

# The New York Times

## Abstract to the End

Ellsworth Kelly's last works demonstrate his devotion to form, color and plane.

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

SPENCERTOWN, N.Y. — On the eve of his 90th birthday in 2013, Ellsworth Kelly told me that working in his studio in Columbia County was “as exciting for me as ever.”

“I have had some physical challenges related to aging, though I accept it,” the painter said. “But it has given me an added surge for continuing to create new work.”

Though suffering from emphysema in his last several years — a result of longtime exposure to turpentine fumes — Kelly was still remarkably productive and immersed in his lifelong investigation of form, color and plane. He died in his home here on Dec. 27, 2015, two days after he and Jack Shear, his partner of 32 years, hosted Jasper Johns and Terry Winters, among others, for

Christmas. Kelly had 10 paintings on his studio walls completed that year, with a freshly gessoed panel ready to work on.

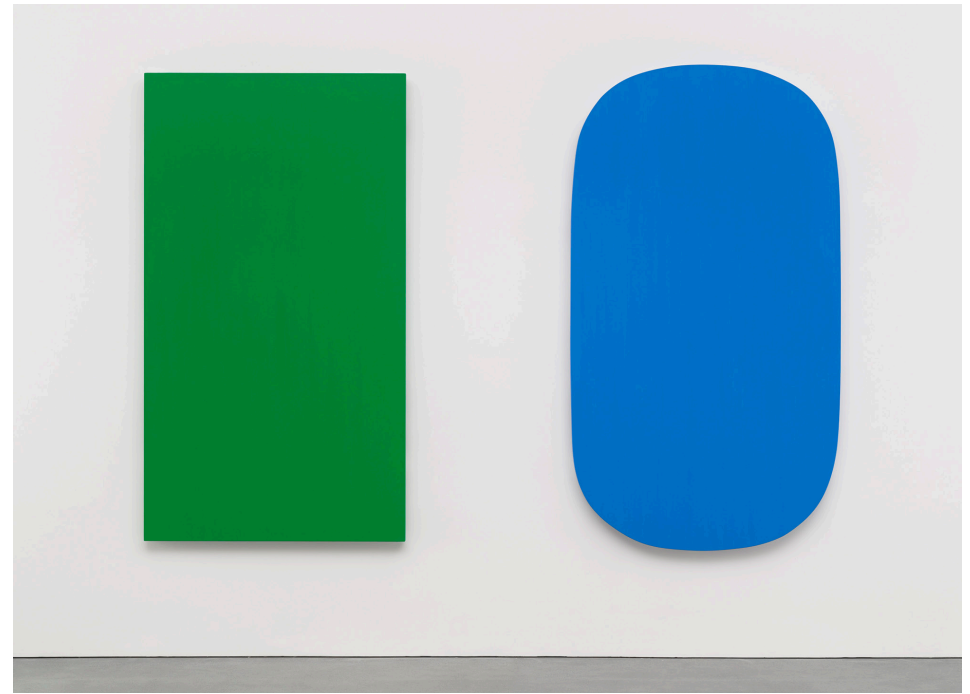
These paintings, some reworkings of much earlier canvases, go on view for the first time on Friday in “Ellsworth Kelly: Last Paintings,” at the Matthew Marks Gallery on West 22nd Street in Chelsea. A companion show next door, “Ellsworth Kelly: Plant Drawings,” includes 25 images of flowers, fruit, vegetables and leaves dating from 1949 to 2008, most never before exhibited and often drawn without the pencil’s ever leaving the page.

Last month, before the paintings were shipped to the gallery, Mr. Shear welcomed me to the expansive studio and offices here in Spencertown, from which he runs the Ellsworth Kelly Foundation. On one wall



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Above, Kelly in his studio in Spencertown, N.Y., in 2012.



ELLSWORTH KELLY, VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

“Diptych: Green Blue” (2015), from “Ellsworth Kelly: Last Paintings.”

are side-by-side portraits of the two men taken by Robert Mapplethorpe in the 1980s after they met in Los Angeles, where Mr. Shear, three decades Kelly’s junior, worked as a photographer. Mr. Shear moved to Spencertown in 1984 in what the two men termed “an experiment,” which became a lasting marriage.

In the studio, nary a paintbrush has been moved. A tall rolling library ladder remains in the corner, draped with Kelly’s paint-splattered work clothes. On a well-ordered desk, a legal pad topped by a ruler and a pencil sits near the small device with which the artist measured his oxygen level throughout the day. (He referred to the oxygen tanks he needed as his “tail.”)

In the artist’s brilliantly illuminated studio hung a two-panel painting titled “White

Over Black III,” a white vertical rectangle overlapping a slightly larger black one. “It has this doorlike quality to it,” said Mr. Shear, noting how the white shape perceptually “flips” between projecting forward and receding. “Ellsworth likes to play games with vision more than anything,” said Mr. Shear, who still speaks of his partner in the present tense.

On another wall, a green rectangular panel hung beside a blue oval. The diptych recalls Kelly’s 1963 canvas “Green Blue Red.” By eliminating the red background, Kelly changed the dynamic and integrated the white wall as a compositional element.

Mr. Marks, the gallerist, traced the source of both paintings to a 1950 photograph that Kelly took, “Trapeze Swings, Meschers,” showing a right-angled swing



hanging in a jungle gym beside a curved swing. “It’s a huge leap to get from that” to the paintings, Mr. Marks said, “but he saw things in nature that inspired his work.”

Kelly had been an avid bird-watcher since his boyhood, and Mr. Marks connected the artist’s recurring use of the arrow form with his early study of bird shapes in Audubon watercolors.

Kelly developed his rigorous approach to abstraction as a young artist in 1948, pivoting away from the psychologically charged paintings of the Abstract Expressionists who dominated the New York scene. He went to Paris for six years and began isolating interesting shapes he found in plants, buildings, shadows and reflections — which he then blew up in scale and painted in flat, monochromatic hues.

While artists, including Monet and Picasso, have often had a dramatic shift in their late work, Ann Temkin, the chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, was struck by how “remarkably true” Kelly remained to the vocabulary he had established seven decades earlier.

“You might think, at this point, he would have exhausted these formats or colors or ideas, but the answer with these last paintings is a resounding no,” said Ms. Temkin, who was given a preview of the exhibition catalog.

Mr. Shear pointed to the artist’s main work table, with a notebook open to thumbnail sketches of four joined-panel paintings. “He didn’t really struggle with painting much, but towards the end, he was really going back and forth on these paintings,” he said, showing the finished works in an adjacent room.

One has a large white arrow overlapping the edges of a black rectangle and slicing it into five triangles.

The sketches show that Kelly originally had the arrow completely contained within the border of a larger panel. “He didn’t think there was enough tension,” Mr. Shear said.

James Rondeau, the director of the Art Institute of Chicago, said that with a “lesser artist, returning to one’s own past to revise it would represent the absence of creativity.” Previewing the new paintings in the



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAUREN LANCASTER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jack Shear in Ellsworth Kelly’s studio

catalog, he added, “With Ellsworth, it’s precisely the opposite.”

Mr. Marks, who paid a work call to Spencertown six days before the artist died, said with affection, “He was just as tough as he had always been.”

Kelly’s confidence was pivotal to his dealer’s career. In 1994, when Mr. Marks was trading his small drawings gallery on Madi-

son Avenue for a huge space on West 22nd Street, naysayers questioned whether anyone would come over to 10th Avenue. “That’s what they said about Soho,” Kelly argued. “Do good shows; they’ll go there.”

Items in the studio left as they were the last time Kelly painted



Eight hundred people came to Mr. Marks’s inaugural exhibition of Ellsworth Kelly paintings. The current two exhibitions, with works priced between \$3 million and \$5 million, bring the gallery’s tally to 19 solo shows of the painter’s work.

Mr. Winters, 67, was one of many young art students at the time who felt Kelly’s influence in the way that he “rooted his abstraction in the real world.”

He added that “the drive and the level of accomplishment in the last years is sort of remarkable.”

Mr. Shear saw the struggle others didn’t. “These last paintings took more time to do because of his health,” he said. “In his last three months, Ellsworth started signing drawings from the ’50s and ’60s that he never signed.”

It was a harbinger of his acceptance of the end. After Kelly had died, Mr. Marks said that his artist friends all told him the same thing: “You do know that is every artist’s hope — basically dying with a paintbrush in your hand.”



ELLSWORTH KELLY, VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

“White Angle Over Black” (2015)