Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923, Newburgh, New York)  
by Sarah Roberts

Ellsworth Kelly’s work is about the act of pure looking. Each of his vibrantly colored canvases and perfectly balanced forms blazes brilliantly, the optic equivalent of a clarion bell ringing out in the silence. To explain his thoughts on art as a process of looking for visual truths, Kelly has pointed to a 1932 text by photographer Edward Weston in which Weston states that a photograph “is not an interpretation, a biased opinion of what nature should be, but a revelation—an absolute, impersonal recognition of the significance of facts.”¹ This same description might be applied to Kelly’s body of work. He creates paintings and sculptures that draw on nature and things observed, but he does not offer representational depictions or interpretations of these real-world subjects.² Instead, Kelly attempts to reveal something about their totality, recognizing and clarifying the significance of visual facts by executing works of art that reflect a singular lucidity and restraint.

After serving in the U.S. Army from 1943 to 1945, Kelly enrolled at the Boston Museum School (now the School of the Museum of Fine Arts), where the course of study was focused on traditional figure drawing and easel painting, but with a strong German Expressionist bent. Although painter Karl Zerbe led the faculty, the figure who had the greatest impact on Kelly in this period was the German artist Max Beckmann, who visited the school in 1948. Beckmann’s sure handling of contrasting colors and abrupt strokes of black and white resonated with Kelly, as did the elder painter’s use of the triptych as a compositional strategy. Later that year, having grown restless with the limited curriculum in Boston, Kelly left for Paris, where he would live until 1954.

During his six years in France, Kelly developed an approach to making art that raises the act of looking—whether at nature, people, or architecture—to an unprecedented level of refinement. The foundations of this approach are two-fold. First, while in France Kelly arrived at a distinctive palette based on primary, secondary, and tertiary hues with which to conduct sensitive explorations of color interaction, as evidenced in works such as Spectrum I (1953). Second, he developed a mode of drawing that, as with the trees in Tuileries (1949), aims not at the faithful reproduction of the artist’s subjects, but at an abstract investigation of the arc of their shapes and contours through the surrounding space.³ Kelly’s attention to the interrelationships of forms and space is also reflected in his deep interest in architecture, which similarly took hold during his years in France. Fascinated by Romanesque churches and modernist buildings such as Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation (1945), Kelly drew and painted architectural fragments such as windows, chimneys, and awnings, as well as patterns of shadows and stonework, always focusing on the basic visual information that could be extracted from their elegant geometries.⁴ Kelly’s decision to pull directly from the world around him freed him from the need to compose a picture: “The subject was there already made, and I could take from everything; it all belonged to me.”⁵ His use of found subject matter eliminated inflections of personal expression, and his focus on fragmentary depictions offered a path away from representation of the world and toward abstract yet incisive articulations of form.
Kelly’s desire to avoid personal expression also led him to experiment with chance techniques, an approach he first encountered in the work of John Cage and Jean Arp. Kelly met Cage in June 1949 and was bolstered by his example and encouragement. But it was Arp, whom Kelly met the following February, who most directly influenced him. Kelly was particularly struck by the duo-collages Arp had created with Sophie Taeuber-Arp in the mid-1910s. These collaborative works feature cutouts in random arrangements that were sometimes generated by first scattering the paper forms on the floor. Kelly began to use cut-up drawings to produce chance collages of his own. He translated the particularly successful collages into paintings, a practice that culminated in Cité (1951).

The initial sketch for Cité was inspired by a dream Kelly had while staying with friends who lived in the Pavillon Suisse designed by Le Corbusier in 1930 for the Cité Internationale Universitaire in Paris (fig. 3). Kelly began the work by brushing rich black ink onto a large sheet of paper to create an abstract black-and-white striped drawing that both approximated the large, irregularly banded, black-and-white mural he remembered from his dream and echoed the rhythmic linear facade of Le Corbusier’s building. He then cut the paper into twenty equal squares and rearranged them randomly into a new composition. Encouraged by the results, Kelly replicated the pattern on a slightly larger scale using custom-made wood panels that he had painted in glossy black and white. The finished work’s undulating stripes flicker against the edges of each panel, confounding the viewer’s efforts to distinguish between figure and ground. The halting rhythm of the stripes exerts a visual tension that both activates the surface and unifies it in a vibrant whole. Building on both drawing and collage, using chance techniques, and employing a complex interplay of abutted forms, Cité encapsulates the strategies that Kelly had been developing in France.

After returning to the United States in 1954, Kelly set up his studio in New York City. Although his few exhibitions in France had brought scant attention or sales, he quickly found success in New York, and by the late 1950s he had gained significant international recognition. He continued the lines of inquiry he had begun in France with multipanel works, such as Gaza (1956), and boldly colored reliefs that increasingly played with the impact of color on spatial perception. For Kelly, the use of abutting monochrome panels distanced his works from traditional easel painting and made them more object-like. He has stated that “the panels became the form and the wall the ground.” In the decade that followed, Kelly rapidly expanded his formal vocabulary to include slightly askew rectangles; soft ellipses, arcs, and curves; and crisp loops. He also deepened his exploration of the sophisticated palette of intense, spectral colors that he has continued to favor throughout his career. During the 1960s and early 1970s this repertoire of shapes and colors was used to alternately heighten and suppress figure-ground relationships through meticulous adjustments of scale and hue. Single silhouetted forms, often leaflike or organic in feeling, pop against distinct backgrounds in works such as Red White (1962). By comparison, the carefully calibrated interactions among the colors and shapes of Red Blue Green (1963) result in a visual equilibrium.

Kelly’s freestanding sculptures seek a similar balance through subtle modulations of forms in space. Often consisting of gently folded or curved planar shapes, the sculptures can create the
sense that they have sprung to life and hopped down from the walls to explore the space around them. Some of the sculptures are evenly coated with color; others, such as *Untitled* (1982–83), employ simple finishes that reveal the inherent tones of the metals or woods from which they were made. By stripping away color, Kelly both focuses the viewer’s attention on the ways these works intervene in their environments and highlights the dramatic, shifting silhouettes one encounters when moving around them.

A major group of black-and-white multipanel paintings—begun in the 1970s and returned to periodically over the following thirty years—also set aside vibrant color in favor of creating conversations among forms of varying scales. At first glance, the Fisher Collection’s *Black Panel with White Curve I* (1989) reads as a simple, rational composition of familiar shapes. Prolonged looking, however, reveals a peculiar tension between the two compositional elements as it becomes clear that everything is not as it at first appeared. The curve is not quite a semicircle, and its straight edge is slightly longer than the height of the black rectangle, the bottom edge of which hits the curve somewhat below its center point. As a result, from some angles and viewing distances the rectangle seems to be shedding the curve, while at others the rectangle appears to anchor it. Kelly arrives at these mysterious effects not through exacting measurements or mathematical ratios, but by intuitively playing with proportion and the complementary visual weight of the black and white masses. The black-and-white works delight in—and ask for heightened attention to—complex and sometimes minute aesthetic choices.

The high-keyed palette and finely honed, selective approach to abstraction that Kelly developed in the 1950s and 1960s laid foundations for the development of Minimalism, Color Field painting, hard-edge abstraction, and even Pop art, with artists as diverse as Blinky Palermo, Robert Indiana, and Richard Tuttle acknowledging Kelly’s impact on their thinking. If his methods stimulated the work of the next generation of artists, they have also fueled his own decades-long exploration of the multitude of remarkably rich visual experiences that can be prompted with the sparest of means. Kelly asks viewers to stop thinking of works of art as being about something and to invest, as he has, in the act and art of looking.

[Notes]


7. *Study for “Cité”* (1951) is in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.


9. Ibid.