

Lenka Clayton

**SQUARECYLINDER.com**  
northern california art

## Listening to Threads

Published August 15, 2021

By: David M. Roth

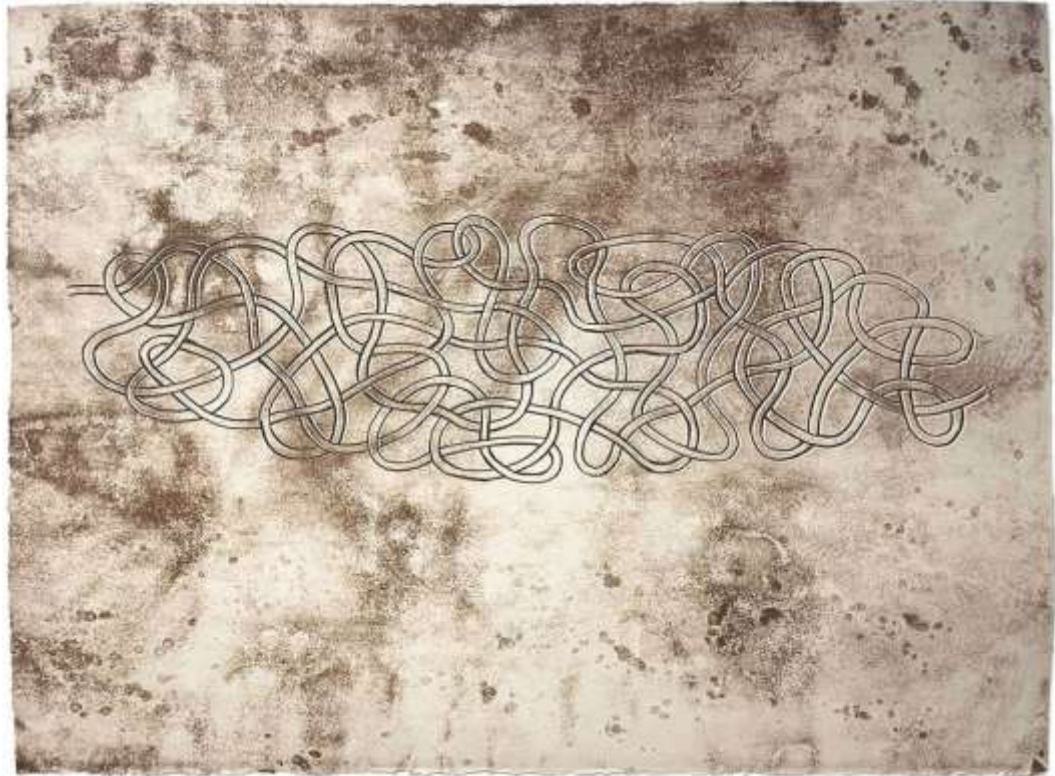


Installation view: Open Field. Foreground: Amy Trachtenberg, When I see you the sky is blue — when I don't see you the sky is blue, 2021, disassembled bras, silk, steel, wire, dye, acrylic paint, glass, 136 x 61 x 13 inches

If you were going to choose a presiding spirit for an exhibition, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more engaging subject than

Anni Albers. Writer, educator, textile artist, printmaker and hero to the cognoscenti, Albers made some of the most resplendent designs and geometric abstractions ever created. Equally significant: she and her husband, the painter Josef Albers, were the first to be hired as instructors at Black Mountain College, the incubator of the American avant-garde.

The list of artists, writers, musicians, dancers, poets and thinkers who passed through that short-lived North Carolina institution reads like a who's who of American art in the 20th century. It matters not that financial difficulties forced Black Mountain to close only 24 years after it opened in 1957; its influence has never waned. Black Mountain's ethos — put into action first at the Bauhaus and then advanced stateside by Albers and her cohorts after the couple fled Nazi Germany for the U.S. in 1933 — privileged materiality, process and experimentation over pre-determined outcomes. Form and function, art and design, craft and industry carried equal weight; they were not considered dichotomous pursuits. Today, broad swaths of contemporary art, here and abroad, reflect Black Mountain's influence and its embrace of interdisciplinary inquiry.



Anni Albers, *Enmeshed I*, 1963, two-color zinc plate and stone lithograph, 20 x 27 3/16 inches

Within its stable of artists, the Catharine Clark Gallery found much evidence of that influence, and after years of mulling a response, it mounted *Open Field: Nine Artists Respond to the Ideals of Black Mountain College*. The exhibition doesn't aspire to capture all that went on there – few galleries could — but it calls forth the spirit of the place with works that demonstrate the ongoing relevance of the college's learn-by-doing approach. Pioneered by the philosopher John Dewey, it was seen as creating an enlightened citizenry capable of exercising the critical skills required by democracy. Significantly, Black Mountain wasn't an art school; it was a liberal arts college that employed art education as a means to an end. The wonder of it rests with the fact that it produced so many history-shaping artists. They include John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham, Lou Harrison, Ray Johnson, Cy Twombly, Franz

Kline, David Tudor, Kenneth Noland and Robert Motherwell to name but a few.



LigoranoReese, Fourth Movement in the series, Listening to the Material, 2021, walnut music box, 30-note metal music movement. Composition based on Anni Albers' Drawing for a Knot, 4 1/2 x 7 1/2 x 4 inches

Two pieces on loan, one by Cage, the other by Anni Albers, anchor the show and set a fittingly heterodox material and conceptual framework, encompassing sound, painting, sculpture, drawing, video and textiles. *Variations III*, a print Cage created in 1992 at Crown Point Press, makes you wonder if he made the wrong choice when, early in his career, he abandoned painting for music. The central image is of a dagger-pierced smoke cloud, committed to paper as if it had been exhaled only seconds earlier. Hanging in space, it forms a pitch-perfect and suitably ephemeral analog to the artist's approach to music which, at one famous juncture, placed silence above all other musical attributes. However, Albers' *Enmeshed I* (1963) is the most historically significant of the two pieces. It was the artist's first foray into printmaking and also the piece that convinced her – on the spot — to leave weaving for printmaking. It shows an uncoiling skein of yarn floating above what looks like patchy clouds, a glowing apparition set adrift. Like so much else in Black Mountain lore, the piece came about by chance. Tamarind Lithography Workshop invited Josef Albers in LA to make a series of prints; Anni came along for the ride with no intention of participating, but when asked if she'd care to run a few experiments of her own, she agreed. The results turned out to be life-changing — exactly as happened when Albers first encountered weaving. "It was the threads that caught me, really against my will," she recalled in a 1982 lecture. "But circumstances" – i.e., Bauhaus restrictions limiting what courses women could take – "held me to threads and they won me over. I learned to listen to them and speak their language. Listening, not dominating, makes us truly active."



Amy Trachtenberg, *Magnetic Field*, 2021. Aluminum, synthetic polymer and mixed media on canvas on wood frame with nails, 72 x 42 inches

LigoranoReese, the artist team of Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, best known for politically charged ice sculptures set in public places, take Albers' advice about listening to heart. They transform her weavings and prints into musical compositions by

superimposing the artist's patterns over a notated grids laid out on punch cards. Fed into wood boxes housing an unseen mechanism that operates like a player piano, they produce sounds that fall midway between a kalimba (an African "thumb piano") and a xylophone. The timbre is exotic and instantly addictive – so much so that I had to tear myself away from them for fear of irritating the gallerists. A fusion of Albers' credo and the monkey-wrenching of John Cage, whose "prepared" pianos mark one of the high points of mid-century art-making, they are the exhibition's highlights.

Amy Trachtenberg's works are the show's other main draw. The thing to know about Trachtenberg is that her history with textiles runs deep: Her father was a traveling fabric salesman, and as a student, she worked in Paris as an assistant to Sheila Hicks, the famed fiber artist who studied with Anni Albers and helped establish fiber-based sculpture as an accepted practice in contemporary art. The artist has variously used discarded clothing and detritus collected from city streets as emblems of the human condition and the basis for hybrid works that lean closer to pure abstraction. Here, the latter holds sway. A hanging sculpture made of painted, stitched-together bra fragments and glass, for example, gives no clue to the raw materials' identity. It looks like the skeleton of some unknown entity, shot through with holes of various shapes and dimensions. Likewise, a series of prints based on the same materials form ghostly palimpsests that could, at a distance, be taken for cave paintings – were figures or animals involved. (None are.) In this regard, both the sculpture and the prints owe a debt to Robert Rauschenberg, who, in his assemblages, studiously avoided combinations of materials that might trigger concrete associations. That influence comes across strongest in *Magnetic Field*, a chocolate-colored painting embedded with zippers. They divide the canvas into odd-shaped volumes and suggest portals opening onto someplace else. Direct antecedents are Barnett Newman's signature

gesture, the zip, and Rauschenberg's parody of it, *Automobile Tire Print* (1953), made when he asked John Cage to drive his Model A Ford across a 22-foot length of paper.



Leilah Talukder, installation view of clothing, jewelry and documentary video by Robert Borsdorf

Leilah Talukder's installation of handmade clothing and jewelry point to the design side of Albers' practice. A video showing the artist boiling plant and vegetable matter to make dyes recalls the primal effort textile-making once required. Early in her career, Albers covered similar territory, traveling the Americas to learn Indigenous weaving techniques, some of which she turned into designs for products sold by Knoll, the furniture company. Art vs. commerce? She saw no conflict; both operated on the same plane, as part of a continuum.

Lenka Clayton's drawings call on another of Albers' practices: her use of a typewriter to create sketches for weavings. Here it's worth remembering the impoverished conditions under which Black Mountain students worked. Albers often sent them into the woods to forage and challenged them to discover what



they could make from leaves, pods, roots and branches. Clayton's suite of still-life drawings, created while she was in residence at the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, exhibits a similarly resourceful response to a set of constraints: those imposed by motherhood. Her solution was to adopt a 1957 Corona typewriter, which she initially used to make drawings between feedings and naps. As with a previous exhibit here in 2019, the thrill of viewing the work comes less from what's on the page than from imagining the physical gyrations the artist employed to create it. From hard edges to curves to cross-hatching to the faintest sfumato – no effect seems outside her reach. The drawings are sui generis, prime examples of Black Mountain's emphasis on creative problem-solving.



Lenka Clayton, (Net) (04/01/2021) and Houseplants Tended by Anni Albers (03/10/2021) from the series Typewriter Drawings, 11 x 8 1/2 inches each

Beyond that, the show drifts but will likely find firm footing in two sold-out events on August 21 and 26: a collaboration

with [BOXBLUR](#) featuring dance by Emma Lanier and Cauveri Suresh, with music box compositions by LigoranoReese and an original score by Phyllis Chen. The bill also includes a “visual essay” by Hugo Glendinning and Adrian Heathfield presented by the San Francisco Dance Film Festival documenting the working relationship between sculptor and performance artist Janine Antoni, choreographer Anna Halprin (1920-2021) and the writer Hélène Cixous. BOXBLUR will also host an [all-day symposium](#) on *Open Field* at the gallery August 28.

# # #

*“Open Field: Nine Artists Respond to the Ideals of Black Mountain College” @ [Catharine Clark Gallery](#) through September 11, 2021. The exhibition also includes Ruth Asawa, Jen Bervin, Mary Muszynski, Reniel Del Rosario, Stephanie Syjuco and collaborative works by Lenka Clayton and Phillip Andrew Lewis.*

**About the author:**

David M. Roth is the editor and publisher of Squarecylinder.

<https://www.squarecylinder.com/2021/08/listening-to-threads/>