

FEATURES

Artist interview

Ellsworth Kelly:

LOOKING BACKWARDS, MOVING FORWARDS

As he prepares to show new work in New York, the 91-year-old American painter reflects on artists past and present – from Monet to Calder, a “tough” Judd and the “kid’s stuff” made by Koons – and explains why he still believes the future is bright. By Pac Pobric

Spencertown, New York, the hamlet two-and-a-half hours north of New York City, where the US artist Ellsworth Kelly has lived since 1970, is a quiet, simple place. Off a two-lane road, partly hidden by woods, is Kelly's sprawling studio, which is spare and clean, but still overflows with riches in books and art. (Among the works in Kelly's collection are pieces by Francis Picabia, Willem de Kooning and Blinky Palermo.) Inside, it is peaceful, yet it hums with discreet activity. This year, the artist and his staff are preparing for an exhibition of new work, which is due to open in May, at the Matthew Marks Gallery. At least some of the pictures in the show build on ideas Kelly conceived years ago: multiple panels, each painted a single colour, sit next to or atop one another. Kelly, who turns 92 in May, smiles while looking them over. "My work is meant to be enjoyed," he says. "If you can enjoy the colour and the relationship of forms, and what they do to you – that's it." Two new publications are also expected this year: the first volume of Kelly's long-awaited catalogue raisonné is due in the autumn (six additional volumes are expected to follow), and a monograph by the art historian Tricia Paik is due to be published in October.

The Art Newspaper: You have recently been working on curatorial projects, including "Monet/Kelly" at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, which closed in February. How did that start?

Ellsworth Kelly: I don't know how much you know about the last works Monet did, but I didn't know anything after his haystack paintings from the early 1890s. So I wrote a letter to his stepson and he invited me to Monet's studio in 1952. By then, of course, all the *Water Lilies* had already been painted for the Orangerie [the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, where they were installed in 1927], but the museum wasn't open so much then. And, anyway, the art colony in France thought that Monet had already lost it. But he did have two studios, and the smaller one was jam-packed with pictures. You couldn't get into the room. And the big studio was huge; there must have been 15 huge pictures there. When I went there with a friend in 1952, Monet's stepson showed us all the work and told us that he hadn't shown it to anybody else. We were the first artists to see it.

What drew you to Paris in the first place?
When I was in school in Boston [in the late 1940s], all we did was draw nudes. There was no



abstraction at all; it was very backward. They didn't have any early American School influence, like Thomas Hart Benton, but some friends and I would hitchhike to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and look at the School of Paris artists. I got to know a lot about what was going on in Paris, and Picasso influenced me a great deal. He was all over everything.

How did France change your work?
I had been there for less than six months when I said: "I'm not going to be a figurative painter. Picasso is interesting to me, Brancusi is interesting, Mondrian is too." Malevich didn't come into the picture right away. But I didn't meet many artists in France, though I was very close to [the US painter] Jack Youngerman.

And you came back to the US in 1954?
Yes. Dorothy Miller, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, came to see me because Alexander Calder had written to some people [telling them] to come to look at my paintings. Calder also paid my rent. I think it was \$45 or \$50. I knew him in France, and I guess I was the starving artist then. But I didn't know what was going on in New York when I was in Paris. When I came back in 1954, the

Abstract Expressionists had taken over. They were the first American artists who became global.

Some critics said your work came out of Abstract Expressionism, but others associated you with Minimalism. How did you avoid being put into one category?

Donald Judd didn't like being called a Minimalist either. But what else are you going to call it? He was a tough character; mean sometimes. He was boss. We had a show, and we each had a picture in it. And my work was based on an idea I had in Europe that I started to make when I came back [to the US]. Judd called it a "fluke"; he said "it's good European art". So I kind of ignored him.

Do you still get out to see contemporary art?
Well, I didn't feel a necessity to go to the Jeff Koons show ["Jeff Koons: a Retrospective", Whitney Museum of American Art, 27 June–19 October 2014]. I feel like I know what his subject is and how he makes it. I don't mind the *Puppy*, the big dog with the flowers, but I just got a Gagosian Gallery catalogue about the things Koons is doing now, and it's like he's making monsters. I'm thinking of the "Hulk" works. But, you know, that's kid's stuff, somehow. When I was growing up, there used to be



Ellsworth Kelly in his studio in Spencertown, New York, in 2012. Above, *Gold with Orange Reliefs, 2013*, for which he made a drawing in 1962, and below, a work from his new show—*Black Relief over Yellow, 2014*

things in the front yards of houses that were shiny. And there was a blue ball and young deer and all that. I feel like Koons is just a step away from that.

Do you feel happy with your own place in the art-historical narrative?

I feel that art is changing, and I'm not satisfied with the auction situation. It's misleading, but it's natural too. New art has always been a little difficult, and abstraction has not been accepted by the masses. But I have some good collectors who support me. I think they wouldn't buy it otherwise.

The collector Bernard Arnault, the chair and chief executive of LVMH, is certainly interested in your work. You recently finished an installation for the auditorium in the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris.

I know [the architect] Frank [Gehry] quite well, so he called me. Because of the acoustics in the space, I couldn't do the work the way I usually do. We couldn't have anything solid, because the wall itself is acoustic, so we had to find a different material. My fabricator found something in Toronto; it's like metal with holes in it. Arnault and his wife [Hélène Mercier-Arnault] are both pianists, so it was especially important for the theatre to have good acoustics. When the seats are in, they hide part of the installation. I was talking to a critic from France, and he said: "Oh, you have something that disappears when the whole area is what it's supposed to be." So it's interesting to hide it and then reveal it.

You're still quite busy. Would you say you still feel generally optimistic?

I was thinking just the other day about how humans have produced all this, and how serious people are afraid that we've had it, that we're done. Or that we haven't looked ahead into the future and now we're ruining the earth. But I feel like I can't live that way. I've got to let it annoy me, because we have produced great art. I don't know if you read [the US author William] Faulkner, but when he won the Nobel prize [in 1949], he said: "I believe that man will not merely endure, he will prevail."

• Ellsworth Kelly, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 13 May–27 June; www.matthewmarks.com

Digest Ellsworth Kelly

BACKGROUND

Born: 31 May 1923, Newburgh, New York

Early life: Kelly lives in nine different homes between the ages of six and 16. His family finally settles in Oradell, New Jersey, where Kelly attends junior high school. There, he draws cover illustrations for his school's literary magazine and begins to paint outdoors. Later, at Dwight Morrow High School, Kelly acts in school plays and earns a scholarship to study drama in college, but his parents do not approve, so he never enrols.

Education: Kelly enrolls in art school at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in 1941, but leaves in 1943 to join the war effort. He is educated, in part, by the military and works for the 603rd Engineers Camouflage Battalion, designing propaganda posters and camouflage patterns. After the war, Kelly studies art briefly in Boston, but moves to Paris in 1948. He lives in the French capital for six years and takes classes at the École des Beaux-Arts, with support from the GI Bill for US veterans.

Lives: Spencertown, New York

Represented by: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

MILESTONES

Sculpture for a Large Wall, 1957



Kelly was in the midst of his six-year sojourn in France when he wrote a letter in 1950 to the composer John Cage, saying: "My collages are only ideas for things much larger—things to cover walls." Kelly never realised a monumental work in France, but in 1957, when he was back in the US, he made his first large-scale, three-dimensional work. *Sculpture for a Large Wall*, 1957, which measures more than 11ft (3.3m) from top to bottom and is more than 65ft (19.8m) wide, was originally built for the Penn Center in Philadelphia at the invitation of the architect Vincent Kling. The experience left something to be desired (Kelly battled with the building's owner over the final design of the piece), but the opportunity to build a massive work was tremendous—"not merely because Kelly was broke", as the art historian James Meyer writes. When the building was sold in 1987, Kelly bought the sculpture back. The collectors Jo Carole and Ronald Lauder later acquired the piece, and it is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The "Chatham" series in Buffalo, 1971



One year after moving to Spencertown, Kelly began to work on 19 L-shaped multi-panel paintings, named the "Chatham" series after the town in which he opened his new studio (left). The idea for the shape came from the crossbeams in the workspace, and each picture was made of two joined monochrome panels. The series came at a critical point in Kelly's career. His previous few exhibitions had been poorly received by critics including Hilton Kramer, Donald Judd and John Canaday, but when the "Chatham" works went on display at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, in 1972, the reception was positive. Kramer, who one year earlier found it "very difficult to remain interested in [Kelly's work] for more than about three minutes", wrote a glowing

review. Kelly was one of the "most audacious" abstract painters working at the time, Kramer wrote, and the paintings were "the very best pictures" the artist had produced.

Experiments with shape and space, 1984

In 1984, Kelly presented a group of 14 aluminium and steel works at the Leo Castelli and Margo Leavin galleries in New York and Los Angeles. Each piece was attached to the wall (right, *Untitled*, 1983), but each also had one edge on the ground. In a short statement for the exhibition catalogue, Kelly wrote that he wanted "to free shape from its ground, and then to work the shape so that it has a definite relationship to the space around it". Although Kelly considers the works to be sculptures ("they're heavy, so I call them sculptures", he says), they also owe a debt to his shaped canvases. More than any other works in his career, they speak of Kelly's interest in translating the forms of one medium into another. Today, one of these pieces sits at the front entrance to the artist's studio and office in Spencertown—a quiet acknowledgement of its importance in his development.



Guggenheim retrospective and tour, 1996-97

Diane Waldman was working at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1968 when she became interested in Kelly's work. Her husband suggested that she call the artist and introduce herself. "So I did it cold," she later remembered. "I called him up, and I said, 'Ellsworth, you don't know me. I'm an assistant curator at the Guggenheim Museum. My name is Diane Waldman. I'd like to do an exhibition of your work.'" At the time, William Rubin was planning a show of Kelly's work for New York's Museum of Modern Art, which took place in 1973, but the artist's long friendship with Waldman finally led to a major retrospective at the Guggenheim in 1996. More than 40 private and institutional lenders contributed to the show, which included more than 160 works. It travelled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Tate in London and Munich's Haus der Kunst.

"Ellsworth Kelly at 90", 2013

In celebration of Kelly's 90th birthday in 2013, the Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, staged a show of 14 paintings and two sculptures made in the previous two years. Although the art was new, much of it sprang from ideas that Kelly had developed years earlier. A large painted aluminium sculpture, *Black Form II*, 2012, took its shape from a 1962 drawing. Also in 1962, Kelly made a small collage (22cm by 20cm) that became the basis for *Gold with Orange Reliefs*, 2013. But although the forms were old, their execution was new. Kelly's paintings tend to disguise the presence of his hand, but *Gold with Orange Reliefs* was uncharacteristically painterly; it was also the first time that he had ever painted with the colour gold. In the exhibition catalogue, the art historian Robert Storr asked: "What better way for Kelly to enter his tenth decade than poised to leap forward after a long look back?" P.P.

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Patrimonio Nacional, Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial



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