

Art in America

Ellsworth Kelly at Matthew Marks

The two small drawings at the beginning of this exhibition of 28 self-portraits are from 1944, when Ellsworth Kelly was 21 years old. *Self-Portrait at Normandy* (1944) is boldly brushed in ink and was roughly torn from a spiral-bound, lined notebook. In an essay for a catalogue that explores this drawing and 23 more, Mondrian scholar Harry Cooper, who enjoys access to Kelly on these matters, explains that Kelly made the

drawing by candlelight in an army tent. June of '44 saw the Allied invasion of France. Kelly declines to award himself anything like the fancy-pants good looks of Milton Caniff heroes such as Steve Canyon. Kelly's drawing has the in-your-face pathos of the dog-face soldier buddies of Bill Mauldin, then 23, who became a cartoonist for the Army daily *Stars & Stripes* that same year. Kelly's Normandy image bears the look of weariness to death, the head disembodied, like a mask. By September, Kelly was in Paris.

There are confident blue ink brushstrokes in *Self-Portrait, Verdun* of the same year. With the forward hunch peculiar to the genre, Kelly looks down to drawing paper from looking up at a mirror, cheating his gaze to record what he has seen. A handsome young man, the cheekbones and almost delicate slope of his nose are modeled with deft passages of brush. Kelly saved this drawing more carefully, removing the spiral wire of the binding to avoid tearing the sheet. *Self-Portrait with Mirror*

(1947) at first seems casual in its layered observations. The seated Kelly holds a sketchpad in his reflected left hand, his drawing hand concealed, and stretches both legs toward a full-length mirror. Totally absorbed, he rests his right foot on the mirror's corner as though poised to thrust the mirror's plane into another dimension, to keep it from sliding forward, or himself from crashing through the looking glass. There are a few objects on the floor that interrupt the diagonals struck by its planking. Of further interest given the nature of Kelly's work to come, the mirror's frame strikes a bold vertical band down through the drawing, dividing the studio between the dual representations of the unseen and the seen.

There is an informal, reflective aspect to most of these drawings, like a conversation between the idea and its form. Sometimes a drawing anticipates the line of early Warhol, and there are other drawings in the evident manner of Picasso and Matisse. In 1992, an older Kelly visited St. Martin in the French West Indies. He peers over the rims of his glasses,

finishing the drawing with a pencil grasped in the representation of his reflected right hand, and at that moment, the artist and his double connect at the end of a nearly unbroken line.

—Edward Leffingwell