

Ellsworth Kelly's Temple for Light

By M.H. MILLER FEB. 8, 2018



Ellsworth Kelly's "Austin," the artist's final work and only building, which opens this month at the University of Texas's Blanton Museum of Art. Credit Victoria Sambunaris

In 1986, Douglas S. Cramer — a producer of television shows including "Dynasty" and "The Love Boat" — asked the artist Ellsworth Kelly to design a free-standing structure on his vineyard near Santa Barbara, Calif. Cramer was a loyal collector of the artist, and wanted Kelly to make an original, large-scale artwork for his property. Kelly, who died in December 2015 at the age of 92 and whose career was defined by stripping painting and sculpture down to their elemental components of form and color, made designs for what appears from the outside to be a simple double-barrel-vaulted building, alluding to Romanesque and Cistercian religious architecture and resembling an igloo made of stucco. Inside, the artist had planned for a number of revelations. Colored-glass windows — arranged as a grid over the entrance, as a ring of tumbling squares on one side of the building, and a sunburst on the other — would bend the light in different ways. On the walls was Kelly's take on the stations of the cross — 14 marble panels, variations on stark black-and-white abstractions. In the rear of this single-room structure, where one would expect to find the crucifix in a Christian church, would be one of Kelly's totem sculptures — a thin column standing over the interior like a sentinel. The project eventually fell through; Kelly kept two models of the structure in his studio, though he never really believed the chapel would be built.

But in an unlikely end to this story, the artist's building has now been constructed on the grounds of the Blanton Museum of Art, on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, almost exactly as he had envisioned it 30 years ago. Kelly planned the piece, "Austin," which is 2,715 square feet with a 26-foot ceiling, in the final three years of his life with the help of

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Simone Jamille Wicha, the Blanton's director. (She was made aware of the project by Mickey and Jeanne Klein, who are collectors of Kelly's, alumni of the University of Texas and members of the museum's board.) Wicha helped raise the \$23 million necessary for construction and the endowment, and sent renderings and sample materials — for everything from the glass panes to the granite floor to the limestone used for the building's exterior (changed from the original plan's stucco to better withstand the Texas climate) — to Kelly's home in upstate New York, where he approved every aesthetic decision. Construction began two months before his death.

"Austin," which opens to the public this month, is very much the culmination of Kelly's oeuvre, not just a summation of his work's themes but his masterpiece, the grandest exploration of pure color and form in a seven-decade career spent testing the boundaries of both. It is also the kind of ambitious fantasy that artists rarely get to execute, in the same category as Christo and Jean-Claude's 20-year attempt to suspend six miles of fabric panels over the Arkansas River (a project he abandoned last year) or Michael Heizer's colossal "City," a mile-and-a-half-long sculpture in the Nevada desert that the artist has been building since 1972 and which the public has never seen and perhaps never will. There are precedents for "Austin" — for instance, Donald Judd's sprawling Chinati Foundation complex, which he worked on from 1979 until his death in 1994 to showcase his large-scale artworks and those of his contemporaries in the desert of Marfa, Tex.; Barnett Newman's 14-part abstract painting cycle from 1958 to 1966 interpreting the stations of the cross; the Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence on the French Riviera, completed in 1951, which was designed by Henri Matisse and displays his work; and Le Corbusier's 1954 Notre-Dame du Haut, a Roman Catholic chapel in eastern France. But it's possible that no contemporary artwork of this scale by a major artist has matched its creator's initial ambitions so perfectly as Kelly's "Austin."

When I visited Texas at the end of November to see the work, I was cautioned by various people that "Austin" is not, in any official sense, a chapel. The artist in fact turned down an offer to construct the work at a Catholic university because they asked that the building be consecrated, according to Kelly's partner of 32 years, Jack Shear, who described Kelly as "a nonbeliever" and "a transcendental anarchist."

"I mean, it's gonna be called a chapel whether anyone likes it or not," Shear told me. But, he says, "It's a chapel really dedicated to creativity. That's how I see it: It's a secular chapel." He compared this to the Rothko Chapel, the most inevitable analogue, a brick octagonal structure principally designed by the architect Philip Johnson, which features 14 moody, dark paintings by Rothko, who killed himself a year before the chapel opened in Houston, Tex. Since 1971, it has served as a nondenominational ecumenical center, with rotating texts from most of the world's major religions available on site for visitors to read.

The roots of "Austin" lie in Kelly's travels through Europe in his 20s. He served there in World War II as part of the Ghost Army, a secret unit that staged decoy military operations to confuse the Germans. He returned after the war ended and lived in France from 1948 to 1954, a time spent visiting his idols like Brancusi (whose distillations of sculpture into simple geometric shapes provided a model for Kelly's later work) and befriending Alexander Calder (who once lent him rent money), as well as Merce Cunningham and John Cage (who briefly lived in the same building as



A view of sunlight passing through Kelly's colored windowpanes inside "Austin."



Kelly's 18-foot totem sculpture in the rear of the building, where a cross would typically go in a church.



The front entrance, with a door made from Texas live oak and a grid of stained glass windows.

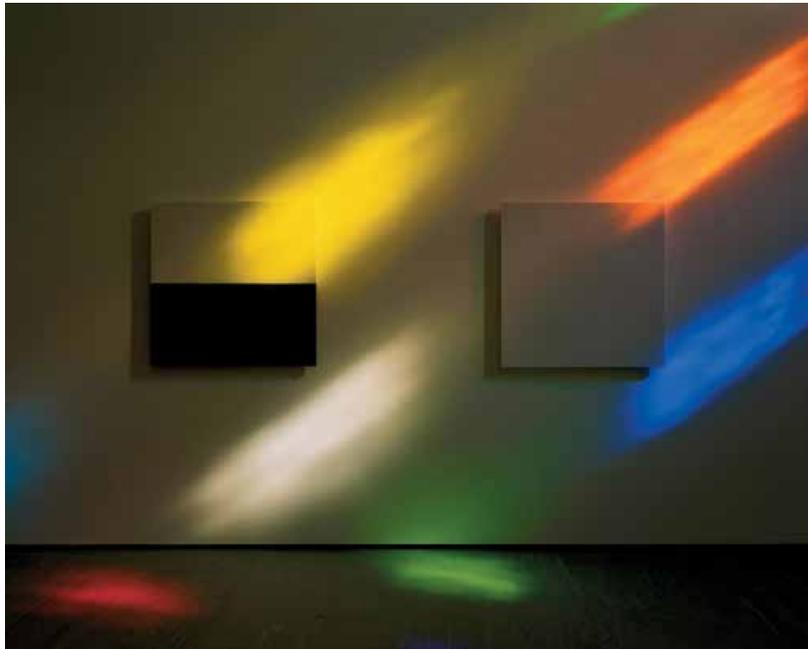
Photographs: Victoria Sambunaris

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he did in Paris). He also developed his ideas about art that focused on pure form and color, though his work from this time is heavily indebted as well to the medieval architecture he was seeing. An early painting from 1949 — a kind of Cubist portrait that riffs on Picasso — is named after Poitiers, a medieval French village known for its Romanesque structures, in particular the church Notre-Dame La Grande; Kelly used a part of its facade as the basis for the head in his portrait.

If many of Kelly's influences can be traced to his years in France, he was still very much a New York artist — he grew up about an hour outside the city — and by the time he returned to New York from Europe he was a fully formed visionary, one who caught the tail end of Abstract Expressionism while witnessing the first appearance of Pop. (Kelly referenced both of these schools in his work, though he belonged to neither.) From 1970 until his death he worked upstate, in a studio outfitted with skylights so he could make use of natural light. Why, then, for all his history in and around New York, did he decide to install his most monumental work in a town to which he had no real connection?

One reason is the fact of Texas itself — there was something bewitching about the state for artists of Kelly's generation. Wicha, the Blanton's director, attributes this to the light, which, like everything in Texas, is a little more intense than it is elsewhere. "These skies and these huge clouds that we have up here — it's different," she said. Judd was drawn to Texas in part because he was weary of the superficial chatter of the New York art world — he countered this malaise by buying enough land outside Marfa that he eventually owned a parcel nearly three times the size of Manhattan. Rothko, too, increasingly isolated by his fame in New York, likely thought of his chapel in Texas as a kind of refuge.



The light shining across Kelly's 14 black-and-white marble panels. The artist conceived of the work decades ago, but only saw his plans set in motion in the final years before his death in 2015. Credit Victoria Sambunaris

Still, the University of Texas — which has 51,525 students and whose most significant architectural monument before the arrival of Kelly's piece was the Darrell K Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium — is not the first place one would imagine to find a new icon of contemporary art. But in many ways the Blanton, which sits on the edge of campus, seems to have been a nearly fated home for the work. Part of this is simply because the university and museum were totally committed to Kelly's original vision and were willing to do the grueling work of fundraising for the project. (And in a small but telling detail, Carter Foster, the museum's deputy director for curatorial affairs, has the world's only original Ellsworth Kelly tattoo, which the artist designed for him and took seriously enough as a work that he assigned it an inventory number.)

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But “Austin” also fits here like a missing puzzle piece, situated so that it faces out toward the state capital building, as though staring down the entire city and yet blending into the landscape as if it had always been there. This city is known as a progressive beacon in an overwhelmingly conservative state. Long the music capital of the Southwest, it is now also a burgeoning outpost of the tech industry. But the presence of Kelly here almost instantaneously transforms it into an important art destination, the kind of place people make pilgrimages to.

The Chinati Foundation and the Rothko Chapel are both testaments to the artists that created them — self-monuments that the public can participate in — but they also required a great deal of outside help. Judd refurbished most of the already constructed and abandoned military buildings of Fort D.A. Russell for the Marfa site, and Rothko enlisted three architects to design and build his chapel. Kelly and the Blanton worked with an architect to construct “Austin,” but the overall design came from Kelly himself. Rarely has an artist blended art and architecture and painting and sculpture so seamlessly, in such a way that it memorializes not only his career, but also contains all aspects of it simultaneously. It was his final work, and it was planned in his final years of life, when he was on an oxygen tank and too sick with cancer to travel. And yet, unlike the Rothko Chapel, which is haunted by the suicide of its creator (in a 1958 commencement address at the Pratt Institute, Rothko said art must have “a clear preoccupation with death”), “Austin” is an unquestionably joyful space — a place where, as Kelly said in the months before his death, he wanted the viewer to be able to go and “rest your eyes, rest your mind.”

“When Ellsworth died, I had never had anybody so close to me die,” Shear told me as we talked at the Blanton. “I realized that there’s no language for death in America. I would sit next to people at dinner and they would say, ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’ But people’s idea about death is so weird in our culture. I say he’s still alive. He’s lucky. He’s an artist. His work is out there and it’s being shown. He’s still living in my book.”

A few minutes later we walked to the chapel and went inside. It was close to noon, and the sun poured through the glass panes above the entrance, flashes of green and orange and blue shimmering onto the granite floors. A full spectrum of light encircled the top arch of one wall, shadows bouncing off Kelly’s stations. In this setting, with the light from the panes slowly moving across their surfaces, the black and white patterns of the marble panels looked almost impossibly dramatic — they had become something primordial, like cave drawings, like the concept of black and white itself. Shear and I stood in silence for a time, watching the colors move around the room. When we left, Shear placed both hands on the front door and gave it a kiss, closing his eyes in a moment of brief fulfillment — as if he were kissing Kelly himself goodbye.



The exterior of the building, which is rendered in limestone. Credit Victoria Sambunaris