



Art Review: Ellsworth Kelly's Singular Forms

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by Pac Pobric

"Ellsworth Kelly: Singular Forms, 1966-2009" at Mnuchin Gallery in New York City

On View through June 1, 2013

There are few artists who have consistently made strong work throughout the entirety of their careers, and Ellsworth Kelly is one of them. This isn't to say that all of his works are masterpieces, but Kelly has successfully honed in on a specific set of problems and has articulated them more clearly than any of his contemporaries.

At this point, the artist has earned wide recognition for his achievements, and with his 90th birthday approaching on May 31st, a series of New York exhibitions at Matthew Marks, the Museum of Modern Art, and Mnuchin Gallery are all heralding his success.

Still, despite all the accolades, Kelly's work remains more or less poorly understood. It isn't true, as has been alleged, that Kelly invented the shaped canvas. (That honor, it seems, goes to Robert Delaunay.) Nor—and this is a much more egregious misconception, and more widespread as well—is Kelly a Minimalist.



Yellow Piece by Ellsworth Kelly, 1966. Acrylic on canvas, 75 x 75 inches. Private Collection. Photo by Jerry L. Thompson. © Ellsworth Kelly. Courtesy of the artist and Mnuchin Gallery.

Certainly his work shares certain characteristics with the art of Donald Judd or Dan Flavin. All three were interested, at varying points, in ridding their art of subjective influence. For Flavin and Judd, that meant machine manufacture, but Kelly remained committed to using his own hands. His approach was different: "Instead of making a picture that was an interpretation of a thing seen, or a picture of invented content, I found an object and presented it as itself alone," the artist said in 1969.

Especially while in France between the years 1948 and 1954, Kelly developed an entire set of strategies that allowed him to make something *as it already was* instead of trying to invent something new.

Yet invention slipped in through the back door, as it does for all great artists. By the time Kelly made his first shaped painting in 1966 with *Yellow Piece*, the first picture in “Ellsworth Kelly: Singular Forms, 1966-2009” at Mnuchin Gallery, it seems to have become obvious to him that he *could* invent great pictures.

Subjectivity crept back into his practice, and making art was no longer a matter of re-creating something: it became compositional, which is to say that Kelly again began to make decisions about his works. Which way should the angles curve? Should the sides be painted? What color suits a certain shape? The shaped canvas brought Kelly back to invention and further from the Minimalists than he had ever been.

What’s so brilliant about Kelly’s shaped works is how deceptive they are. Even the pieces that appear to be square are not; they’re not even parallelograms. Slight curves in one direction or another throw each of these sculptures and paintings into an uncanny relationship with the simple geometric shapes they seemingly mimic. This is especially true of the works on metal. What’s even more remarkable—and this is the core of their success—is that it’s impossible to remember exactly what a work looks like after you’ve walked away from it. You have to see it to believe it.



Blue Curves by Ellsworth Kelly, 2009. Photo by Jerry L. Thompson.
© Ellsworth Kelly and Courtesy of the artist and Mnuchin Gallery.

Not that they are all perfect. *Green Panel* from 1980, for example, is a bold attempt to build a canvas that sits somewhere between the pentagon and the triangle, but it seems to get lost somewhere between the two. Certainly it’s a very particular shape, as are the best of Kelly’s works, but its specificity isn’t matched by its aesthetic affect. Its major redeeming quality is its color, which hovers somewhere between jade and (appropriately enough) kelly green, but color alone doesn’t make a good painting, especially when it comes to shaped pictures.

Yellow Piece itself feels somewhat provisional, which seems to be confirmed by the fact that it’s the only painting in the show done in acrylic (the later pieces are all oils). The painting may be important as a gateway to Kelly’s shaped paintings but, taken by itself, it seems preliminary.

But these two pieces are only truly weak in relation to how strong Kelly’s best works are. It’s not quite obvious whether *Blue Curves* from 2009 or *Grey Panel II* from 1977 should take best in show, but it is curious how different they seem from one another: one a pale grey “rectangle” and the other a deep blue “B”. Still, these two works circle back on one another, at least in terms of affect. What draws them close is their grace under pressure.

If these paintings, like all of Kelly’s shaped canvases, seem simple at first sight, that’s because Kelly has already done the hardest work. That 32 years separates the paintings should be proof enough of how radically Kelly’s art has changed within the relatively strict confines of the shaped monochrome. Invention within that limit may be his greatest discovery.

-Pac Pobric

BASIC INFO: “Ellsworth Kelly: Singular Forms 1966 - 2009” opened on April 18 and remains on view through June 1 at Mnuchin Gallery, 45 East 78 Street, New York, NY 10075.

www.mnuchingallery.com.

To see more artworks in the show, click here: [“IN PICTURES: Ellsworth Kelly: Singular Forms 1966 - 2009”](#)

Pac Pobric is an art critic from Brooklyn, NY, and an editorial assistant at The Art Newspaper.

HAMPTONS INSIDER: Ellsworth Kelly and Jack Youngerman met in Paris in the late-'40s while studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Both artists worked in Paris until the mid-'50s. Afterwards, their paths crossed again in New York City with each working in studios that were part of a connected community of artists that included Kelly, Youngerman, Agnes Martin and James Rosenquist, according to [MoMA](#).

Youngerman has lived and worked in Bridgehampton, NY for the last few decades. His work is currently the subject of solo shows in East Hampton, NY (LongHouse Reserve and The Drawing Room) and New York City (Washburn Gallery).

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