

Arts&LEISURE

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True to His Abstraction

At 88, Ellsworth Kelly
Enjoys Renewed Popularity,
As He Continues to Explore
Color, Line and Shape

By CAROL VOGEL

SPENCERTOWN, N.Y.

ELLSWORTH KELLY'S studio here is a sprawling labyrinth of white-walled rooms, some with skylights, some with large windows looking out onto the rolling landscape. The walls are either bare or impeccably hung with a selection of Mr. Kelly's striking painting reliefs. Everything is simple, spare and modern with one exception: at the entrance is a small mustard-yellow ladder-back chair with a multicolored woven straw seat inspired by van Gogh's paintings of his bedroom in Arles.

"I did this in shop class in sixth grade," Mr. Kelly said during a visit one recent wintry afternoon. "It was my first color spectrum."

"The negative," he went on, pointing to the spaces between the slats in the back, "is just as important as the positive."

A classic observation coming from this 88-year-old artist, whose seven-decade career has been an unwavering exploration of shape, line and color in their purest forms. While many other artists of his generation were appropriating images of American flags or movie stars or newspaper clippings, Mr. Kelly was relentlessly immersed in abstraction: creating color spectrums and panel paintings with nothing but a giant curve or rectangle, or making drawings depicting the simple outline of a leaf.

Refusing to be labeled a Minimalist or Abstract Expressionist, he spent decades fighting for attention, while others of his generation — Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns — were grabbing the spotlight.

"Ellsworth never tried to second-guess art history," said Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art. Yet while Mr. Kelly's lifelong focus on abstraction in paintings, sculptures, collages, drawings and prints may not have been a smart career move — there were years, es-

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Ellsworth Kelly at his studio. He remains immersed in abstraction.



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pecially in the 1970s and '80s, when his work went ignored and unsold — now it appears that the tide has turned.

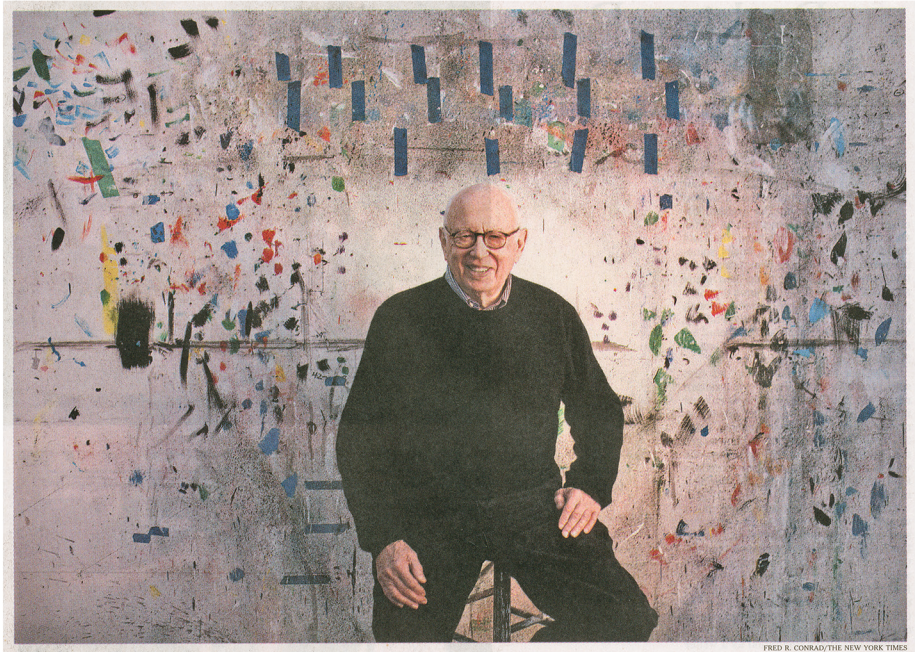
Abstraction is hot again, with canvases by Gerhard Richter fetching astronomical prices at auction and the recent Willem de Kooning retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art was a crowd pleaser. Reflecting on the multiple exhibitions of Damien Hirst's spot paintings that opened this month in Gagosian's 11 galleries around the world, Mr. Kelly said: "He's been able to get a lot of attention, making color and form stand alone. That's something that has taken me decades."

"Time has always been very important in my work," he added. "Tastes have changed recently, and although abstraction has been difficult, people are more open to it now." As a result Mr. Kelly finds himself more in demand than ever before. In July two 18-foot-high wall sculptures were installed on the facade of the American Embassy in Beijing. He is juggling several new sculpture commissions and has a full schedule of museum exhibitions, including one of his wood sculptures at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and a show of black-and-white works that closes this weekend at the Haus der Kunst in Munich and reopens on March 1 at the Museum Wiesbaden. Another exhibition of prints and paintings will open this weekend at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and in June the Metropolitan Museum of Art will offer a show of his plant drawings.

Meanwhile the Chelsea art dealer Matthew Marks turned to Mr. Kelly for the opening of his first gallery in Los Angeles, a former garage in West Hollywood that has been turned into an all-white 3,500-square-foot space. Not only will it be filled with Mr. Kelly's works, but he has transformed the facade with a black sculpture in relief along the top, inspired by a collage and a painting he did in the '50s and '60s.

"Ellsworth has been fearless in his commitment to the limitless possibilities of abstraction," said James Cuno, chief executive and president of the J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles, who first met Mr. Kelly in 1989 and has exhibited and commissioned his work in various museums where Mr. Cuno has been a director, including the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard and the Art Institute of Chicago. "With concentrated imaginative power he has made some of the most beautiful and important paintings of the Modernist era. And he is at the height of his powers, not elegiac but ecstatic, filled with the wonder of seeing the world afresh."

Tearing around his studio in gray flannel pants and sneakers, hampered only by



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Ellsworth Kelly, above, in the area where he paints; near right, his sculpture for the facade of the Matthew Marks Gallery in West Hollywood, inspired in part by his painting, far right; and, below, Mr. Kelly with Gwyneth Paltrow.



JOSHUA WHITE, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

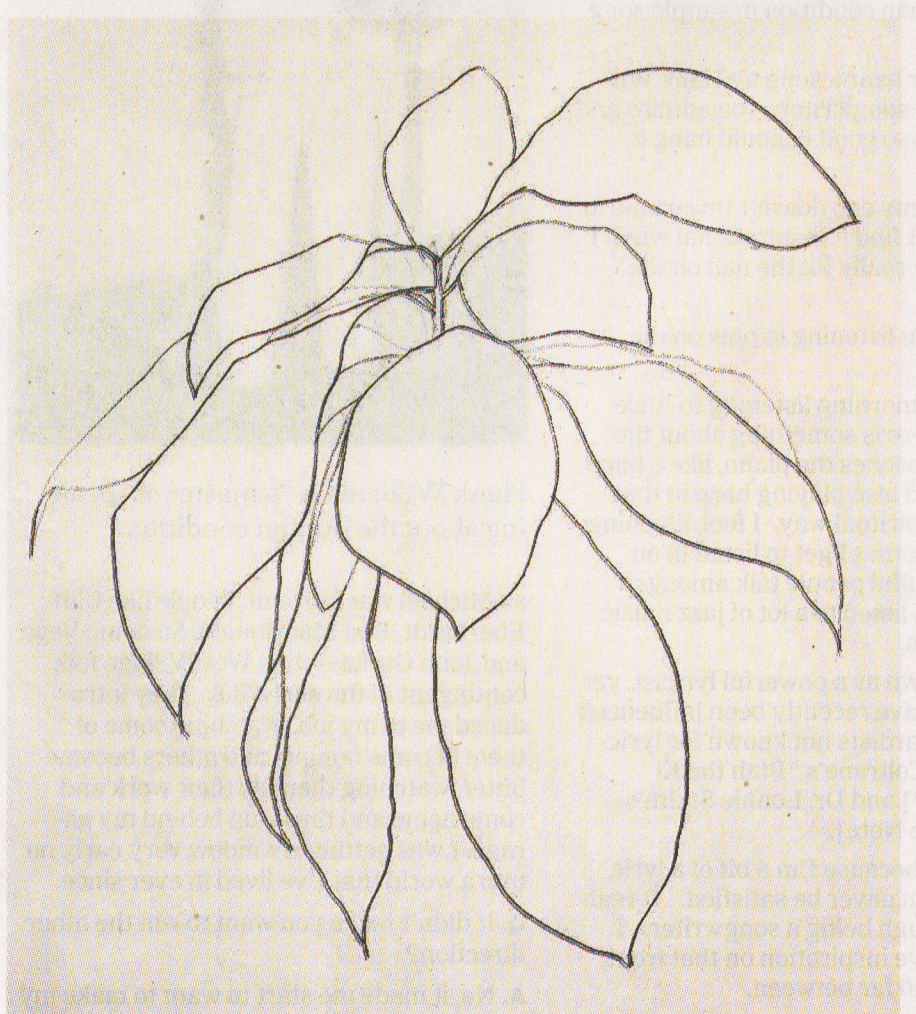


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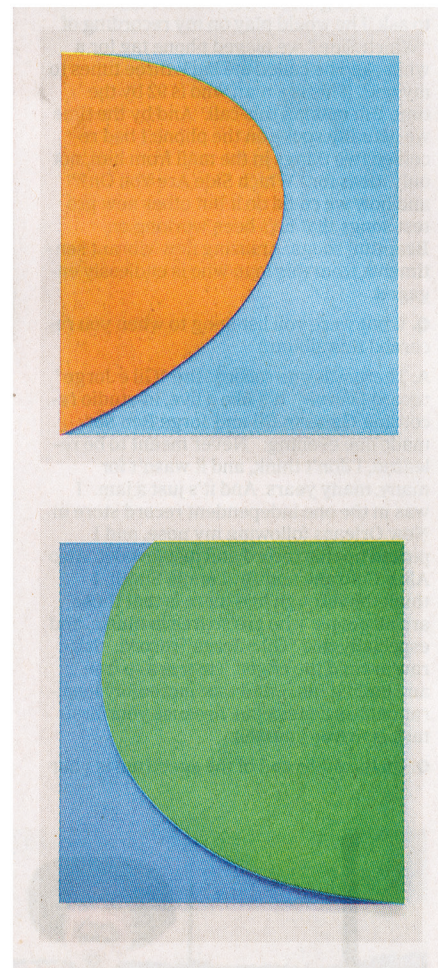
long tubes for the oxygen machine that he is hooked up to because of a recent lung condition — possibly caused by years of inhaling turpentine, oil paint and other materials in his studio — Mr. Kelly was animated. With an almost boyish energy and laser-sharp memory that make him seem a lot younger than his years, he spoke about his work, his recent surge of popularity and his life in this secluded hamlet in upstate New York, a few miles west of Stockbridge, Mass.

In one of the largest rooms he pointed out a brightly splattered area he called his painting wall. Unlike younger artists, including Mr. Hirst and Jeff Koons, who often direct studio assistants, Mr. Kelly creates everything with his own hand. “I wouldn’t feel right doing it any other way,” he said. “Kids do anything these days, but I’m still an old-fashioned painter. Maybe in a few years when I’m too old, I’ll need

Right and below right, 2011 reliefs by Mr. Kelly, and, below, a 1967 drawing of an avocado plant.



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM ELLSWORTH KELLY/MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY



help, but what am I going to do, say to an assistant, put the yellow there?”

Mr. Kelly was staring at a group of painting reliefs — simple forms with dramatic combinations of orange and blue, dark blue and black, green and blue, black and white — that filled the adjacent walls. They were drying, each with long wood strips separating the background canvas from the colored relief panel in front. “I have to wait a week for each to dry,” he said. “Oil takes that long, sometimes longer. I don’t like acrylic because you can’t get the density of color. And with each coat of oil paint the surface gets better and richer.”

Creating these unframed relief paintings, he explained, is his way of “going into the viewer’s space,” adding, “If I painted it all on one canvas, it wouldn’t have the depth. It would be flat.”

“What I’ve made is real — underline the word real,” he added. “It becomes more of an object, something between painting and sculpture.”

Mr. Kelly has been experimenting with the notion of painted reliefs since he lived in Paris in 1949. “I began with cardboard painted reliefs,” he said. “Some of them were all white. And I’ve continued this relief work ever since. I like the relief of Romanesque architecture.”

He draws constantly, sometimes making tiny sketches on a scrap of paper, even a folded cigarette carton picked up on a New York City street because the shape caught his eye. Often he'll save these bits and use them years later as inspiration. Some start out as drawings and over time morph into a painting or a monumental sculpture. The lyrical, folded sculpture outside the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, for example, started out as a three-inch piece of cardboard that developed into a sketch, then a sculpture in wood, then aluminum, then steel, becoming refined with each incarnation. "A shape for a painting could come from the shadow a leaf casts on a branch," said Mr. Marks, his dealer. "He'll draw it over and over again and use it in a painting, a print, a sculpture."

The actress Gwyneth Paltrow is a big fan of Mr. Kelly's work and has been collecting his plant drawings since 1997, "as soon as I got my first paycheck," she said in a telephone interview. "There are certain artists you have a visceral reaction to, and Ellsworth is one of them." The two met when she was in a play in Williamstown, Mass. "He came backstage and introduced himself," she recalled.

Mr. Kelly grew up in Oradell, N.J., the second of three sons. His father was an insurance company executive. After serving in the Army during World War II he moved to Boston, where he qualified under the G.I. Bill for tuition at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. There he studied old master painting and drawing and taught night classes in art in the Roxbury neighborhood, in exchange for room and board.

He moved to Paris in 1948 and got to know John Cage, Merce Cunningham, the Surrealist artist Jean Arp and the abstract sculptor Constantin Brancusi, whose simplification of natural forms had a lasting effect on him.

He moved to New York in 1954, settling in a 19th-century loft on an old dock called Coenties Slip, near Wall Street. At the time artists living nearby — like Robert Indiana, Barnett Newman, Rauschenberg and Mr. Johns — were creating pioneering work that bridged Abstract Expressionist and the Pop and Minimalism of the 1960s. The Abstract painter Agnes Martin lived in the same building, and the two became close friends and exchanged ideas about their work.

During these years Mr. Kelly created single canvases of hand-drawn shapes that were different from his Paris paintings, which were mostly panels, each canvas a separate color. He also joined several powerful galleries: Betty Parsons, then Sidney Janis and later Leo Castelli. Although he got some attention, he was eclipsed by bigger stars like Rauschenberg and Mr. Johns.

In 1970 he decided to abandon the city's flourishing art scene, putting down roots here, where he still lives with Jack Shear, a photographer. In the ensuing decades he has worked steadily, if quietly. Despite some ups and downs his art has been purchased by museums and collectors around the world. He has also had shows at numerous galleries and museums, including a giant retrospective in 1996 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York that traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Tate in London and the Haus der Kunst.

Mr. Marks, who has been his dealer for 20 years, recalled that when he first began representing Mr. Kelly, a German dealer said to him: "Why did you take on Ellsworth Kelly? He's so boring."

"I ignored it," Mr. Marks recalled.

An obsessive archivist, Mr. Kelly has kept examples of his work from every decade of his career, studying them continually for inspiration, as a way to move forward. "He's the last artist to repeat himself," Mr. Storr said. "But he always comes back to his basic vocabulary: surface, scale, color, image. And he always gets it as simple as he can."

The facade of Mr. Marks's new Los Angeles gallery, for instance, was inspired by "Study for Black and White Panels," a collage he made while living in Paris in 1954, and a painting, "Black Over White," created in New York 12 years later. Both are predominantly white with a black bar that floats in relief on the upper portion of the all-white stucco facade.

"He's making art as good as the art that inspired him when he was in Paris," Mr. Storr said. Comparing him to Mr. Johns, perhaps the only other major artist of his generation who is actively working today, Mr. Storr continued: "To a great extent Jasper is a literary artist. His work is coded with secret messages. Ellsworth is purely a visual artist. With Ellsworth there is no message, just an experience."