

# Art in America



View of Ellsworth Kelly's exhibition, showing two-panel relief paintings from 2004; at Matthew Marks.

## NEW YORK

### Ellsworth Kelly at Matthew Marks

The elimination of unnecessary detail is a sometime hallmark of late-career work; de Kooning's stunned, stunning whited-out last paintings are an example. Another, no less magisterial, is a pair of recent painting suites by the octogenarian Ellsworth Kelly. One, a quartet of two-panel reliefs completed in 2004, was shown—with close consideration of context—in the squarish room with a conspicuous center column that is Matthew Marks's upstairs space on 24th Street. In each relief, one rectangular canvas is laid over another, horizontal atop vertical, so as to expose the upper margin of the bottom canvas. The pairs involve strongly contrasting, not quite primary colors, including signature shades of warmed-up green and blue. Two green-blue reliefs faced each other across the room, the green on top in one and underneath in the other, suggesting, just barely, the difference between land- and seascape. The dimensions of these two are identical (80 by 74 inches, and 2¾ inches deep). In the other pair of facing reliefs, horizontal dimensions differ by roughly a foot, while the vertical remains constant, giving a hot yellow a fighting chance at counterbalancing the weight of orange-red in one, while cooler red narrows its hold over navy blue in the other. Together the four reliefs create a kind of anti-Rothko

chapel, crisply defined, powerfully resonant, joyous but not ecstatic—a chromatic tonic chord in a major key, played with force.

At the gallery's bigger, ground-floor space on 22nd Street—ruled, we are forced to note, by a grid of six skylights—color was eliminated altogether. In this, the main event, a group of black and white reliefs from 2006 was brought together for the first exhibition of Kelly paintings to focus exclusively on form. The initial impression they make is of dramatically stark simplicity, all suave sophistication and smart lines; Truman Capote's fancy-dress ball comes to mind. But here too, little differences ramify hugely, and the longer you spend with these paintings, the more mysterious they seem. Six are reliefs, again involving paired canvas panels, here one white and the other black; the bottom canvases completely circumscribe the top ones, which are diagonally placed quadrilaterals that may have a curved top; all top canvases are placed diagonally. The exception to this format is a grand triptych—it's nearly 20 feet wide—of abutted aluminum panels that only seems symmetrical. In fact, the central black rectangle is flanked by two similar but nonidentical whites. This Newman-sized work arms the faculties of discernment needed for the smaller canvas reliefs, where vertical dimensions are constant within each pair (they are 60, 80 and 84 inches high), while variations in width measured in fractional inches make black-grounded and white-grounded

versions of paired paintings seem equivalent when they're not. The result is an utterly engrossing combination of commanding austerity and stupefying complexity.

In a third Matthew Marks space (a more intimate room on 22nd Street) were a group of small ink drawings from 1954, in which Kelly recorded the shifting shadows that fell on the pages of a book he was reading while riding a bus. An almost filmic sequence of images composed in bold swooping strokes and eccentric abbreviations, this suite is breathtakingly lovely in itself and a graceful prologue for the paintings next door, if hardly necessary. Summary though they may be of a lifetime of work, the reliefs require no introduction at all.

—Nancy Princenthal