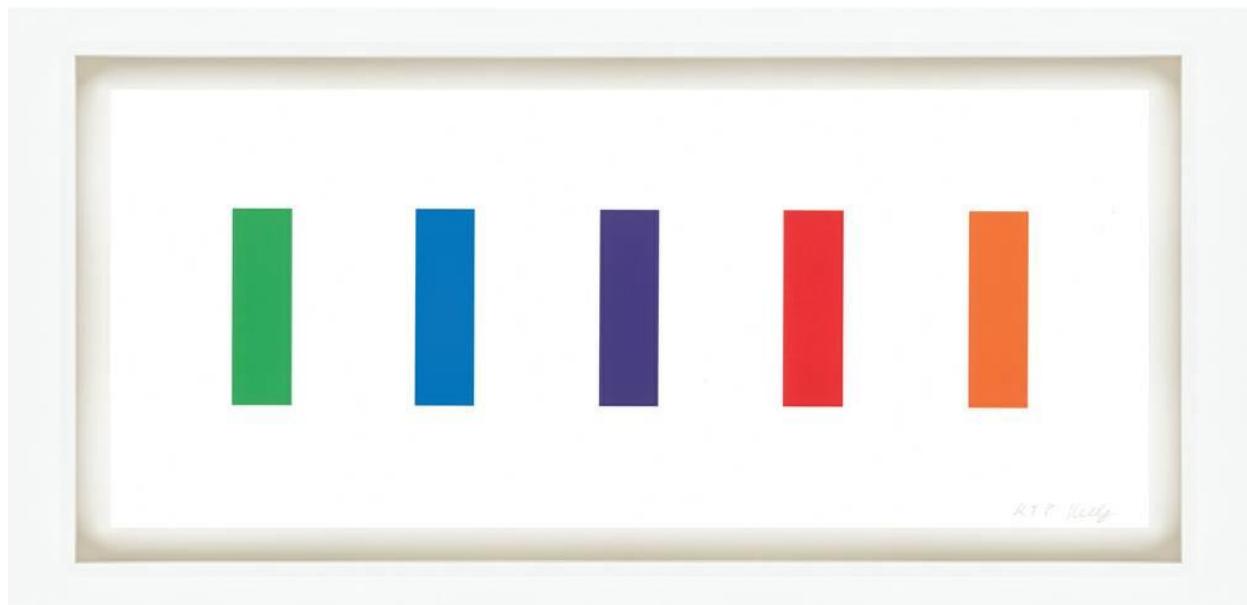


Ellsworth Kelly's Masterful Abstraction Vibrates the Eyes and Mind

Dawn-Michelle Baude Wed, May 4, 2016 (1:00 p.m.)



Ellsworth Color Panels

Viewer looks at “Red” at the Ellsworth Kelly show at the Barrick Museum. Viewer considers the 48-by-37-inch print of an angular, six-sided form. Old neurons from geometry class rattle. Neither the sides nor the angles are consistent, so it’s ... an irregular polygon. Indeed, it’s red like the title says, and positioned on white paper. But it’s not really white—or at least not eggshell white or whipped-cream white. It’s more of a chalk white. And the red, come to think of it, is which red? Tomato? Venetian? Crimson? Or maybe it’s the purest, most essential red that can be made.

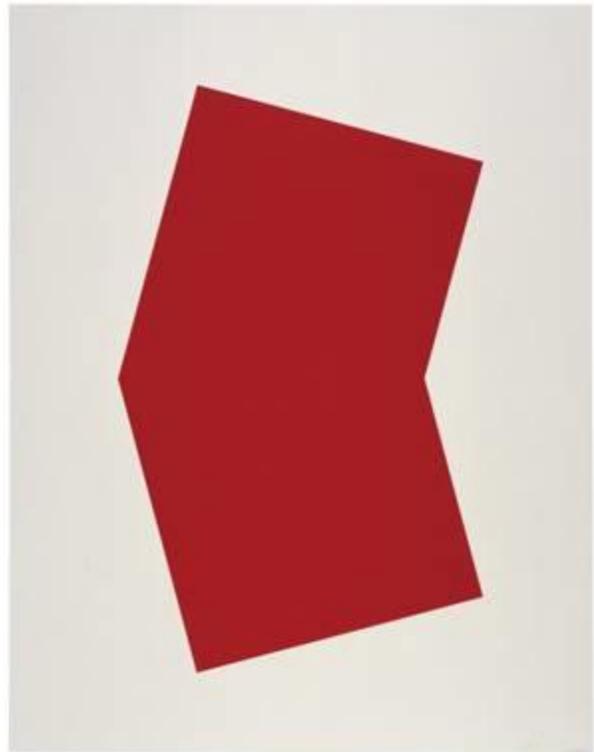
Viewer’s retina is stimulated, along with the solar plexus. Pulsing, in fact. Something is vibrating right out of Kelly’s picture plane and into the brain. Like other major abstract painters who came of age in the middle of the 20th century, Kelly doesn’t use color and shape to make an image; color and shape are the image. But unlike his contemporary, Josef Albers, Kelly wasn’t systematically investigating the rules of optics—he was following his heart. Or gut. Or intuition. He saw relationships between color and shape in a way that no one else had ever seen before, or will see again.

Created in 2001, “Red” is one of more than 20 lithographs in the exhibition organized and guest-curated by Michele C. Quinn. The most recent print, “Color Panels,” dates to 2011. Kelly, who died last year, was 88 years old when he made it. A kind of chromatic xylophone or rainbow light-switch, “Color Panels” is as strong and vigorous as other Kelly works made throughout the past six decades. Most artists can’t sustain that caliber of prolonged activity. But Kelly doesn’t waver.

Known for geometric abstraction, his work involves a purifying process. Kelly looked, say, at the angles where two sidewalks intersect, or the silhouette of a water tower against the sky. He kept the lines and shapes, and removed all the texture and contouring. Then he added fully saturated, monochromatic color, creating forms purged of extraneous detail, perfected in rapt clarity. But the show also includes four portraits, five botanic drawings and an extraordinary daffodil that’s part tuba, part E.T. The artist’s expressive draftsmanship exhibits the loose and carefree—but utterly precise—lines of a master.

While the show begs the question of what recent Kelly shows of painting and sculpture at LACMA, MoMA and the Guggenheim revealed, Ellsworth Kelly at the Barrick is first-rate, and accompanied by a Saturday 1 p.m. screening of *Ellsworth Kelly: Fragments*, a documentary providing insight into both art and man.

Although the show is small, it takes time to really see. The longer the viewer contemplates the works, the more they offer. Toward that end, the irregular polygon “Red” could be an idealized Platonic form. Or an open book.



Ellsworth *Red*

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Ellsworth Kelly Through May 14; Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; Saturday, noon-5 p.m.

Barrick Museum, 702-895-3381.