sincerely. "This attitude has seeped through all social classes".

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