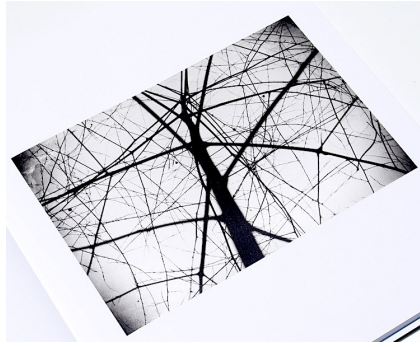


The Joyful Forms of Ellsworth Kelly

by Ricki Morse



In March of 2016 *The New Yorker* gave this title to an article celebrating the lifetime achievements of Ellsworth Kelly (1923-2015) and reviewing the very first exhibition of his photographs at the Mark Mathews Gallery in New York City. Our exhibition, opening October 15, originates from that collection and provides us with a unique vision of the world as Kelly experienced it. In viewing these three Kelly photographs, we are able to join his search for the essence of a curve as it arises in nature (1) and sidestep the limitations of critical concepts like abstract, color field, hard-edged, or minimalist. As Chris Wiley put it in *The New Yorker*, “Kelly was engaged in building an idiosyncratic visual alphabet, with each letter chiseled down to the bedrock of form, color, and scale.” This search for the essence of a white curve or the mass of a black triangle begins in nature, as seen through his lens, and carries us to the “joy” of being there.



From his first photograph in 1950, Kelly recorded his observations thus building a visual journal. “When you look at the world, everything is separate — each thing is in its own space, has its own uniqueness. When I take photographs, I want somehow to capture that.” Three photos above: A curve seen from a highway near Austerlitz in 1970, the intricacy of limbs against the sky, a stark black/white abstraction.



Ellsworth Kelly at his home in Spencertown, NY, 1982, *Getty image*.

Following the evolution of Kelly’s photographs, drawings, paintings and sculpture through his 92 years is much like watching a flower open. Each petal unfurls at its own pace, remaining a part of the whole, always taking its own inherent time. His early love of Romanesque architecture, drawn and admired from his years in France and later in museum collections, took shape in his single architectural project constructed after his death. Ellsworth Kelly was born in Newburgh, New York, the second of three sons, to parents of Pennsylvania Dutch and Welsh extraction—his father was an insurance company executive and his mother a former school teacher. The family moved to New Jersey where the toddler was introduced to bird watching by his mother and grandmother. He later attributed his love of color to his childhood wonder at birds and their flashing displays of color. Though he was encouraged by his high school teachers in art and drama, his parents had little interest in art and in 1941 agreed to his enrollment Pratt Institute for its technological training, where he studied until he was drafted into the Army in 1943.

The Ghost Army His first step into the larger world came through his application to join the 603rd Engineers Camouflage Battalion, available to recruits with training in the arts, and he arrived in France, often near the

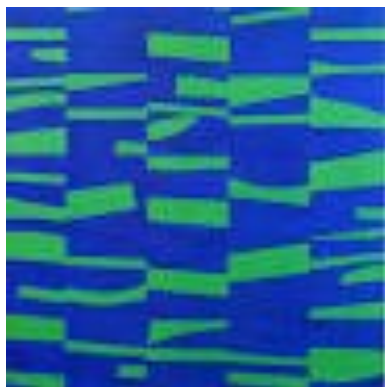


Ellsworth Kelly, *Briey*, 1945, sketchbook painting. Kelly's landscape of a town in northeastern France depicts elevation and scale.

frontlines. Known as The Ghost Army, it was a deception unit: 1,100 men who produced sonic, radio and atmospheric deception for the purpose of confusing and thwarting the enemy. They produced millions of yards of camouflage covering for troops and artillery as well as inflated fabric tanks and encampments. He traveled widely whenever possible, keeping a sketch book which records his growing affinity for architecture and the sophistication of his evolving world view. He became fascinated with Romanesque architecture, expanding his personal vision as broader than single pictures into sculpture or murals placed in nature. Upon his discharge in 1945, access

to the G.I. Bill allowed him to enroll at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where he studied for three years. Though an elegant draftsman, as displayed in his drawings of landscapes, plants and flowers, a unique wonder began to arise in his work, allowing simple or random shapes to drift off the page and gain their own separate integrity. In 1948, under the G.I. Bill, Kelly moved to Paris, where his artistic vision coalesced through the lens of a camera.

The Paris Years After beginning classes at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Kelly spent hours at the Louvre nourishing his love of traditional design and



Ellsworth Kelly, *Merchers*, 1951, oil on canvas, MOMA. This Atlantic seacoast town north of Bourdeaux was a favorite.

architecture, while in the Parisian galleries he encountered Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), the Dutch master of Neo-Plasticism, a concentration of three colors among vertical and horizontal structures, and contemporary French sculptor Jean Arp (1886-1966) whose forms echoed nature and surrealistic dream images. In 1950 he borrowed a Leica and began to take pictures of nature which spoke to him of essential beauty, a property of all things, from shadows to

weathered walls. In his photos, *Shadows on Stairs, Villa La Comte, Meschers*, 1950, gelatin silver print and *Pont Marie, Ile Saint-Louis, Paris*, 1950, gelatin silver print (enlarged) we see the inspiration for the related paintings.

New York City and Abstract Expressionism When Kelly returned to New York City in 1954, the international art world had undergone a quantum shift. During the escalation of WWII in Europe, many artists and academics fled to the western hemisphere—some targets of the Nazi regime. By the end of the war Paris was no longer the center of the western art world. New York City not only opened its heart and museums to the newcomers, but greeted them with the latest American art



Shadow on Stairs, 1950. Here Kelly randomly mixes the steps shadows and surfaces with a glittering effect, drawing our attention to the geometry.



Ellsworth Kelly, *Seine*, 1951, oil on canvas, Pennsylvania MA. The stones of the bridge as reflected in the river rebuild the edifice under water, echoing the artist's process of adapting shapes from nature.

movement—abstract expressionism—from the action painting of Jackson Pollock to the color field work of Mark Rothko. In exploring the differences between Kelly’s work and that of the abstract expressionists, we reveal the core of Kelly’s work, primarily that it was not about him. Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler spread their canvases on the floor and dripped, smeared and painted swaths of color as they spontaneously experienced the possibilities of the surface. Mark Rothko painted bands of mixed colors in wide swaths which expressed his emotional state in that moment—abstract in that there was no representation and expressionistic in that the emotions of the moment were expressed.

Ellsworth Kelly’s approach was philosophical. Based on his commitment to exposing the basic forms of which nature itself is composed, he isolated those forms and colors in space. His camera acted as his sketchbook, giving each form its own space. Grounded in shapes generated in nature, Kelly’s preferences are irrelevant. The source of his work comes from outside himself, not from his imagination or emotion, and reflects his presence to what he sees. His presence is what he shares with us and generates within us. In isolating the inherent shapes in nature, Kelly allows us to be present to them, to the natural world outside ourselves. Often labeled “hard edge,” Kelly makes the single shape stand apart from its surroundings to bring it into our presence.

His first commission for a major work came from the city of Philadelphia, a large wall decoration for their new Transportation Building, appearing on our cover this month. “*Sculpture for a Large Wall*,” 1957, expands



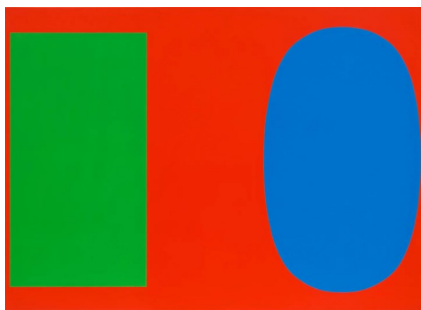
Ellsworth Kelly, *Seine*, 1951, oil on canvas, Pennsylvania MA. The stones of the bridge as reflected in the river rebuild the edifice under water, echoing the artist’s process of adapting shapes from nature. The stones of the bridge as reflected in the river rebuild the edifice under water, echoing the artist’s process of adapting shapes from nature.



Ellsworth Kelly, *Pony*, 1959, painted aluminum, Whitney Museum.

the shimmering glitter of light and breeze. Though he always talked about his work in terms of the outdoor settings which inspired them, this was his first work of sculpture, opening his path to the soaring spheres of his later work. His first free-standing sculptures had appeared in 1959, painted aluminum sheeting which reflects the shadows in his photographs. The gentle evolution of Kelly’s vision opens before our eyes, connecting us to the universal forms of nature, the goal of his journey.

Throughout the late 1950s and early ‘60s, Ellsworth Kelly worked with shapes and solid colors deployed flatly across single canvases. Finding inspiration in both nature and art, he was drawn to the oddity of forms and the various conditions that create visual interest in unlikely ways. In this spirit, “*Green Blue Red*” abstains from the balance and harmony of traditional painting and reflects an impulse to build a surface of visual tension out of the contrasts of color and shape and the containment of an edge. Kelly’s works of this period depict the jarring difference between colors and the unusual placement of shapes, energizing the visual experience and creating a disorienting optical effect. The green rectangle and blue oval are vibrant and foreign against the red background. Kelly does not construct balance or resolve; he creates compositions that are alive in their idiosyncrasies.



Ellsworth Kelly, *Green Blue Red*, 1963, oil on canvas, Broad Museum, LA.



Ellsworth Kelly, *Spectrum*, 1969, oil on canvas, Metropolitan.



Ellsworth Kelly walking through his Betty Parsons NYC show in 1963.

In *Spectrum*, 1969, the single images multiply, spreading down a whole wall, like reflections in the Seine.

Settled in Coenties Slip with an apartment and a studio, in the midst of an artist's colony near the southern tip of Manhattan, Kelly soon had his first solo show in 1961 at the Betty Parsons Gallery, one of the most prestigious in the city.

Collectors and museums had begun acquiring his work, accelerated by the MOMA show, "Sixteen Americans" in 1959. *Running White*, 1959, was acquired by MOMA after the show. The shift in his personal finances had relieved him of the search for work and the hours spent giving art classes, sorting mail at a local post office or working as a security guard. What did



Ellsworth Kelly, *Running White*, 1959, oil on canvas, acquired by MOMA from their "Sixteen Americans" exhibition.

not change was the pace of his evolution in expressing natural forms.

In true Kelly fashion the process was one of growth, not aspiration, and could not be hurried. The Buddhist saying, "Don't push the river. It flows by itself." captures the nature of Kelly's process. We see the vertical lines in his photographs evolve into soaring columns, and the single color panels become natural shapes that float from the wall.



Left: Ellsworth Kelly, *Plant Lithographs*, 2005, Yale Univ. Press. Kelly was a skilled lithographer, printing many of his plant drawings. Right: Ellsworth Kelly, *White Curves*, 2003, white aluminum, Beyler Foundation, Switzerland. His sculptures were drawn not only from his photographs but also from his drawings, here offering the curve of the flower to the metal form.

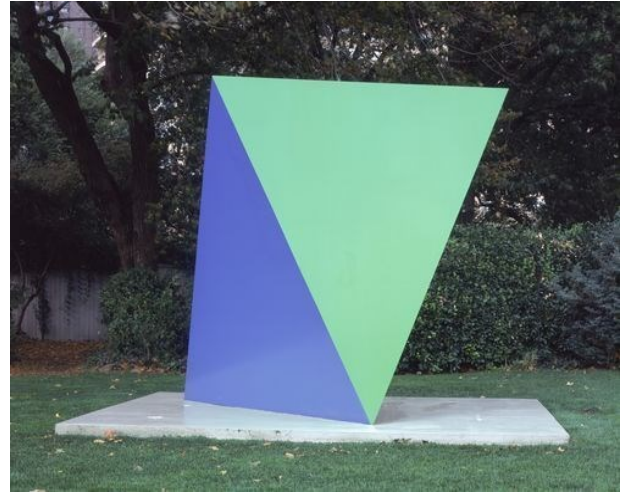


Ellsworth Kelly, *Three Panels: Orange, Dark Gray, Green*, 1986, oil on canvas, MOMA

The Guggenheim Retrospective

In 1996 the Guggenheim Museum in New York City mounted a massive Ellsworth Kelly exhibition covering not only current work but his entire artistic career, a very special tribute in the world of art. Over 200 works, borrowed from museums and private collections all over the world, were displayed along the curving walls of the spiraling gallery, befitting of Kelly's love of natural forms.

All that's missing is his sculpture, installed throughout the world, which became the focus of his later years. Our representative collection includes their stylistic range, the observations of his photographs clearly reflected in these images.



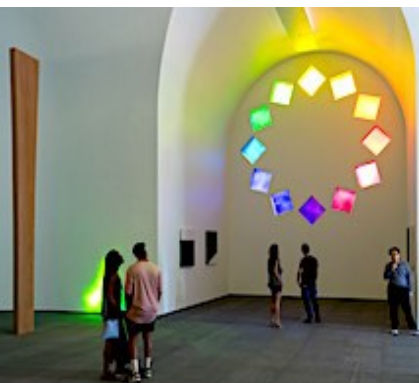
Ellsworth Kelly, *Berlin Totem*, 2008, stainless steel, 40', American Embassy in Berlin. Ellsworth Kelly, *Barnes Totem*, 2012, steel, 40', Barnes Foundation Plaza, Philadelphia, PA. Ellsworth Kelly, *Green Blue*, 1968, painted aluminum, 8', MOMA.

On July 24, 2014, President Obama presented Ellsworth Kelly with the National Medal of the Arts in the East Room of the White House. Amidst all the accolades and awards, Kelly was searching for a home for his singular architectural work, the *Temple of Light*. The chapel was originally commis-



Above: Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*, 2018. Below: Rather than a cross, we see Kelly's concrete totem in the alcove, echoing his photographs of severe vertical lines.

sioned in the 1980s by Douglas Cramer, a Santa Barbara television producer and collector who planned to erect it on his vineyard. It was never built and Kelly hoped to gift the plans to a potential builder. His gift was accepted by The Blanton Museum of Art at the Univ. of Texas, one of the largest university museums in the country. Though he loved old churches, he was a confirmed atheist and dedicated his temple to light, placing colored glass windows in patterns on the walls, spilling intense sunlight in a brilliant array. The temple certainly



ly fulfills his purpose for art.

He writes, "In a sense, what I've tried to capture is the reality of flux, to keep art an open, incomplete situation, to get at the rapture of seeing."

Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective, Edited by Diane Waldman, 1996, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York
Ellsworth Kelly, *As Sculptor*, artforum, summer 1967
Ellsworth Kelly: Photographs, 2016, Aperture.