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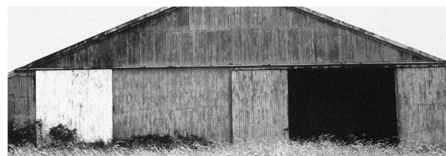

23 ART REVIEW
Ellsworth Kelly's photographs. BY PHILIP GEFTER

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A Minimalist Painter's Love Affair With Photography

PHILIP GEFTER

ART REVIEW

In 1862, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres led a group of French artists and intellectuals in a campaign against photography, signing an official petition denouncing the "industrial" method as anathema to the artist.

A century later, the art world still looked down its nose at the medium. Yet the camera, with the ability to render the actual world in precise optical detail, has been a secret weapon for artists since photography's inception, from Thomas Eakins to Edgar Degas, Charles Sheeler, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol.

Ellsworth Kelly, who died in December, first picked up a camera in 1950 and began making pictures as "records of my vision, how I see things," he told an interviewer in 1991. Now, the first exhibition of Mr. Kelly's photographs is at the Matthew Marks gallery, more than 30 gelatin silver prints made over four decades. His straightforward pictures of houses, barns, brick walls and winter branches yield the same distinctive observation of perceptual phenomena so characteristic of his hard-edge paintings, sculpture and prints: Rectangles float; shadows fall into hard-edge shapes; surfaces reveal evenly mottled patterns and unlikely grids.

Black-and-white photography was tailor-made for these interests. His simple picture of a barn in Southampton, N.Y., for example, is a study in elementary geometry, underscored by the pure black, white and grayness of the photographic print. He divided the picture frame into three precise strips: On top, the gabled roof is a well-balanced triangle; underneath it is a wall composed of squares and rectangles, one painted white, and another a deep-black opening bookended by two gray doors; below is a lighter shade of evenly patterned grass.

Once you see the structural components and the geometric contours, the barn itself seems rather incidental.

His photographs show the layered planes of the three-dimensional world as seen by the eye before the mind can identify the objects within it. "Sidewalk, Los Angeles, 1978" is both a perceptual riddle and a lesson: The skinny shadow of a vertical signpost falls flat against the pavement and then turns abruptly up the wall. It may not have been his intent to identify a law of physics in everyday life, but shadows bend with their surroundings. This image is something of a found drawing: The black lines of the post and its shadow construct an incomplete square that defines the picture surface, while the receding sidewalk pulls the eye back and creates an optical illusion.

Mr. Kelly was interested in the 19th-century photographers Timothy O'Sullivan and Carleton Watkins, both of whom made pictures of vast landscapes that flattened into line and shape; he believed they were "doing things

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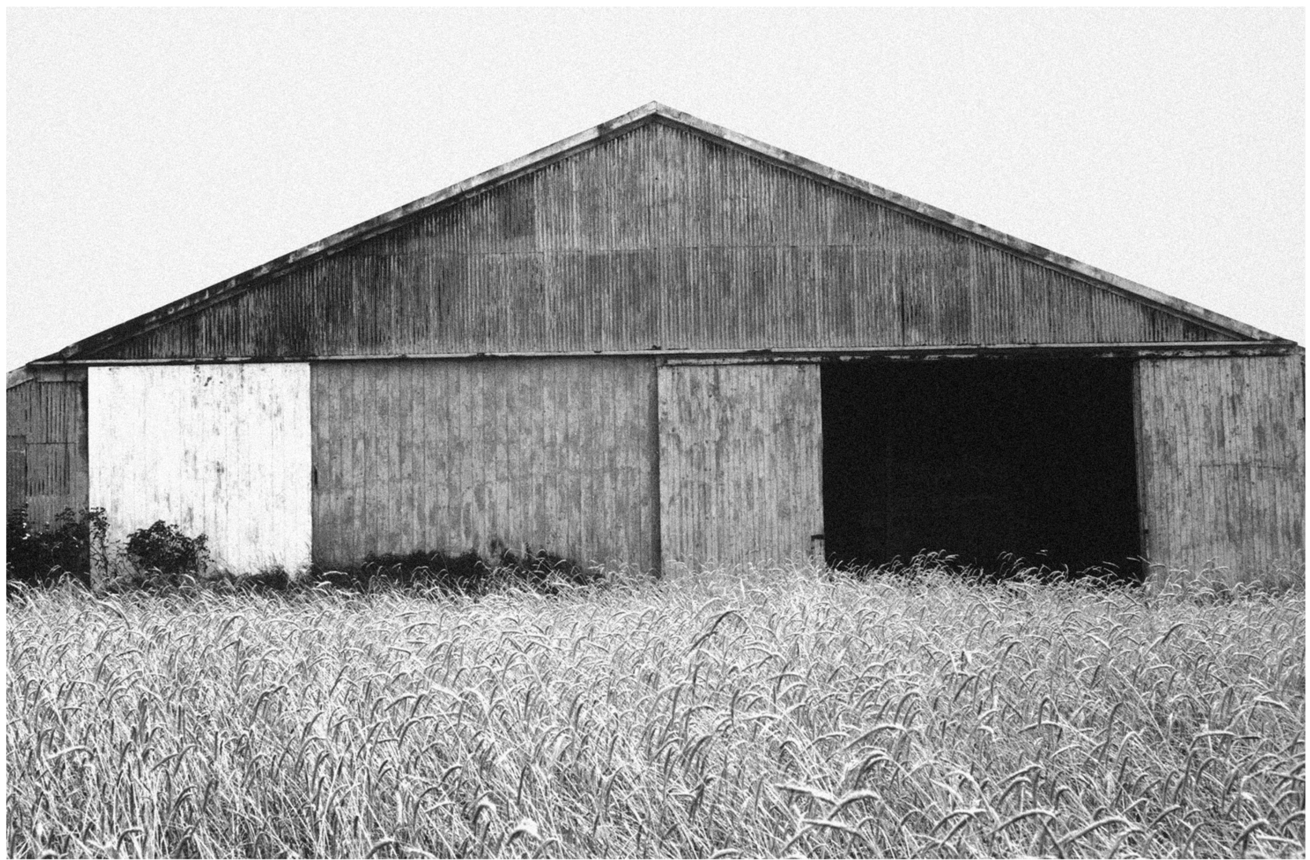

Ellsworth Kelly Photographs *"Barn, Southampton," a gelatin silver print from 1968, is part of the first exhibition of this painter's photographs, on view at the Matthew Marks gallery.*

with form that no one was doing in painting."

"Photography is for me a way of seeing things from another angle," he said, describing, for example, the way a scene viewed through the spindles of a chair is altered by moving perceptibly in one direction or another. In other words, everything is rearranged depending on how it is framed, and Mr. Kelly explored an endless variety of new arrangements to see how they might reside on the surface of the picture plane.

Throughout his career, Mr. Kelly was compelled by the interplay of two and three dimensions, and he investigated "how things look" in several mediums. His interest in taking pictures, though, was less about presenting them as fully resolved works; photography was simply another means for him to identify and examine the formal characteristics of visible reality.

Mr. Kelly is associated with Minimal art, not only because he first became known when the movement surfaced in the 1960s but also because his affinity for primary color and essential form adhered to Minimalist ideas about distilling the object to nothing but the thing itself, stripped to the essential facts, devoid of metaphor and pretense. The art object was less important than the experience of looking at it.

The shadows, outlines and juxtaposition of elements that preoccupied him are things, he noted, that early man would have seen. They are the visual building blocks that toddlers see as they try to comprehend the vicissitudes of the physical world.

The camera is a neutral device. Edward Weston, who photographed patterns and structures in nature, drew a distinction between making pictures to learn about the world and those that impose a vision upon it. It was his intention to make pictures, he once said, not as "an interpretation, a biased opinion of what nature should be, but a revelation — an absolute, impersonal recognition of the significance of facts."

It is edifying to look at Mr. Kelly's photographs with their deadpan fidelity to the actual world, and to be reminded of the purity of the camera in service of the artist trying to understand the perceptual building blocks of his own experience — and of ours. "I realized I didn't want to compose pictures," he told The New York Times in 1996. "I wanted to find them." And he did.

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