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SFMOMA PRESENTS ELLSWORTH KELLY IN SAN FRANCISCO

From July 13, 2002, through January 5, 2003 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present *Ellsworth Kelly in San Francisco*. Organized by Madeleine Grynsztejn, SFMOMA Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, *Ellsworth Kelly in San Francisco* highlights 58 works that span the artist's career of 50-plus years. The exhibition brings together for the first time the 22 pieces SFMOMA acquired from Kelly's own collection in May 1999—including such masterworks as *Cité*, 1951, *Red Blue*, 1966 and *Curve XXI*, 1978–80—as well as major paintings, sculptures, relief works, collages and drawings from private collections throughout the Bay Area.

“SFMOMA has long had a special affinity for the work of Ellsworth Kelly, starting with the 1966 acquisition of *Red White*, 1962. This work, along with the Museum's recent acquisition of a number of Kelly's other important works, ensures that this vibrant

relationship will continue for generations to come,” states Grynsztejn. “These works, when shown together with more recent, and equally exceptional, works in local collections will offer visitors an unparalleled opportunity to see and understand the major developments within his career during the past half-century.”

The 22 seminal works acquired from the artist, together with the Museum's previous Kelly holdings, form the single-most important grouping of Kelly's work in any museum. The overarching exhibition reflects the full span of Kelly's eloquent career. The earliest works on view date from the artist's student days in Boston just following World War II and his subsequent sojourn in Paris from 1948 to 1954, where he developed and refined his unique approach to abstraction based on actual observation. The exhibition then chronicles Kelly's move to New York in the mid-1950s, where he



Ellsworth Kelly, *Cité*, 1951; Collection SFMOMA

more



Ellsworth Kelly, *Black Ripe*, 1955; Collection of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson

developed a biomorphic style that led to his shaped canvases. His sculptural output of the 1970s and his dynamic and colorful multipanel works of the last two decades are also included.

An early painting in the exhibition is the expressive *Self-Portrait with Thorn*, 1947. The artist represents himself holding an uprooted thorn bush, foreshadowing his noted series of plant drawings, an example of which is also on view. Also featured are the pair of oil paintings, *Chuan-Shu*, 1948, and *Seated Figure*, 1949, which reveal the beginnings of Kelly's abstract explorations, informed by ethnic and tribal art as well as European Modernism. These works, as well as *Mandorla* and *Kilometer Marker*, both from 1949, demonstrate Kelly's early use of geometric shapes such as ovoids, curves and irregular rectangles—precursors to the forms he would develop decades later.

Among Kelly's first forays into three-dimensional work is *White Relief*, 1950. He credited this work, together with *Window I*, as leading to the multipanel paintings that dominated his work in following years. *White Relief* was undertaken at an important creative juncture for Kelly: in 1949 in Paris he met the composer John Cage and the artist Jean Arp, both of whom were proponents of chance as a governing force, an idea that had a major impact on how Kelly constructed his compositions.

In the 1950s Kelly's experiments with chance compositions led to the completion of a series entitled *La Combe*, the third variation of which is among the recently acquired works. *La Combe III*, 1951, is notable for its darting, linear patterns against solid white ground and for its de-centered composition.

Cité, 1951, another of the SFMOMA acquisitions, is considered a benchmark work in Kelly's development. This work takes the artist's exploration of chance composition and abstraction further than the *La Combe* series. Kelly started this piece with a drawing of black and white stripes that he subsequently cut into 20 pieces and arranged randomly. In keeping with the philosophy of chance, this composition became the basis for the painting, which employs 20 wood panels. At 56 1/2 by 70 1/2 inches, *Cité* is also significant as Kelly's first large-scale work.

Kelly's experiments in chance collage led to a development of the role of color in his work: as he reduced the number of formal elements involved, so color grew in importance. He was interested in the idea that color does not define form, but in itself can become form. Both *Spectrum I*, 1953, and *Spectrum Colors Arranged by Chance*, 1951–53, illustrate this theory, which allows each color to assert its own individuality. The multipanel works that further explored this premise are represented by *Red Yellow Blue White and Black with White Border*, 1953. The painting presents seven physically distinct yet compositionally interdependent panels of individual colors, such that color retains a physiological autonomy

and literal objecthood. This is a critical foundation of Kelly's work.

Kelly's return to the United States from Paris in 1955 marked an artistic turning point. He deliberately moved away from multi-panel works into reliefs and was also drawn to biomorphic forms in which he was able to explore with greater focus the relationships of form and color, curve and line, flatness and depth, figure and ground. *White Relief*, 1958, a small oil-on-wood relief, presents Kelly's classic juxtaposition of curvilinear forms and straight lines, and of monochromatic dimensionality. In *Concorde Relief I*, 1958, another small-scale work, the two-level wood surface remains unpainted— itself a form of monochromaticism—and the exploration of the figure/ground relationship is further developed. This work presages the large, shaped wood panels that Kelly would develop in the 1970s and 1980s.

Black over Blue, 1963, is an important large-scale relief in aluminum first exhibited in Kelly's show that year at the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. In this work, "Black" is a curved vertical shape that begins at the top of the "Blue" ground and shoots downward well below the bottom edge of the blue. This large relief appears to incorporate the wall on which it is mounted, extending Kelly's test of the boundaries of a canvas. *Blue Red*, 1966, explores planar relationships from a different perspective. This painting-cum-sculpture consists of two large adjoining rectangular canvas panels: the blue panel rests against wall and the red sits on floor. The artist's use of canvas as a sculptural medium in this work begs comparison with his color/form paintings of the same period, as exemplified by *Red White*, 1962, which juxtaposed the two colors as forms on one plane.

In 1970 Kelly explored the fragmented curve, inspired in part by the contours of gently curving hills he saw around his Spencertown home in upstate New York at the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains. He had explored the curve in earlier work, but this time he addressed the form at its most attenuated: an arc whose ends are joined by angled straight lines to form a wedge or, in Kelly's own terminology, a curve. Kelly's *Curve* series is among his best-known work and is represented in the group of SFMOMA acquisitions by *Curve XXI*, 1978. As the series progressed, size, choice of material, thickness and surface became as critical to the success of each artwork as the colors and shapes of his earlier pieces. *Curve XXI* is a later example for which Kelly chose the unusual medium of birchwood. Measuring 75 by 170 inches and specifically mounted five inches from the wall, *Curve XXI* becomes a relief work that uses the wall itself as its ground. *Diagonal with Curve I*, 1978, a true relief, is both related to Kelly's *Curve* series as well as an evocation of his earlier white reliefs.

An important shift for Kelly in the 1970s was the development of a series of outdoor sculptures that featured thin severely horizontal or severely vertical planes of steel or aluminum. Kelly created *Stele I*, 1973—an almost 20-foot vertical rounded rectangle of one-inch-thick weathered steel—for his own lawn, and it has never been publicly exhibited.



Ellsworth Kelly, *White Relief with Green*, 1994; Collection of Mimi and Peter Haas

Another work in the exhibition that blurs the boundary between painting and sculpture is *Untitled (Mandorla)*, 1988, a wall-mounted bronze sculpture of a large mandorla (pointed ellipsis) form. Its inspiration, the 1949 oil painting *Mandorla*, is one of Kelly's earliest Paris works. Kelly culled the mandorla shape from a medieval cathedral window he had seen in his first travels in France.

The most recent works in the exhibition are borrowed from major private Bay Area collections. These works include *Yellow Relief with Black*, 1993 (a fractional gift to SFMOMA). In this work, two panels of distinctly different size and color join to form a single, dynamic whole. *White Relief with Green*, 1994, juxtaposes a semicircular white shape with a green cone figure. Together they behave as a single entity, as if the green curve is turning like a leaf to show its white underside. *Green Curve*, 1996, seems as if to stand on tiptoe at its triangular tip. Like *Red Curves*, 1996, these single-panel, monochromatic works are carefully installed in the galleries and are dynamically juxtaposed with their architectural environment.

Ellsworth Kelly in San Francisco will be accompanied by a 100-page catalogue with an introduction by Madeleine Grynsztejn. The catalogue is co-published by SFMOMA and the University of California Press and will be available in a \$29.95 cloth edition at the SFMOMA MuseumStores.

In addition, SFMOMA's Education Department will present a host of public programs. For more information, call the Office of Public Programs at 415/357-4102.

Ellsworth Kelly in San Francisco is sponsored by U.S. Trust. Additional support for this exhibition has been provided by Collectors Forum, an auxiliary of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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Hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays) 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; open late Thursdays until 9 p.m.; summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day) 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day.

Admission prices: Adults \$10; seniors \$7; students with ID \$6. SFMOMA members and children twelve and under are admitted free. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free. Thursday evenings, 6 to 9 p.m., admission is half price.

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