

ELLSWORTH KELLY 1923-2015

Abstract painter created simple, effective works

By Charles Desmarais

Ellsworth Kelly, the influential artist who died Sunday at 92, set surprisingly modest goals for the impact of his art on the world.

Mr. Kelly knew that the work might puzzle his audience at first and admitted that it would likely take time, over many viewings, before people would really understand what he wished to share. But he also told the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art — which holds much of his art — that “people want a constant.”

“I’d like my paintings to be in the present tense,”

Kelly continues on A10

FROM THE COVER

Abstract works withstand time

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Mr. Kelly said, and he succeeded in making works that seem entirely outside of time. That, of course, is the way it is with truly iconic forms: the disk of a planet seen in the sky, the shadow of a tree falling across a field — these have no age. Mr. Kelly searched for simple outlines that would generate abstract paintings and sculpture yet retain echoes of things, from leaf shapes to remnants of architecture, that he had seen in the everyday world, and which he sometimes recorded in photographs. He spoke of experiencing his “first abstraction” as a child, catching a glimpse of fragments of a room through a neighbor’s window. At any point in his long career, the gap of blank sky between two buildings or the pattern of a sewer grate might have brought into being a new work.

Parents’ encouragement

Born May 31, 1923, in Newburgh, N.Y., Mr. Kelly demonstrated an early fascination with drawing. His pragmatic parents reluctantly allowed him to attend Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. After two years’ service in the military as a camouflage artist, he resumed art studies on the G.I. Bill at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and, after his move to Paris in 1948, at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts.

Mr. Kelly left New York at a time when many young artists had begun moving there partly because he could not embrace the Abstract Expressionism personified by Jackson Pollock

(1912-1956) and Willem de Kooning (1904-1997).

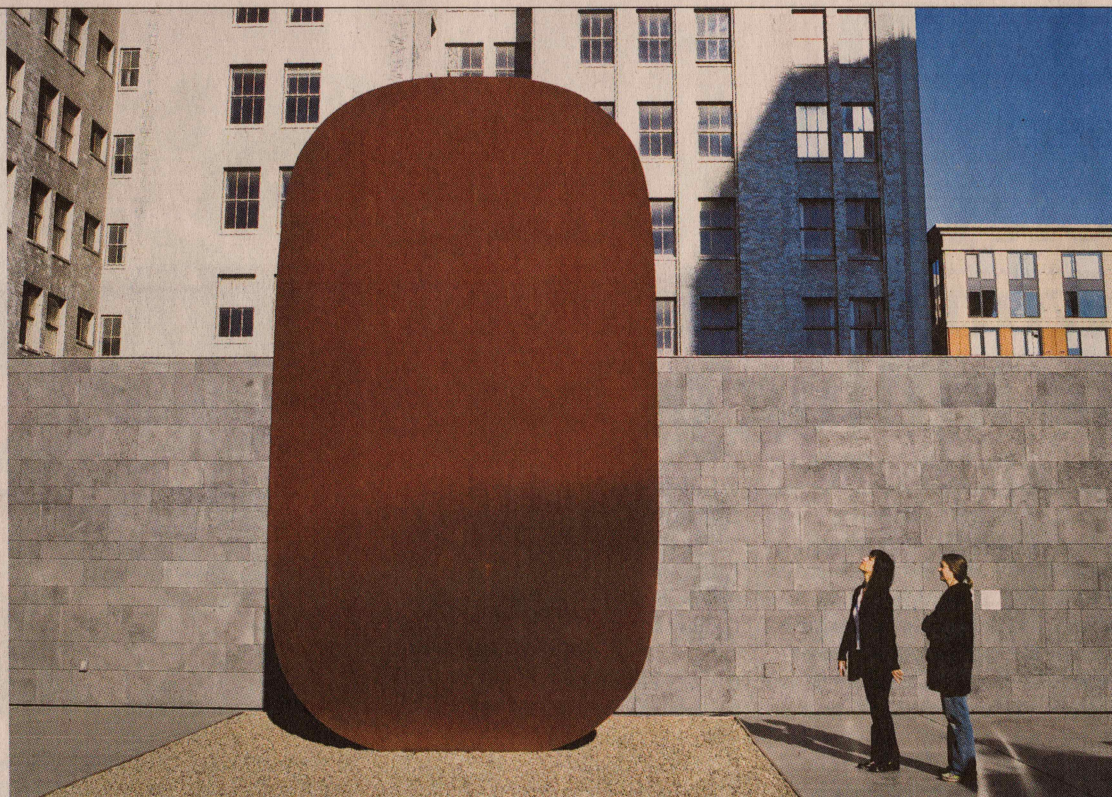
In Paris, Mr. Kelly began to experiment with generating compositions of paintings from impersonal sources such as the fall of shadows on a staircase and the reflections of riverside structures in the Seine. By the time he returned to New York in the early 1950s, he had evolved his own mode of abstraction, presented in his first solo Manhattan show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1956.

Worldwide exhibitions

Since his first solo gallery show in Paris in 1951, Mr. Kelly had exhibitions at museums and galleries around the world, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

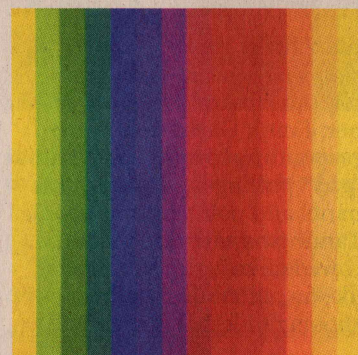
In 2002, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art organized “Ellsworth Kelly in San Francisco,” a survey of work from Bay Area private and public collections, demonstrating the large presence of his art in Northern California. “Ellsworth Kelly has long been a pioneer of abstract painting, and an example to all who possess a single-minded vision and dedication to their work,” SFMOMA Director Neal Benezra said in an e-mail. “Our relationship with the artist has been profound for many years.”

With 75 works — paintings, sculpture and works on paper — in the combined collection of SFMOMA and the Doris and Donald Fisher Collection, the museum holds, Benezra said,



Russell Yip / The Chronicle 2009

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art displayed abstract artist Ellsworth Kelly’s sculpture “Stele I” on its rooftop garden in 2009. His work had a large presence in Northern California.



San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

“Spectrum I” (1953) found a home and audience in S.F.

“one of the largest and finest collections of Ellsworth’s work of any museum in the world.” A total of 31 of those works, including an unrivaled group of seven rare paintings from the formative Paris period, will be displayed in four galleries dedicated to the artist and elsewhere in the building when the museum reopens May 14 after a three-year expansion. Mr. Kelly



Ellsworth Kelly, who had his first solo gallery show in Paris in 1951, created deceptively simple art.

himself proudly thought of SFMOMA’s planned presentation as a “museum within a museum,” and became a donor of both works of art for the collection and money to support conservation.

Connection with S.F.

It is clear that the Fishers are a major reason that San Francisco is such an important repository for his art. Indeed, Doris Fisher, who talked with him “almost every week,” recalled one major acquisition in an interview this year with the Wall Street Journal: “Ellsworth Kelly came to us, Charles Schwab and his wife and SFMOMA, so we pitched in

and together we bought 19 works; among them were ‘Cit ’ from 1951 and ‘Spectrum I’ from 1953.” Those two works alone (perhaps supplemented by the major 1955 painting in the Anderson Collection at Stanford University) would make the Bay Area a Modern American art destination.

In an age of art as spectacle, art news as gossip and art collecting as speculative investing, Ellsworth Kelly represents an abiding and still-untarnished version of the Modernist ideal of art. As he told John Cage in a letter written early in his career, “It should meet the eye direct.” Mr. Kelly leaves behind clear evidence of the worth of that deceptively simple thought.

Former Chronicle art critic Kenneth Baker contributed to this report.

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