

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Ellsworth Kelly: Prints

February 9 – March 31, 2018

Opening reception: Friday, February 16, 6–8 pm

Lora Reynolds is pleased to announce *Ellsworth Kelly: Prints*, an exhibition of lithographs made between 1966 and 2012.

Starting in the 1940s, Ellsworth Kelly made paintings, sculptures, and prints of precise, simplified shapes in vibrant color—alone or in concert with others—and contour drawings in pencil or lithographic crayon of plants, flowers, and fruit. Shape and color are the primary subjects of his art, but his work stands apart from that of other early geometric abstractionists—which was characterized by a preoccupation with math and conceptualism—in that it was always derived from visual experiences Kelly chanced upon in the world. He made sketches and photographs—of the gentle curve of a snowy hill, shadows falling on a staircase, reflections in water, or the negative space under a bridge—which he would later return to, study, and transform into artworks with unidentifiable origins.

Many of Kelly's shapes are unfamiliar, bulging polygons: quadrilaterals with no parallel sides, fragments of a circle that include an arc but no radii, skewed squares, and all manner of other geometric exotica. Sidney Felsen, the founder of Gemini G.E.L., once said, "Kelly can just make a shape better than anyone else." Perhaps this is because he did not invent them; he found his shapes in the world. The art historian Richard Shiff described a flattened paper cone—a blue and white container that once held an icy treat—that captured Kelly's attention in the 1950s when he found it in a street gutter. The artist picked it up, took it to his studio, and went back to it again and again for inspiration over the course of half a century. *Blue Curve*, 1988, a large lithograph in this exhibition, is distantly connected to this fabled cup that Kelly lifted from detritus.

"I've always been a colorist, I think. I started when I was very young, being a bird-watcher, fascinated by the colors of birds," Kelly once mused. His smooth, flat fields of assertive color have been repeatedly described as hedonistic, but there are no archetypal Kelly colors; their range is actually quite subtle and complex. Reds may be bluish or yellowish; yellows are variably greenish or orangey. Kelly considered each artwork individually, searching for the perfect color to pair with a given shape; he sought to form an effortless, inseparable unit wherein neither element overpowered the other. Kelly did say, however, "I like color in its strongest sense. I don't like mixed colors so much, like plum or deep, deep colors that are hard to define. I like red, yellow, blue, black, and white—that was what I started with."

One of Kelly's lifelong projects—his Spectrums—began as a student assignment to reproduce the Munsell color chart by hand. Munsell's system is an extensive color space organized by hue (e.g., red or blue), value (lightness/darkness), and chroma (intensity). Kelly never lost interest in trying to reduce Munsell's hundreds of data points into just a handful of colors that were

perfectly coordinated in value and chroma. It was very difficult to do, Kelly said, because “each color has to be the right red, the right purple,” and the transitions between each pair had to be seamless and balanced. Making a violet as brilliant as a yellow—and conversely, a yellow as weighty as a violet—was no easy task. He chose the colors for his Spectrums intuitively, in a celebration of light (which Isaac Newton proved was comprised of many colors) and seeing.

But the artworks that make the connection between visual perception and Kelly’s fascination with shape *incontrovertible* are his plant drawings. Simple and elegant, they capture only the outline of a Calla lily, vine of grape leaves, or pear—and with few exceptions, never include any color, shading, or dimensionality. Each drawing is of a single plant form—never a bouquet of multiple species—that dominates the page while being surrounded by negative space, isolated from all context. Kelly’s clean, confident line in these drawings emphasizes the *shapes* in flora—in nature—that attract his eye, pointing to the otherwise mysterious origins of his colorful and sensuous prints, sculptures, and paintings.

Considering the untraceability of the majority of Kelly’s work and that all of it is inspired by his specific observations of everyday life, *unknowability* becomes an important conceptual anchor that remained constant for the entirety of his career. He spent his life distilling fleeting, mundane moments of visual intrigue into artworks that take the viewer beyond their normal experience of the world. As curator Richard Axson put it, “[Kelly’s] paintings, sculptures, and prints are physical objects and a part of our sphere. His serene art, then...is a conduit between two realms: the phenomenal and the transcendental.”

Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923 Newburgh, New York; d. 2015 Spencertown, New York) has been the subject of major exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (New York), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York), and Whitney Museum of American Art (New York). He has mounted solo shows at Haus der Kunst (Munich), Menil Collection (Houston), National Gallery of Art (Washington DC), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Tate Liverpool, Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), and many other institutions around the world. Museums that own his work include the Centre Pompidou (Paris), Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Madrid), Museum of Modern Art (New York), and Tate Modern (London). The French government has awarded Kelly three medals, including the Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres in 2002; in 2013 President Obama awarded him the National Medal of Arts. In February 2018, coinciding with this exhibition, the Blanton Museum of Art (Austin) will unveil a freestanding, monumental building designed by Kelly—a space for joy and contemplation—with colored glass windows, a totemic redwood sculpture, and fourteen black-and-white marble panels.