

# PEYTON WRIGHT

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## Sewell Sillman

(American Painter, 1924-1992)



Photograph courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Sewell Sillman was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1921, and attended high school in Atlanta. Upon America's entry into World War II in 1942, Sillman enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force Reserve while simultaneously pursuing studies in civil engineering at Georgia Tech, and later at Johns Hopkins University. He saw active duty in the European Theater in 1944 and '45 and was wounded in the Battle of the Bulge.

Returning to America after the war, Sillman re-enrolled at Georgia Tech, this time with a focus on architecture. Eventually becoming disaffected with

the "oppressive" atmosphere at Georgia Tech, Sillman followed his friends William Ragland Watkins and Albert Lanier to Black Mountain College, just outside of Asheville, North Carolina. Sillman recalled that Black Mountain College "...gave me a chance to get rid of absolutely every standard that I had grown up with... It was like a snake that loses its skin... What was left was someone who had absolutely no idea in the world what to do.... It was marvelous."

Faculty members at Black Mountain included former Bauhaus professor Josef Albers and his wife Anni, Buckminster Fuller, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, Walter Gropius and Robert Creeley. Among Sillman's fellow students were Ray Johnson, Kenneth Noland, Robert Rauschenberg, and Susan Weil. Sillman initially continued his architectural studies with design visionary Buckminster Fuller, but it was his introduction to Josef Albers that would lead Sillman away from architecture to what would become a tireless lifelong push against the boundaries of visual possibility. As Sillman's own aesthetic inquiry grew, so did his inspired relationship with Albers, evolving from acolyte to collaborator. Of Albers, Sillman said "What you get from

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Albers is not something that you can codify, that you can exhibit, that you can mine and make a buck with... It's basic soul study in a sense. It goes inside of you."

Josef Albers left Black Mountain College in 1949 and accepted the position of head of the Department of Design at Yale University. Sillman followed his mentor to Yale where he earned his BA in 1951 and his MFA in 1953 with a thesis on color. He joined the Yale Department of Art faculty in 1954 teaching Color, Drawing and Painting, and later becoming Director of undergraduate programs in Art—a position that he held until 1966. Sillman went on to teach at Parsons School of Design, Carnegie Tech, Ohio State University, SUNY Purchase, Penn State University, and the Rhode Island School of Design.

In 1962 Sillman co-founded Ives-Sillman, Inc., with fellow Yale artist Norman Ives, publishing fine art portfolios and individual prints by artists including Josef Albers, Roy Lichtenstein, Ad Reinhardt, Willem de Kooning, Jean Dubuffet, Jacob Lawrence, Piet Mondrian and Romare Bearden.

For many artists, drawing is a mnemonic aid in a much greater plan; plot lines to be dressed with the adornment of another medium. Not so for Sillman. His prolonged, patient dedication to drawing as his primary mode of expression elevated draftsmanship far above graphic design, reporting back from beyond the thermosphere with elegant and esoteric messages which compel us to stay and practice "seeing" more fully. Sillman's paintings, however, are of another order. Though they clearly owe a debt to the carefully calibrated geometric abstractions of Albers, they are far less academic than the maestro's works. Albers repeatedly explored color through his iconic square motif, with an inexhaustible need to be didactic, creating signature paintings clearly intended for presentation to the world. By contrast, Sillman's color explorations are deeply personal and communicate a distinct appeal to the sublime. Some appear to be portals to be entered—by invitation only. Other paintings are crafted like textile designs with painstaking attention to detail, pattern, and composition. They are harbingers of the computer assisted aesthetic that would surface several decades later in popular contemporary fiber arts.

Despite his characteristic reticence, Sillman was widely exhibited during his lifetime. He was included in "Recent Drawings, U.S.A." at the Museum of Modern Art in 1956 and his works were handled by both the Stable Galleries and the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York City. He is represented in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum in New York City, the Florence Griswold Museum and the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC. Sewell Sillman died in Lyme, Connecticut in April, 1992.