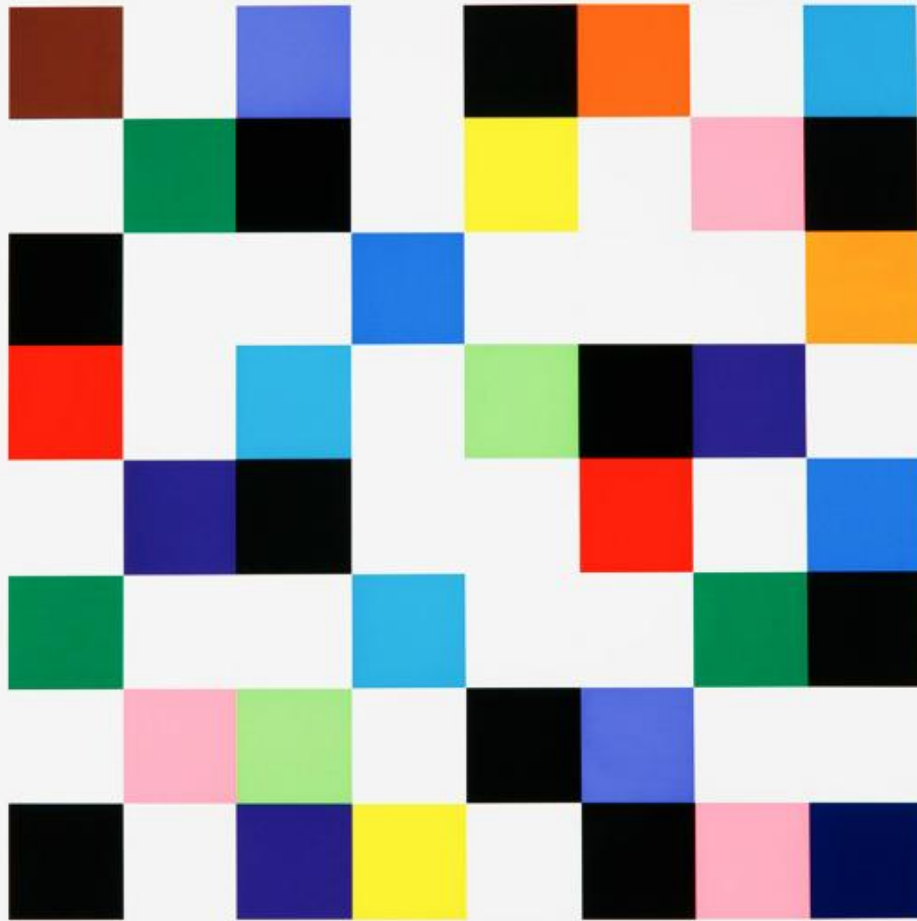


NOT TO BE MISSED: **ELLSWORTH KELLY AT LACMA** | by Marlena Donohue



LACMA's "Ellsworth Kelly: Prints and Paintings" includes such exemplars of his prolific print practice as *Colors on a Grid*, 1976. © Ellsworth Kelly and Tyler Graphics, Ltd

ELLSWORTH KELLY IS AMONG THE FABLED LIVING AMERICAN PAINTERS.

In the 1940s he went to Pratt Institute, then to the school of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, and after the army, he both studied and taught art in Paris. His art back then consisted of spontaneous organic forms developed from contact with surrealism and artists like Joan Miró, Jean Arp and Constantin Brancusi. After he returned to the US in the '50s, he gradually began simplifying his forms to end with monochromatic panels joined into one work by what he called the "laws of chance."

The LACMA show, on view at the museum's Broad building through April 22, is the first such overview of Kelly's work in more than three decades. All installation photos © 2012 Museum Associates/LACMA



That experimental, quirky trajectory is often hidden in Kelly's mature style. Since the 1970s, Kelly's been grouped with Minimalists because his shaped objects, like those of Frank Stella or Donald Judd, are "completed" only when they're viewed. (Cues of depth and color vary with the perception of any given viewer.) He's also been consistently, if not simplistically, identified with a style called "post-painterly abstraction" (a term coined by the critic Clement Greenberg for a 1964 LACMA show he curated, which included work by Kelly, Frank Stella, Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, among others). The straight talk translation of these approaches is pure geometry, pure color, pure perception as an antidote to the touchy-feely mess of the '60s. Both labels fail to address the perfect tension between rigor and sensuality Kelly brings to bear in work across all media.

Today he's best known for huge monochrome canvases, intensely colored half arcs and all manner of polygons in two and three dimensions, balanced within bright, flat fields. For the last 40 years, Kelly has mused on variations of Platonic solids, applying this interest with sustained focus to prints on paper, sculptures, line drawings and canvases.

"Ellsworth Kelly: Prints and Paintings," an exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that runs through April 22, offers at least two Ellsworth Kelly insights. First, lithography and printing in general are for Kelly neither minor formats nor adjunct steps toward major works; they hold their own and are conceived by the artist to do so. Second, Kelly's roots in surrealism, the strong connection that his shapes retain to things from nature and the emotions they can stir, are always close at hand.

The exhibition consists of some 100 lithographic works, prints, a sample of drawings and four or so major paintings culled from international private and public lenders. The emphasis here is printed work, a specialty of Kelly's; he can partner with his favorite printers to achieve inked surfaces as dense, velvety, tactile and alive as any brushed by hand.

Take-home point: Kelly's post-painterly abstraction is far from pure. It is human. It vibrates and grabs at us in the gut, eye and head all at once. You must stand in front of this work and experience it because no write-up can quite cover what it *does*.

This excellent exhibition — the first major overview in almost 30 years — reminds us of Kelly's prodigious print practice. The inclusion of drawings and major paintings alongside prints invites a consideration of how the artist's ideas move fluidly from medium to medium. Britt Salvesen, the curator who heads both the museum's Prints and Drawings department and its Photography department, co-curated this show with Stephanie Barron, Chief Senior Curator of Modern Painting. Salvesen talked to *Istdibs* about the works and Kelly's creative process.

Kelly, who has printed almost exclusively with Gemini G.E.L. since the late 1960s, at work in 2001 in the Los Angeles studio. Photo by Sidney B. Felsen





THERE IS THE WHOLE IDEA THAT PRINTMAKING IS A MINOR FORM OR THE PRECURSOR TO FULLY DEVELOPED LARGER WORKS. AS THE CURATOR OF PRINTS AND GRAPHIC ARTS, I AM SURE YOU HAVE SOME IDEAS ABOUT THAT.

Many of the artists of Kelly's generations, from the '50s through the '60s, got into printmaking as an extremely serious endeavor, and for each the role of printmaking was different. In Kelly's case, this idea that printmaking leads to other works is not accurate. There is no direct correlation or readable line from prints to paintings to sculptures. Kelly can be intrigued by an idea for a shape from a sculptural commission and then years later develop that shape in a concentrated way in prints that stand very much as their own works of art.

BUT YOU DO SEEM TO WANT TO ESTABLISH SOME CONNECTION BETWEEN THE PRINTS AND PAINTINGS BY COMBINING THEM.

That is true but what I and my co-curator Stephanie Barron wanted to do was to let the works themselves establish the connections and hint at the artist's imaginative process without imposing some perhaps artificial structure via our design for the display.

Purple, 2001 and Red, 2001, are from the series Kelly is seen creating on the previous page.

According to the show's curators, the Broad building is an ideal venue for displaying abstract works, where visual nuance is everything. Kelly's *Red Curve* (*State I*), 1988, on wall at right.



AS MIGHT HAPPEN IF YOU PUT ALL ARCS TOGETHER OR ALL THE RECTANGLES TOGETHER, OR TOOK US FROM YEAR TO YEAR?

Yes, exactly. Museums have their exhibition strategies and these are often quite helpful. But we wanted the show to reflect the artist's thinking process in a more organic way.

HOW DID YOU DO THAT?

Stephanie felt that the Broad building was the perfect place to let that happen. It was built precisely for the display of Modern and Contemporary art and as such is perfect for featuring abstract works on paper, where visual nuance is everything. And what we find when these prints speak for themselves is that they hold their own, they hold up and are integrated, self-contained and important works.

I WAS AMAZED AT HOW ONE ARC OR EDGE AFTER ANOTHER THAT SEEMED IDENTICAL BECAME DISTINGUISHABLE FOR INCREMENTAL AND, I MUST SAY, BEAUTIFUL LITTLE ALTERATIONS. ONE AFTER ANOTHER HOLDS OUR ATTENTION. BESIDE THE GENEROSITY AFFORDED BY THE ARCHITECTURE, WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THIS?

Much of the subtlety and richness comes from the way Kelly nuances figure-ground relationships. With work that is printed on paper, the play of figure-ground and edge are crucial; you have the edge of the paper in relation to the shapes built on it, and you have the edge of the print against the ground of the wall. Every one of these relationships is calibrated so expertly by a precise artist like Kelly. And we can really see this here.



Red/Blue (Untitled), from the portfolio "Ten Works by Ten Painters," 1964.
© Ellsworth Kelly and Wadsworth Atheneum



THAT IS THE THING ABOUT THE PRINTS AND PAINTINGS YOU'VE INCLUDED — IT'S ALL PERMUTATIONS OF GEOMETRY, AND YET THESE SHAPED SURFACES HAVE AN AMAZING HUMANITY AND DYNAMISM; THEY BREATHE, KEEP SHIFTING IN THE EYE AND IN THEIR SPACE.

It is funny you should mention this. Kelly always says that so much of his work is based in nature, in things he encounters and responds to strongly in the world. That's why the shapes seem careful but never cold.

I INTERVIEWED KELLY SOME YEARS BACK AND I EXPECTED TO HAVE A CONVERSATION ABOUT PURE FORM, PURE THIS, PURE THAT. I WAS SHOCKED TO HEAR SUCH SENSITIVITY AND SUCH A POETIC USE OF LANGUAGE AS HE DESCRIBED BOTH HIS LIFE AND WORK; I WAS EVEN MORE SHOCKED WHEN HE TOLD ME THAT HIS SHAPES CAN BE INSPIRED BY THINGS LIKE A FIELD OF YELLOW WILDFLOWERS OR THE CURVE OF A WOMAN'S CALF.

When he mentions the artists who have most influenced him, he cites Alexander Calder and his relief sculptures; the way they move and really show this dynamic, non-static language of figure-ground.

A 2009 portrait of Kelly in his Spencertown, New York, studio. Photo courtesy of LACMA

AND A CALDER WORK IS THAT PERFECT EXAMPLE OF PRECISION AND JUICINESS YOU FEEL IN WHAT KELLY DOES.

Clarity and clean conception are key. Here I have to say something about how Kelly works his prints. He does not draw directly onto the plate there in the print house, evaluating and making changes alongside the printer as he goes, the way a Rauschenberg might. That spontaneity of finding the form as you go is not what a Kelly print is typically about.

KELLY'S MAIN PRINTER, GEMINI, IS LOCATED HERE IN LOS ANGELES, AND THE STORIES OF KELLY ARE LEGEND.

You always hear the junior printers at Gemini say that when you have printed with Kelly, that's the ultimate test.

BECAUSE HE IS SO EXACTING?

Because what he is interested in is the elegance of very simple visual relationships, and when you are speaking as an artist

with such a subtle language like the thickness of a line or the shade of a blue, you know exactly what you want to see.

CAN YOU TALK A LITTLE ABOUT HIS PRINTING PROCESS, HOW KELLY OVERSEES THESE CALIBRATIONS, HOW MUCH OF THE PROCESS IS UNDER HIS CONTROL AND HOW MUCH IS LEFT TO THE PRINTER'S DISCRETION?

All master printers work with their artists in a variety of ways. In the '80s Gemini established these residencies with some of the most important contemporary artists. They were invited to come out to LA, stay for weeks working side by side with expert print-makers to realize an idea or a series of images.

KELLY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GEMINI HAS LASTED DECADES, RIGHT?

About three or so. They understand each other, Gemini knows by now what Kelly is trying to do and he is an artist who appreciates that consistency.

Orange over Blue (Orange sur Bleu), from "Suite of Twenty-Seven Color Lithographs," 1964-65. © Ellsworth Kelly and Maeght Editeur, Paris



Kelly is interested in "the elegance of very simple visual relationships," according to the exhibition's co-curator Britt Salvesen.



All permutations of geometry, Kelly's works seem to breathe and to keep shifting in the eye and in their space.

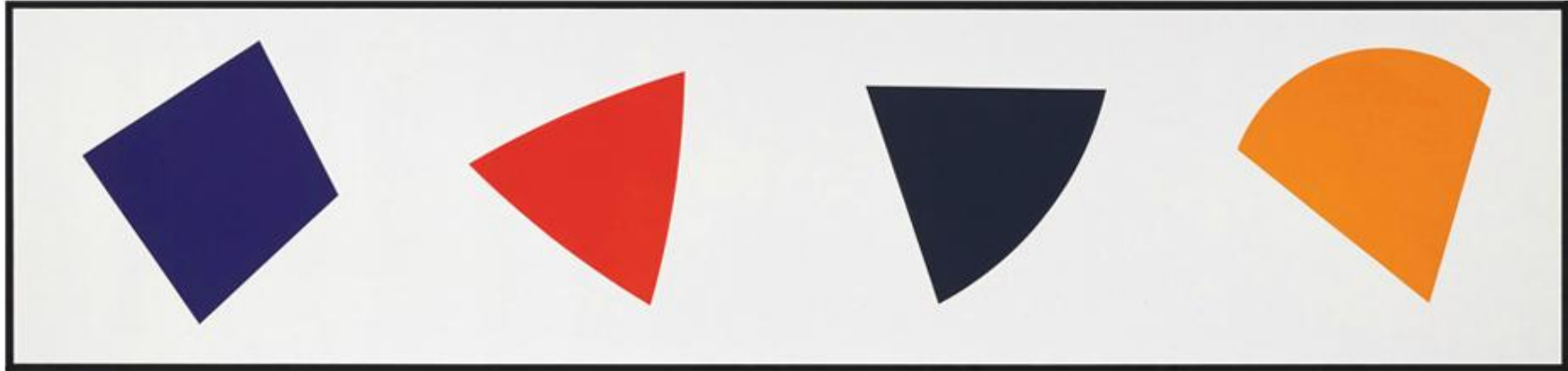


CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT GOES ON IN THE ARTIST-PRINTER RELATIONSHIP OVER SUCH A RESIDENCE?

Again it varies widely. For some artists it is an opportunity to invent there on the spot with the printer responding to corrections and suggestions in real time, so to speak. That way of working intuitively then and there is referred to as a multiple-state print process, where you can end up with many unforeseen variations of more or less the same image over repeated plates; then the best experiments may constitute the series.

THE WORKS IN THIS SHOW LOOK WAY TOO EXACT TO HAVE BEEN WORKED OUT ON THE FLY.

Well, nothing a master printer does is quite on the fly — they are extremely trained and deliberate. But for Kelly most of the details have been worked out by him way beforehand in his head and his studio, well before anything goes on at the printers. Then in response to Kelly's fairly worked-out conception a proof is made for the artist's minor adjustments or approval. This last step is what is typically done with Kelly present — any changes at this point are very small, nuanced.



I THINK EVERYONE KNOWS GENERALLY WHAT WORDS LIKE "PRINT" AND "PROOF" MEAN, BUT CAN YOU ELABORATE A LITTLE ON HOW THIS WORKS IN THE CASE OF THESE PRINTS ON VIEW?

Kelly gets an idea for, let's say, a series of curves or for a shape he has seen from a shadow cast by a building. Often he gets an idea from an archive of drawings and collages he is constantly making and adding to. Whatever grasped his attention. Kelly makes a design of this idea, works out the exact placement on the ground, the size, maybe the paper, the color relationships, the density of pigment, and all that.

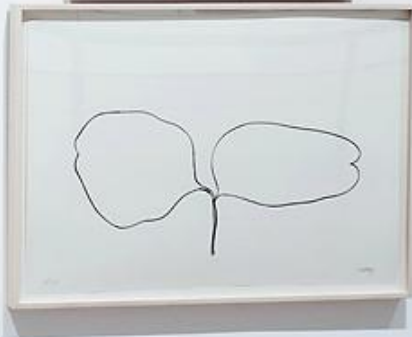
BUT EVEN FOR KELLY, THERE'S SOME DIALOGUE AND BACK AND FORTH WITH THE PRINTER, NO?

Of course. When the design arrives from Kelly, hand-cut stencils of the shapes are made and this is photo-transferred onto an aluminum plate whose surface is specially designed to receive ink in the exposed spaces. The print is pulled and then everyone takes a look and talks. But Kelly doesn't go back into his prints; it is either right or not.

**KELLY'S POST-
PAINTERLY
ABSTRACTION
IS FAR FROM
PURE. IT IS
HUMAN.**

Purple/Red/Grey/Orange, 1988, © 2010 Ellsworth Kelly

In the mid-1960s, Kelly paid homage to various fruits and vegetable with his "Suite of Plant Lithographs." © Ellsworth Kelly and Maeght Editeur, Paris



SO THE STEP THAT GOES ON IN KELLY'S HEAD AND STUDIO IS THE ESSENCE HERE?

Yes and as Kelly has stated repeatedly, his ongoing cache of drawings are where many of the ideas are generated and explored. This is what my co-curator Stephanie Barron wanted to emphasize, so she spent a great deal of time with the artist culling drawings we might show that would illustrate the arc of Kelly's creative imagination, how a shape begins in his experiences and then becomes the basis for work, graphic or otherwise.

STEPHANIE BARRON HAS MOUNTED GROUND-BREAKING SHOWS ON GERMAN EXPRESSIONIST PAINTING AND ART BANNED BY HITLER, AMONG OTHERS, SO I AM CURIOUS ABOUT EXACT CONTRIBUTION TO A SHOW THAT IS SO HEAVILY WEIGHTED TOWARD THE GRAPHIC MEDIA.

She was instrumental. She has known Kelly for years, since her grad-school days and knows fully the paintings of Kelly's early and mature eras, and so she had a real insight into how we might show his prints in a somewhat different way.

An installation view of Kelly's "States of the River" series, 2005.





HOW WAS THAT?

Well, not chronologically, and not strictly thematically — ovals with arcs, and all that. And we certainly did not want to do the "how to" print show that educates viewers on how a print is made. She had the idea to let the drawings set up the sort of wellspring of ideas, and to group works visually in ways that highlighted the course of an idea as it moved back and forth in time and through materials. Once we decided on this strategy, the order of the display just fell together so naturally, so beautifully; we were both elated. To walk the show is really to watch an artist thinking.

Kelly reviews his color ink samples at the Gemini G.E.L. studio in 1983.
Photo by Sidney B. Felsen