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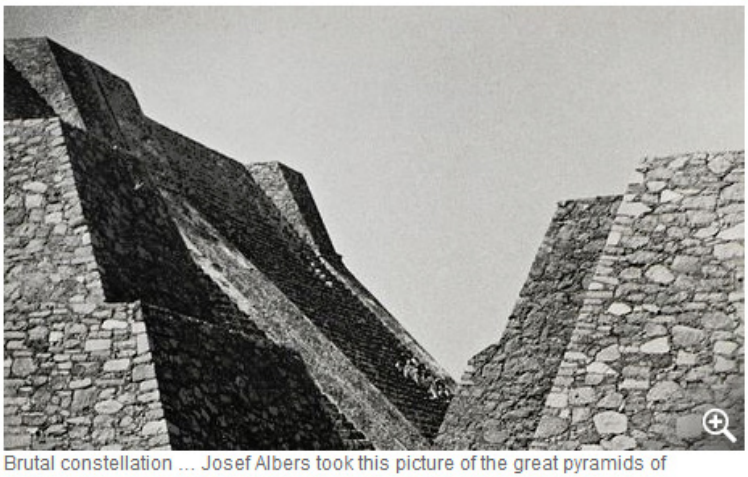
ONART
BLOG

Past perfect: why the best modern art shows its primitive roots

A new show of Josef Albers' rare photographs of Mexican ruins proves that modern artists can't escape the lure of the ancient

• Blurred lines: Josef Albers' rare black and white drawings – in pictures



Brutal constellation ... Josef Albers took this picture of the great pyramids of Tenayuca around 1940. Photograph: Josef Albers/The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society/Dacs

The most advanced art of the 20th and 21st centuries has one eye constantly looking back at the earliest and most primal human creations.

in point. As well as designing works of cool geometrical clarity, Albers took powerful photographs. His images find intimations of the abstract in the real world: sharp lines, bold angles, cutting shadows.

After Albers left Germany for North America in the 1930s, he found some of his richest photographic subjects at archaeological sites in Mexico. In 1937 at Tenayuca, he a brutal constellation of stone pyramids and bulwarks, revealing severe blocks of shadows and planes of bright light on the smooth sloping ancient walls. In 1952, he took a powerful picture of the Pyramid of the Magician, in Uxmal, that used blazing white sunshine to dramatise its mighty presence.

Mighty mound ... Albers' photograph of Pyramid of the Magician, in Uxmal, Mexico. Photograph: Josef Albers/The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists Rights Society/Dacs

These photographs find parallels between Albers's own reverence to the square and the architecture of Mexico's indigenous people. The cities of the new world never invented the arch. Like the ancient Greeks, the pre-Columbian civilisations of the Americas built striking monuments without ever rounding out their architecture. So Albers could photograph a modernist utopia of straight lines, dramatic angles and triangles among the ruins of ancient Mexico.

He's not the only modern artist who found what he was looking for in the distant past. In the 1900s, Picasso was fascinated by ancient Iberian stone carvings. They had a mighty influence on his revolutionary painting Les Demoiselles d' Avignon.

After the second world war, the stretched, slender, seemingly charred figures of Alberto Giacometti were widely seen as archetypal expressions of the modern condition. Wasted, starved, perplexed, his people nevertheless survived, bearing witness to the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Yet as well as expressing their time, Giacometti's figures deliberately echo the art of the ancient Etruscans, who put primitive bronzes into their tombs in central Italy. In searching for an image of modern existential anxiety, Giacometti turned to archaeology.

A nod to the past ... Richard Serra's installation at the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Photograph: Vincent West/Reuters

This special relationship between the very new and very old is still vivid. Richard Serra's permanent installation of curving steel walls at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao is arguably the best artwork of the 21st century. As you wander among its corridors and spirals, archaeological images keep appearing: this village of sculpture evokes everything from the mud mosques of Mali to the fabled Labyrinth of ancient Crete. The Labyrinth lives again in Mark Wallinger's public work that turns the London underground into a place of mythic possibility.

Modern art looks to the future. But, as Picasso showed in his mythical art of the 1930s, it cannot escape the lair of the ancient Minotaur where imagination began and wants to return.