

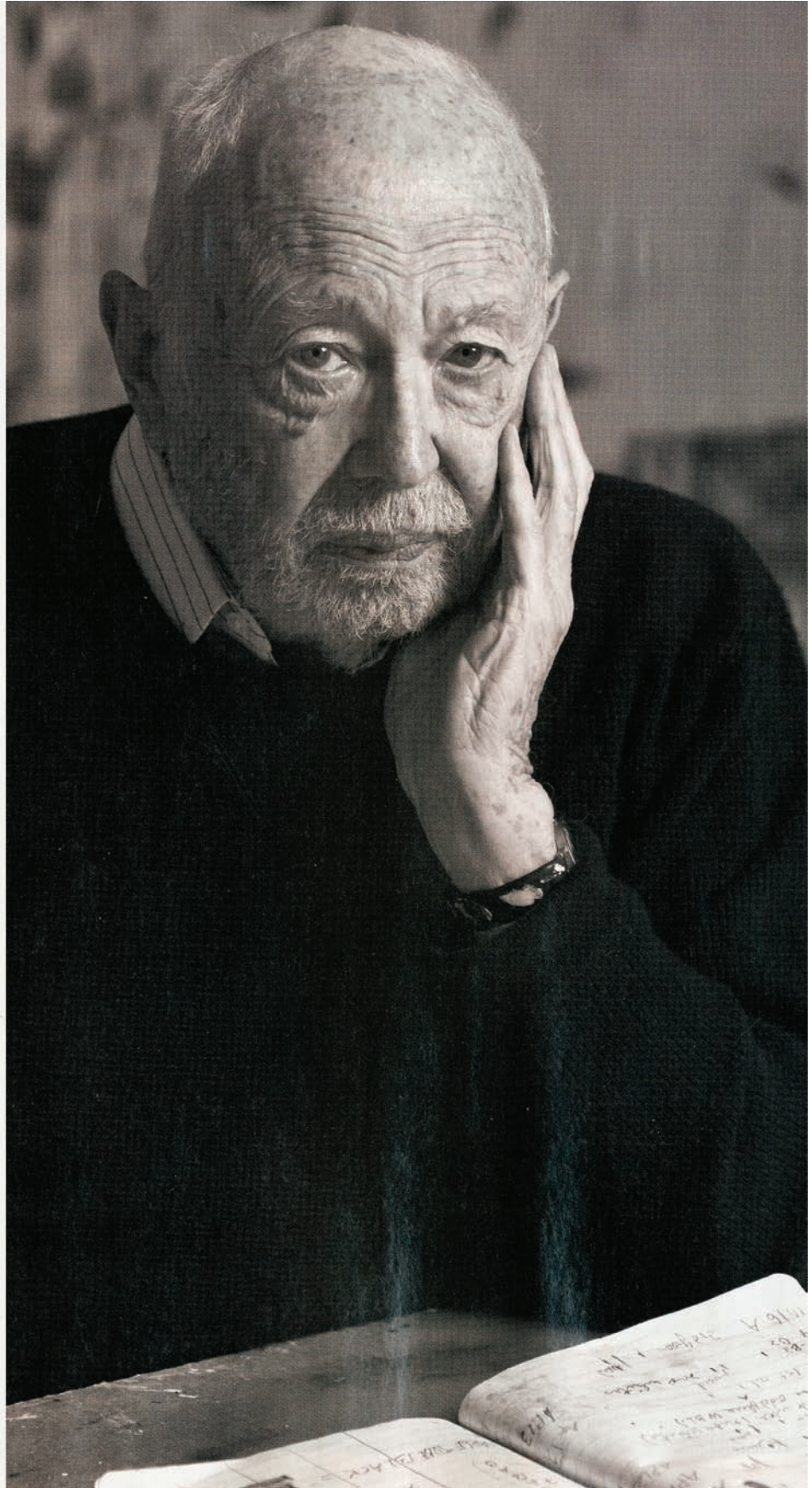
MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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IN THE Abstract

ELLSWORTH KELLY hits town with dazzling displays of color, form and line *by* SUZANNE MUCHNIC / *photographs by* HEDI SLIMANE



Ellsworth Kelly is having an L.A. moment. This month, the East Coast master of pure color and crisp shape makes a big splash with a retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and, in a smaller exhibit, inaugurates the West Coast branch of the Matthew Marks Gallery, a prestigious New York showcase.

At LACMA starting January 22, *Ellsworth Kelly: Prints and Paintings* is a collection of the 88-year-old artist's prodigious printmaking activity, accompanied by paintings, drawings and ephemera. And in West Hollywood, Marks is featuring a Kelly sculpture on his gallery's facade as well as an exhibition of the artist's new relief paintings.

"I'm very happy about all of it," Kelly says, reached by phone at his studio in upstate New York. With an exhibition of wood sculptures at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and two traveling shows of black-and-white works and plant drawings currently lodged in Munich, he isn't exactly starved for attention. But the L.A. convergence pleases him because he has strong connections to the city.

"I did a show there as early as 1957," he says, fondly recalling the period when the fabled Ferus Gallery was founded by artist Ed Kienholz and curator Walter Hopps, then reshaped by dealer Irving Blum. "It was a group show. I don't remember what was in it, but Irving bought some paintings of mine around that time, which he still jokes about. He says he bought them for \$75 and paid \$5 a month."

Kelly's first one-man show of prints at Ferus in 1965 featured lithographs he created during a Paris sojourn. In 1970, he began making regular trips to Los Angeles to work at Gemini G.E.L., a fine-art publisher that produced many of the prints in LACMA's upcoming survey. "Through Gemini, I met Peter Carlson, my sculpture fabricator," Kelly says.

"I've come out to Los Angeles a lot to see him. Peter made all my wood sculptures and the piece for the façade of Matthew's gallery. I'm looking forward to seeing a picture of it."

A photograph instead of taking in the real thing? "I'm on oxygen now, which makes traveling difficult," he says. "But I'm working and having a good time and enjoying showing. I didn't go to Europe [for the openings in Munich], but I really do want to come to Los Angeles for the gallery and the print show."

Kelly, whose work exudes joyous perfectionism while defying stylistic categories, studied at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn until 1943, when he was drafted into the army. He made his first visit to Paris in 1944, on a tour of duty. Museums were closed because of the war, but after attending Boston's School of the Museum of Fine Arts, he lived in France from 1948 to 1954.

With little affinity for the abstract-expressionist and pop-art work that prevailed in his early days as an artist, Kelly developed a vocabulary of pure, vibrant colors and impeccably designed shapes. "I've often said I want to do something I haven't done before—different shapes," says the artist, who has described himself not as an inventor but as a perceptive observer with an independent eye. "Each shape is like an idea, and I have to think of that seriously. I have to wait for the right shapes."

Though best known as a geometric abstractionist or color field painter, Kelly has made drawings since childhood. With a sensitive eye and a sure hand, he has produced a large body of work that renders plants and people with the sparest of outlines, distilling natural form to its essence. "I think all of my stuff starts from drawings," he says. "Prints are a different kind of drawing."

The LACMA exhibition coincides with the publication of an updated catalogue raisonné of the artist's prints. In a nod to the complexity of his work, as well as his career-long pattern of revisiting ideas and motifs, the curators chose to present his work thematically. "There are through-lines, whether it's grids or black-and-white or pencil drawings or the more textural and gestural *River* lithographs or works that were done in series," says Stephanie Barron, senior curator of modern art, who organized the show with Britt Salvesen, head of the departments of photography and prints and drawings.

Kelly's power as a colorist will be apparent, but so will lesser-known aspects of his work, including small drawings that provide insight into his creative process. "Just to see how a small sheet of paper—in one case, a piece of Chateau Marmont stationery—can contain almost an index of three or four series of prints that he would execute over a long period of time is really quite wonderful," she says.

Salvesen is on the same wavelength. "The prints and the thoughts that led to them—it's interesting to consider them together," she says. "There are artists who enjoy the experimentation or messiness of the technical challenges of print-making. With Kelly, it's not so much about the spectacular as the refinement and precision."

For Marks, establishing a presence in L.A. has been a five-year adventure. When he finally found a site, seismic issues forced him to tear down the existing building and start from scratch instead of undertaking the planned renovation. He hired local architect Peter Zellner to design the 3,500-square-foot building, which he calls a "super-fancy garage."

Kelly's outdoor sculpture satisfies a West Hollywood require-

ment that developers contribute a percentage of a project's valuation to public art. The law took Marks by surprise, but he knew what to do. Kelly had just done a sculpture for the Art Institute of Chicago's new wing. The artist's response to the WeHo gallery space is *Black over White*, an 8-by-40-foot rectangular construction of painted aluminum. It runs along the top of the building, capping the stark white structure with a black horizontal stripe.

Kelly says the idea appeared in "a flash of exuberance" after pondering the problem. "It came to me that what the building needed was a black bar," he says. "I thought I was doing something new, then much later, I realized I had done a painting like that in 1966 and two earlier drawings that look like the same thing. Artists, you know, have it all when they are born, and it just comes out at the right time."

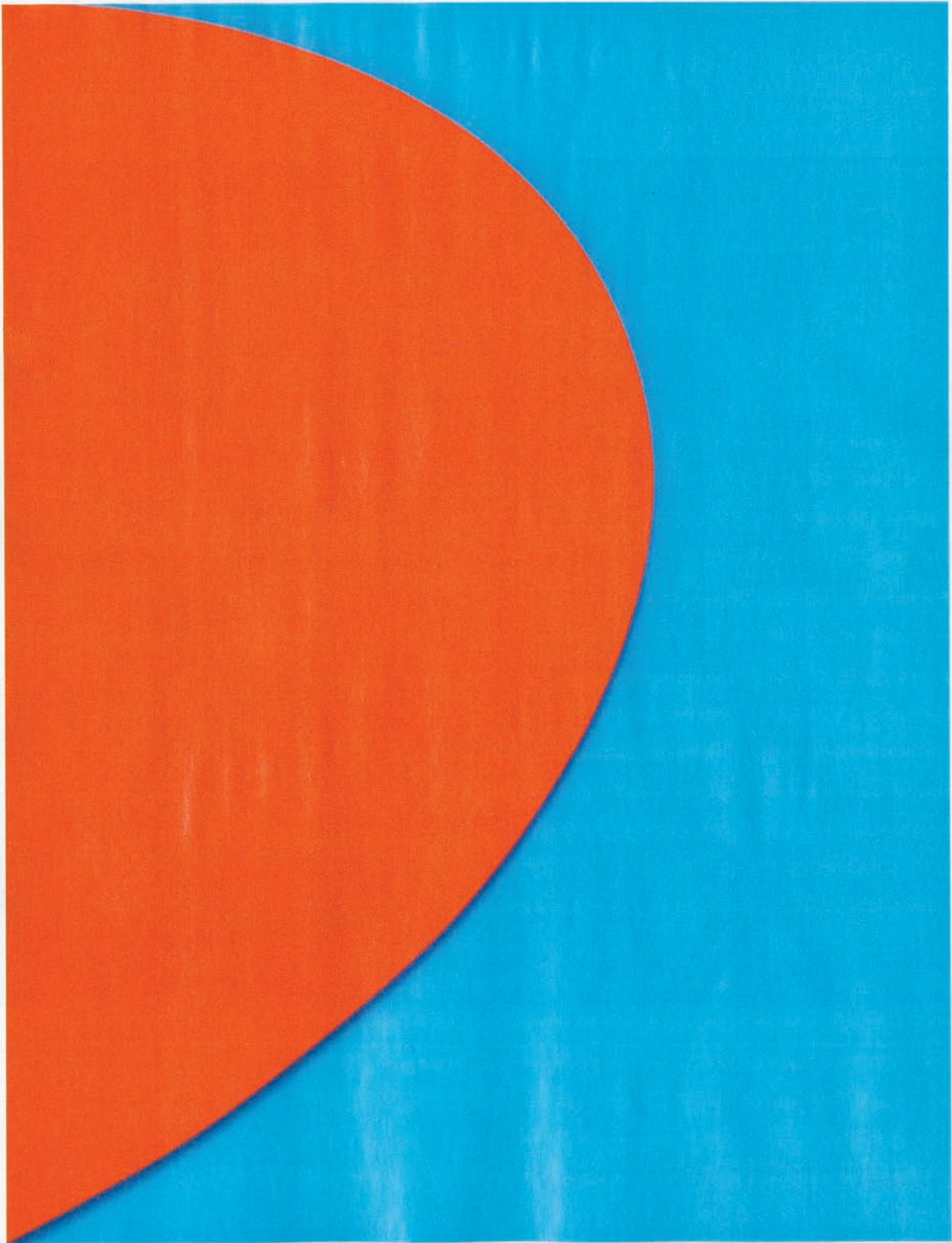
The sculpture is distinctive, though, because a 10-inch space between the building and the artwork will give the black bar a shifting shadow. And that's precisely the point, Marks says. "People will walk by and not even notice. But it's amazing—this thing that kind of floats 36 feet up in the air and changes with the light."

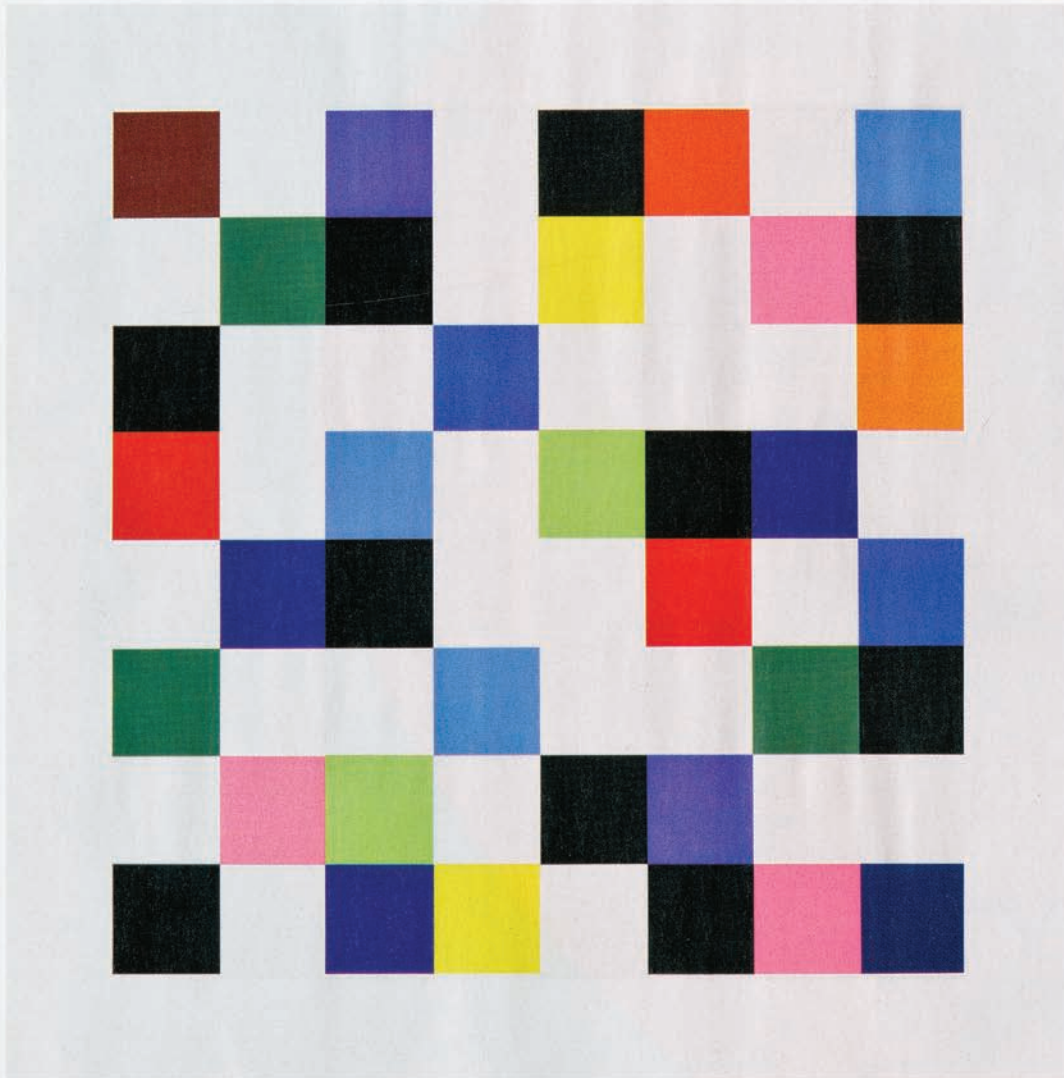
Inside the gallery, visitors will find the latest of Kelly's two-panel relief paintings. Big, bold, finely tuned combinations of yellow and white, blue and green or turquoise and orange, each is composed of a solid-color canvas with surprising contours overlapping a larger rectangular canvas of a contrasting hue. The artist, however, declines to talk about them.

"I want to leave those as a kind of surprise," he says.

SUZANNE MUCHNIC, a staff writer at the Los Angeles Times for more than three decades, now covers the art scene for many publications.

Orange Relief with Blue 2011, oil on canvas, at Matthew Marks Gallery





Colors on a Grid lithograph, 1976, LACMA, Collection of Jordon D. Schnitzer



The hands that give shape to color and color to shape.