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Ellsworth Kelly CALIFORNIA DOUBLE FEATURE

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

For half a century, the artist **Ellsworth Kelly** (b. 1923) has been acclaimed for his clean, clear forms of specific and brilliant color. His precise and confident approach is best known in paintings, but can be seen as well in his drawings, sculptures and, it turns out, in his prints. Despite its title, the exhibition "Ellsworth Kelly: Prints and Paintings," on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through Apr. 22, 2012, features only a handful of paintings and one sculpture-- but it is the artist's first print retrospective since 1987.

Of more than 100 prints, most were drawn from the holdings of Jordan Schnitzer, a dedicated collector of contemporary prints who lives in Portland, Ore. Schnitzer, who published the catalogue raisonné of Kelly prints, also produced *Letters to Ellsworth*, a lovely volume featuring the prints included in the show along with letters written to the artist, now 88, by a range of curators, critics, collectors and friends, including Agnes Gund, Dave Hickey, Bruce Guenther and Dorothy Lichtenstein, with photographs by Sidney Felsen. If such boundless admiration were devoted to a lesser artist, it might be embarrassing, but since it is instead devoted to Kelly, nobody can fault it.

Kelly, who discovered the art by **Joan Miró**, **Constantin Brancusi** and **Jean Arp** while he was living in the South of France in the 1940s and '50s,



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Ellsworth Kelly
Colors on a Grid
1976
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demonstrates a confident mastery of shape and color that is well-suited to the serial nature of making prints. The show was organized and thoughtfully installed by LACMA curators Stephanie Barron and Britt Salvesen, who also contributed their own letters to the new book. Instead of taking a chronological approach to installation, they instead hung Kelly's work according to its curves, grids and fans, and one large gallery is devoted to juxtaposing his works in black and white.

There, his well-known exercises in geometry hang alongside his lithographs of leaves and flowers -- line drawings of grape leaves or camellias -- and light reflecting off the surfaces of rivers from the Amazon to the Thames. These are not a departure from abstraction, but rather a bridge between the natural and abstract worlds.

In the geometric series, superficially simple motifs reoccur, but rarely in exactly the same way. Modulations in color change the perception of form and vice versa, as the slightest shift in line or intensity of hue dramatically alters viewers' perception of something as simple as a red square over blue, or blue over red.

Though based in New York, Kelly has a lengthy history with the city of Los Angeles, having showed with the Ferus Gallery in 1965, and then with the Irving Blum Gallery until 1973. However, it is his relationship with Los Angeles-based publishers Gemini G.E.L. that ultimately proved transformative for him. Kelly has made 256 editions with Gemini, and many of these are presented in the show, including his first series from 1970, *Series of Ten Lithographs: Red-Orange/Yellow/Blue*. (By the way, Gemini G.E.L. at Joni Weyl has just opened its new space in New York, with architecture by Stamberg Aferiat, at 535 West 24th Street in Chelsea.)

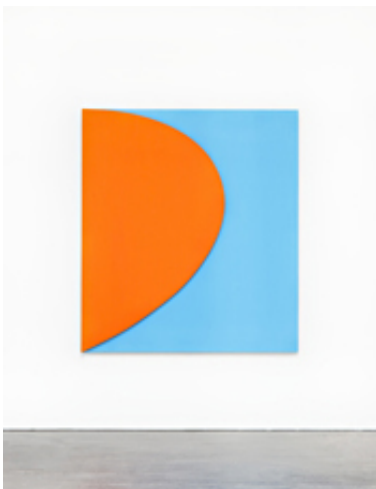
Now, Kelly has an additional connection to L.A. -- embodied in the arrival of a new branch of the **Matthew Marks Gallery** from New York at 1062 N. Orange Grove in West Hollywood. His inaugural show at the gallery, "Ellsworth Kelly: Los Angeles," includes his two-panel paintings of egg-yolk yellow and white, royal blue and black, and even -- dare I say it? -- Kelly green and blue. The gallery building, designed by Los Angeles-based architect Peter



Ellsworth Kelly, *Untitled*, 2011, on the new Matthew Marks Gallery, West Hollywood; photo by Christopher Knight/Los Angeles Times



"Ellsworth Kelly: Los Angeles," installation view, 2012, Matthew Marks gallery, Los Angeles



Ellsworth Kelly
Orange Relied with Blue
2011
Matthew Marks gallery, Los Angeles

Zellner, is a strict white box of perfect proportions. Marks asked Kelly to create a sculpture for the front of the building to fulfill West Hollywood's "percent for art" requirement, so Kelly designed a dark-charcoal, metal band to be mounted at the top of the façade so that it casts a sharp horizontal shadow. Kelly says, "This isn't an ornament. It's part of the architecture."

In the book *Letters to Ellsworth*, Marks recalls acquiring his first print by Kelly, which was titled *Black Over Yellow* (1964-65). It was priced at a prohibitive \$250, so he prevailed upon his parents to buy it for him as his 21st birthday present. A sound investment in their son's interests, as it turned out.

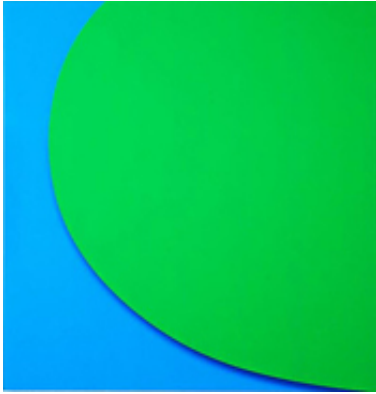
As Marks tells it, he caught the resemblance immediately after Kelly completed the sculpture for his new gallery. "I realized that the black-and-white rectangles of the façade of the gallery are perfectly balanced -- in exactly the same way as the shapes in my first Kelly print."

While Kelly was visiting L.A., I interviewed him briefly for my KCRW radio show, Art Talk. You can hear a podcast at www.kcrw.com/Arttalk.

"Ellsworth Kelly: Prints and Paintings," Jan. 22-Apr. 22, 2012, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, Ca. 90036

"Ellsworth Kelly: Los Angeles," Matthew Marks, 1062 N. Orange Grove Ave., West Hollywood, Ca. 90046

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP is the author of *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960s* (Henry Holt, 2011).



Ellsworth Kelly
Green Relief with Blue
2011
Matthew Marks gallery, Los Angeles



"Ellsworth Kelly: Los Angeles,"
installation view, 2012, Matthew
Marks gallery, Los Angeles



Ellsworth Kelly
Blue Relief with Black

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Ellsworth Kelly has two exhibitions in Los Angeles - artnet Magazine

2011

Matthew Marks gallery, Los Angeles