MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

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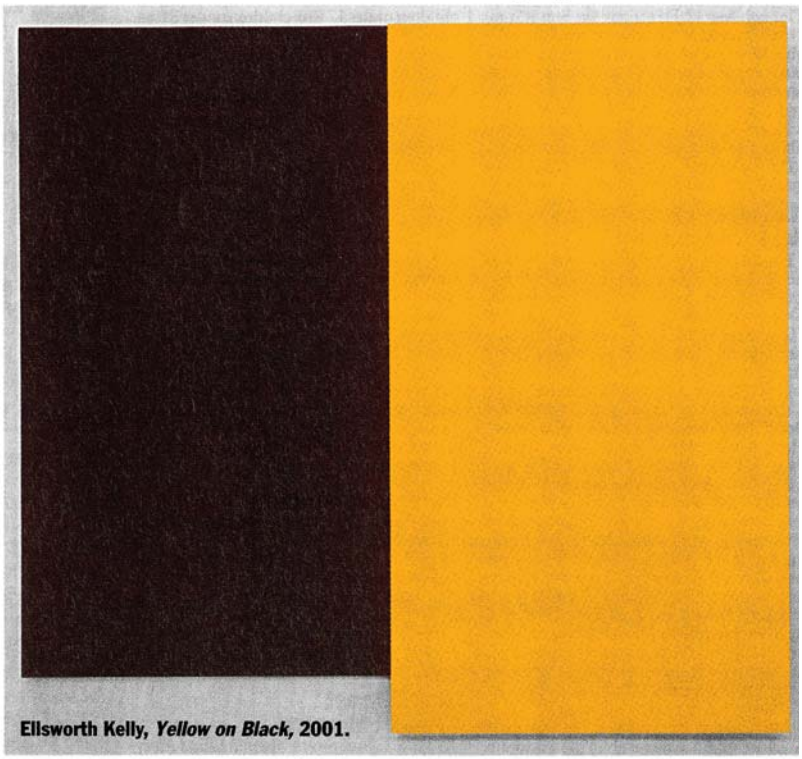
Reviews

In living color

Ellsworth Kelly's latest paintings show why modernism remains alluring today

By **Tim Griffin**



Ellsworth Kelly, *Yellow on Black*, 2001.

Ten years from now, the New York art world will have some explaining to do about the modernist motifs that swept through town at the turn of the millennium. After all, the years 2000 and 2001 still convey vaguely futuristic overtones when you say them aloud. So why are so many artists and institutions looking back to the mid-20th century for aesthetic inspiration? This season opened with Jorge Pardo's Dia installation, in which cerulean and tangerine tiles skim the floors beneath furniture designs by Alvar Aalto, Jena Risom and Marcel Breuer; forerunner Bridget Riley's canvases, invoking nostalgia for '50s–jet-set glamour, soon appeared upstairs (where the show remains on view). And next week, audiences will find themselves summering with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the master of architecture in the International Style, who appears in retrospective shows at both the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art.

The best way to explain why modernism (stripped of its ideological tenets) resonates so deeply is by example, and there is no better instance of the movement's current appeal than the latest shows by Ellsworth Kelly, presented by Matthew Marks in his two Chelsea galleries. The artist, who is 78, recently looked at work that he'd made in the 1950s—a time when Le Corbusier was among those admiring his paintings—and decided to produce a new series of related works that, for all their roots in the past, are as contemporary in feel as anything in the galleries right now.

"Ellsworth Kelly: Relief Paintings, 1954–2001" features a specific kind of painting that Kelly has returned to throughout his career: works in which two monochromatic panels of varying sizes—but always within simple, rectilinear geometries—are conjoined in any number of ways. In *Yellow on Blue,* one panel, laid atop the other, projects slightly farther from the wall's surface than its companion; in *Blue Tablet,* one panel is a fraction longer than the other, thus hanging lower toward the floor. Two panels feature the same color in

the more intimately scaled *Yellow Relief* (1954–55), as the top section is roughly half the size of the one underneath. But other paintings pair hues from anywhere along the spectrum, whether barely or radically differentiated, creating a tenuous contrast of red and orange—or a stark juxtaposition of yellow and black that makes the colors themselves seem to leap off the wall. The optical, in other words, verges on the physical: If you're going to establish a push-pull of colors, why not literally make them push and pull by establishing them as divergent planes?

The yellow-and-black example is one of Kelly's canvases from the past year, which are large, and seem more overtly about outward movement; the juxtaposition of panels has become more kinetic, with one slipping or sliding over the other. One all-yellow combination is even wedged at a 90-degree angle, with two rectangular strips joined at the ends of the panels. In *Red on Red,* a panel partially laid atop another in a diagonal composition suggests both dynamic action and perspectival space.

It should. In fact, the piece is based on a real-life observance, an abstraction of two red, fluttering construction flags that once caught Kelly's attention out of the corner of his eye—and the resulting work represents a distillation of experience into simple form that echoes throughout the show. Proust once wrote of a character who stands before Vermeer's *View of Delft* and regrets that his writing never took on the luminous beauty of a single patch of yellow across a slanted rooftop. Kelly, on the other hand, has spent his entire life going after, and getting, that single patch of urban color and its psychological afterimage—filtering visual encounters through the slow bend of memory, turning them over in his mind, distilling their hues and contours until they operate again in architectural space. Each painting offers an idealized, reduced form, so that color reverberates through the gallery on the cusp of sculptural force, demonstrating just how malleable our experience in three dimensions can be. (You could say that fellow modernist Bridget Riley assembles visual information to create the same effect of palpable weight. But her cornea-crunching, oscillating fields have less to do with Platonic ideals, and more to do with Heracleitus and his relativist statement: "You never step into the same river twice.")

An installation of Kelly's work at the gallery's 24th Street space proves that the artist doesn't need seductive color to achieve his effects. These large, gray paintings from the '70s (which were originally conceived as antiwar gestures) fall into the general architectural scheme of the gallery. Take a moment, when no one else is present, to see how the paintings meld with the color of the concrete floor, or how—with their minimal slants and curves—they press gently against the room's rectilinearity to create a subtle, pleasurable disorientation. That sense is, ultimately, what modernism's glory days and our turn of the millennium have in common: the unfamiliar experiences created by an evolving environment around us. The previous era had its jetliners, videophones and reflective sheets of plate glass, while ours has iMacs, cell phones and the kind of film-coated glass you'll find at the Issey Miyake store. But Kelly's work, like all the best modernism, will touch on the constant fluctuations and variability of space in any age.

"Ellsworth Kelly: Relief Paintings, 1954–2001" and "Ellsworth Kelly: Gray" are on view at Matthew Marks Gallery through June 29 (see Chelsea & vicinity).

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