

# ARTFORUM

## Ellsworth Kelly

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Piet Mondrian painted flowers; Ellsworth Kelly draws plants—has done so regularly since the late '40s. The selection of "Plant Drawings" in this show included works from 1960–69, and from 1980 to the present; apparently Kelly did fewer of these in the '70s. There is little sense of development over time in these works, which only adds to their air of objectivity, to the feeling that they are exercises in something other than style. What draws "absolute" abstractionists to the botanical? When Kelly says, "I found an object and 'presented' it as itself alone. . . . It had to be exactly as it was, with nothing added," one senses that plant life's lack of resistance echoes his own will to passivity before the object. More pointedly, what these representational works in black and white share with Kelly's more famous paintings—nonobjective despite their origins in things seen, and so often about voluptuous color—is a privileging of the edge, whether of the canvas or of the lines that delineate a form.

Although Kelly's line here is sensitive, never at all mechanical, it is also clear that he strives to maintain a certain forceful evenness of touch. There's hardly any differentiation of tone beyond the sheer contrast of white and black, and where there is, it usually weakens the drawing—just clear, tensile, elastic lines enclosing distinct forms. There are telling variations in thickness and pressure, but always within a pretty narrow range of difference, though the results can be quite dramatic. Only one, *Siberian Iris*, 1989, is drawn in thick strokes so that the whole form is black. The rest are drawn in outline, and often give the strange impression that the leaf and petal forms are not palpable figures against a ground, but something more like holes cut into it. These voids, however, possess a paradoxical fullness, a weight or volume manifested as pressure against the paper they inhabit. They give the sense of one quantity of white pressing against another through a taut membrane of black: highly condensed absences pressing against their container.

As this exhibition demonstrates, Kelly has always shared certain affinities with Henri Matisse: he has analytically mastered the domains of color and of drawing by strategically detaching one from the other. But despite many Matissean moments here, the artist these drawings most forcefully recall is another master of outline: Egon Schiele, the author of all those feverishly observed nudes with unerringly tensed contours—structurally severe yet sensually extreme. Kelly's drawings can be just as fiercely erotic. That what's shown are not vaginas, penises, and nipples but stems, leaves, and buds makes this effort all the more breathtakingly perverse—or maybe just lonely. In any case it's fascinating to realize that Kelly's Zen-like detachment may only be the most sublimated version of what Expressionism grasped as alienation.

—Barry Schwabsky