



# CRITIC'S VIEW: Masters of Geometric Abstract Painting on View in Chelsea

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by Charles A. Riley II

Three major galleries in Chelsea are devoting their skylit spaces to masters of geometric abstract painting in our time: Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Mangold and David Novros. Touring this notably similar trio of exhibitions—and comparing the exquisite surfaces, sculptural shaped canvases and inventive color choices—induces a combination of awe and reverent attention to the details of the works in all their uncanny perfection.

## Ellsworth Kelly at Matthew Marks

There are nine masterful canvases in this deeply moving show of [Ellsworth Kelly's](#) final paintings, but the sublime exemplar of Kelly's art among them is *White Diagonal Curve*, which carves its elegant star turn in the final gallery against a white wall that nearly matches its radiance. Just the shadow of its straight lower edge is enough to lend the sculptural presence that a shaped canvas confers.

These paintings, left in the studio when the artist died in December 2015, have a loaded history. Kelly would revisit earlier works, from 1954 in the case of one three-panel painting in the show, sometimes eliminating colored elements and letting the white of the wall complete the form. With its sensuous curves, the archly precise culmination of the pointed black background element in *White Form Over Black* is perfectly tapered to the space of the painting.

The most prominent and joyful work, a tribute to Kelly's indomitable energy in the studio just weeks before his death, is *Diptych Green Blue*, hung according to his wishes with a specific gap between the two elements no matter how large the wall (in this case, an immense expanse facing the viewer as he or she enters the show). As a bonus, next door at the other Matthew Marks gallery space on the street, a group of Kelly's open-line plant drawings (some in pencil, others traced with a delicate brush) offer a reminder of the deep commitment of this abstract genius to drawing from nature.



"Diptych: Green Blue" by Ellsworth Kelly, 2015. Oil on canvas, two panels, 80 x 114 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery.

Kelly died at age 92, just two days after hosting a Christmas dinner for [Jasper Johns](#), [Terry Winters](#) and other friends. The catalogue offers photographs of Kelly's Spencertown studio as he left it, including a freshly gessoed canvas ready for his masterful attention.

"Ellsworth Kelly: Last Paintings," May 5 - June 24, 2017 at Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 W 22nd Street

"Ellsworth Kelly: Plant Drawings," May 5 - June 24, 2017 at Matthew Marks Gallery, 526 W 22nd Street. [www.matthewmarks.com](http://www.matthewmarks.com).

## Robert Mangold at Pace Gallery

Circuits of black racing over gorgeous tracts of blue, green, and red (in acrylic), [Robert Mangold's](#) expertly traced loops and ellipses are extraordinary freehand displays of a virtuoso who has been steering his course along shaped canvases for five decades.

The most popular large work is likely to be the fast-paced *Triple Square Loop* made in 2015 (the same year as the Kelly paintings), but I found myself drawn to the tighter, more ascetic paintings with their more deliberate treatment of the curves.

Mangold's *Three Squares Within a Double Square* is a divinely refined work in grey against a white wall that floats the negative spaces of the punched-out squares against the black interior lines with an equilibrium only a master's sensibility can achieve.

There are works on paper in the third gallery, and these are just as polished as the paintings. Nothing emerges from Mangold's studio that undermines the effect of precision.

"Robert Mangold: Paintings and Works on Paper, 2013 - 2017," May 5 - June 17, 2017 at Pace Gallery, 510 West 25<sup>th</sup> Street. [www.pacegallery.com](http://www.pacegallery.com).



"Two Open Squares Within a Green Area" by Robert Mangold, 2016. Acrylic and black pencil on canvas, 48 x 96 inches. © 2017 Robert Mangold /Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph by Kerry Ryan McFate, courtesy of Pace Gallery.

## David Novros at Paula Cooper Gallery

Vast in scale, the brilliant and powerful [David Novros](#) multipartite paintings from the 1970s are as dynamic as geometric abstraction can get.

More than 25 feet long, *Lent Painting* (1975) uses 10 expressively painted panels in a frieze-like

formation, heavily reliant on right angles, to transport the viewer. Motion is essential. As the artist observes in a gallery press release: “My strategies came by way of making shapes that would move along a wall, and allow a viewer to have a kinesthetic experience.”

Even more dynamic than the *Lent Painting*, the *Frog Altar* (also 1975) lavishly lays on the rich blues and greens in an intense chromaticism that reaches the eye of the passers-by on 21st Street.



“Untitled (Frog Altar)” by David Novros, 1975. Oil on canvas, 84 x 168 x 2 inches overall. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery.

Novros is not as well known in New York, where he lives currently, as Kelly or Mangold. Born in Los Angeles in 1941, his early stardom came at Park Place Gallery in New York, and his work is at the Menil Collection in Houston, where one unforgettable exhibition juxtaposed his work with that of [Brice Marden](#) and [Mark Rothko](#).

“David Novros,” April 27 - June 2, 2017 at Paula Cooper Gallery, 534 West 21st Street. [www.paulacoopergallery.com](http://www.paulacoopergallery.com).

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