

Ellsworth Kelly: Fragments



Courtesy Checkerboard Films

The camera focuses on the impedimenta of art-making—paint-spattered shoes, color-caked palettes, brushes—then reveals a series of curved, chromatically bold panels. The works are being prepared for a show at the Serpentine Gallery in London, and the artist consults with assistants and curators to make sure the preparations are in accordance with his exacting vision. The opening moments of *Ellsworth Kelly: Fragments*, screened at the Philoctetes Center on February 24, while conveying a clear affection for the artist, reveal a deeper allegiance to the purity of the artistic process, moving beyond preoccupations with personality and anecdotal detail.

Mr. Kelly's artistic theme can be defined simply: shapes and colors. He distills the details that inspire him down to the most salient expressions of form and hue. In seeing and capturing what he will use in his art, Kelly comments, "My eye is like a machine."

Having served in France as a soldier during the Second World War, Kelly returned to Paris in the late 40s to discover and refine his approach to art. His fascination with the city's architectural detail led him to create his first "relief pieces," the graph-like representations of angular forms that would define his work for the next 60 years. His obsession with grids began when he woke up to see the shadow of window framework on his wall and said, "Oh, I want that!" While his paintings were frequently based on real objects, he abstracted them into silhouettes and outlines in an effort to connect purely to what he described as "the joy of transmitting visual ex-

perience into a work of art." His early work was heavily influenced by Hans Arp, and he adopted that artist's highly technical, dispassionate approach to creating images. Later he met Brancusi, who gave him an appreciation for the spiritual quality of shapes. "If you can turn off the mind and look at everything with your eyes," says Kelly, "everything becomes abstract." This in a way is the manifesto of a painter who decided very early on that he would be guided solely by intuition.

In the 1950s Kelly returned to New York, which provided, according to the artist, "a completely different set of things to see and use." He began to create sculpture, and then merged painting and sculpture into three-dimensional works that he placed at outdoor sites or incorporated into expansive interiors. As a result, much of his large-scale work can be seen in public spaces throughout the world. One of the technicians who applies paint to the enormous panels used for Kelly's installations comments, "The content is in the *looking* at it. It's not looking at brushstrokes and trying to figure out the meaning."

The screening was followed by a discussion with the film's co-director, **Tom Piper**, and its cinematographer, **David Leitner**. They revealed that what was originally intended as a short documentary about a Kelly installation in Beijing turned into a feature film culled from 52 hours of footage. While Mr. Piper confessed that the creation of the film was sometimes hampered by its subject's mercurial temperament, he emphasized that

the project succeeded in revealing Kelly as an artist, rather than focusing on personality or psychology. In this regard, Piper continued, it was important for the filmmakers to reassure Mr. Kelly that they wouldn't be digging into his personal life. Philoctetes film coordinator **Matthew von Unwerth**, who moderated the discussion, pointed out that this approach was in stark contrast to the very personalized portraits of Chuck Close and Robert Wilson screened at the Center in previous months. Although Mr. Leitner defended the value of a more impersonal approach, he regretted that the film failed to capture Kelly's stature as a world-class raconteur. Based on the post-film discussion, it was unclear whether it was the filmmakers or their subject who were most responsible for constraining the film to a detailed portrayal of Kelly's use of color, rather than a deeper insight into the shades of his personality.

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