

"Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective"

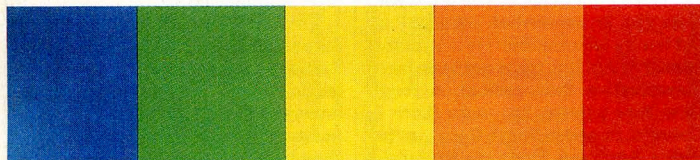
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum through Jan 15 (see Museums).

While the Guggenheim is a great building, with a personality all its own, it's a challenging place to install challenging art. Viewing a show there is an uphill battle, so to speak, especially in the present case, a 50-year summation of Ellsworth Kelly's pivotal role in the evolution of abstraction. The exhibition is a daunting prospect, with 287 works in all, including painting, sculpture, photographs, drawings and collages.

In pursuit of the perfect curve, Kelly took perception itself as his subject and explored it in a language that prefigured the rigors of Minimalism and color-field painting. His flying wedges, steep angles, implied folds and biomorphic shapes liberated painting from the traditional rectangle, and if the chance to see them in living color along the Guggenheim's spiraling ramp excites you as it did me, be warned: The reality is different. Here, Kelly's methodically ordered universe looks lopsided and chaotic—not a bad trick, but not a particularly engaging one.

Although this generally informative show is hardly a disappointment, the overbearing architecture often deflates the transcendent quality of Kelly's best work and has the peculiar effect of reducing even the more monumental pieces to mere ephemera. The opposite is true of a Kelly show running concurrently at Matthew Marks, in Chelsea, where seven vaguely rectangular or diamond-shaped canvases (all from 1996) seem to dance across the walls. Their lucid colors, sensible spacing and rational proportions place the viewer at the center of a grand color wheel, proving that magic can come from a perfect balance of scale. In comparison, the Guggenheim's installation gives the impression of squeezing blood from a stone. Fortunately, some of the work manages to defy the burden of the surrounding architecture. Early in the show, the young Kelly's intimations of the path he would later follow seem to cozy right up to the wall.

Before he was drafted into the army in 1943, Kelly studied at Pratt and Boston's Museum School. In 1948, he went to Paris, where he saw the work of Mondrian and Duchamp and met Brancusi, John Cage and Jean Arp. In such delicately hued 1949 works as *Kilometer Marker* and *Tableau Vert*, from 1952, Kelly appears to have already acquired his mature pictorial vocabulary. He hit on the shaped-panel idea as early as 1950, with *Window V*, a narrow white rectangle whose top-left corner has been lopped off, its surface broken at unpredictable intervals by black bands of varying widths. Kelly soon abandoned this strategy to fill his pictorial field with pure, unmodulated color, building multiple-panel paintings whose now-Matissean colors were



Ellsworth Kelly, *Blue Green Yellow Orange Red*, 1966.

CRITIC'S PICKS

1. **"Jasper Johns: A Retrospective"**
Museum of Modern Art, through Jan 21 (see Museums)
2. **"Ellsworth Kelly, An Installation: Seven New Paintings"**
Matthew Marks Gallery, through Jan 19 (see Chelsea)
3. **Cindy Sherman**
Metro Pictures, through Nov 23 (see Soho)
4. **Matthew Ritchie, "The Hard Way"**
Basilico Fine Arts, through Nov 23 (see Soho)

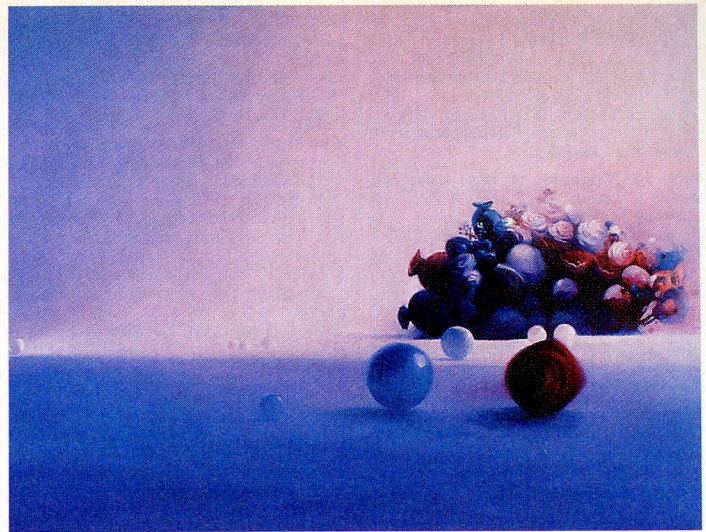
arranged by the chance operations he picked up from Arp.

Back in New York in 1954, Kelly moved into a loft on an East River dock known as Coenties Slip. His neighbors were Agnes Martin, Robert Indiana and Jack Youngerman, a fellow student in Paris. In the company of these anti-illusionist artists who valued the elements of form over the gestural heroics of Abstract Expressionism, Kelly returned to deploying odd, curving shapes within a rectangular frame, joining separate panels into asymmetrical "reliefs," cross-breeding triangles and squares of contrasting colors, stretching trapezoids, slicing circles, attaching conical "heads" to rhomboid "bodies" and generally molding space with color and shape. In 1970, he moved upstate to Spencertown, where he began to favor the monumental over the manageable, inventing new, bannerlike forms out of those he had earlier distilled from observation.

What all of Kelly's work has at its center—and what the museum's curatorial treatment tends to dull—is the sense of play involved in its making. This does surface in the meticulous photographs and works on paper collected in the Mapplethorpe Gallery, midway up the ramps. For this viewer, it was the high point of the show. With some exceptions (*Rebound*, *Red Green*, *Yellow Black and Blue Curve*), the plethora of eccentric reliefs and attenuated totems unintentionally underscores the superficial vacancy of Kelly's art and points mostly to his feats of engineering.

It's not unusual for what once was radical to appear conventional in later years, but walking through this show is a little like swimming inside a lava lamp. One doesn't ponder so much as squint at the art, whose generally ascetic nature may not be the stuff of a crowd-pleasing blockbuster. But in the leaves of his Paris plant drawings, in the photographs of broken windows, snowy hilltops, slanting rooftops and looping electrical lines, in the postcard collages, ink studies and especially in the multihued cutouts from which he drew his cool geometries, we can see the shape of things to come.

—Linda Yablonsky



Lisa Yuskavage, *Still-Life*, 1996.

Lisa Yuskavage

Boesky & Gallery Fine Art, through Nov 16 (see Soho).

Lisa Yuskavage's work describes a hermetic world inhabited by a mythological race of misshapen, sloe-eyed nymphoids and Amazons. Some are distinguished by huge turned-up asses, while others have pendulous breasts or pig noses. Yuskavage's supporters claim these paintings challenge the controlling, paternalistic authority of "the male gaze," a view that doesn't entirely account for the wrenching self-hatred apparent in these works.

Yuskavage is a painter who deals with the difficulty of living inside female flesh these days. But while the power of the so-called male gaze to warp a woman's self-esteem may be the pretext here, Yuskavage's subjects project a sexuality that seems entirely of their own making.



Tony Tasset, *Snake*, 1994.

"Shit"

Baron/Boisante, through Nov 16 (see 57th Street).

In 1896, Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* outraged Parisian audiences by beginning with the exclamation "Shit!" From then on, excrement became the ne plus ultra of the culturally extreme, providing an easy badge with which to advertise one's avant-garde intentions. In the past few years, a number of artists have focused on feces, gilding the lily of the one act of creation virtually every human achieves daily. This is the show that was bound to happen, and the gallerists here have approached their material with scholarly finesse.

Of course, Piero Manzoni's historical milestone (*Artist's Shit*, 1961) is here, along with other important period pieces. The curators have unearthed a *Shit Sculpture* from 1964 by the team of

The simplest of these paintings are the best. *Motherfucking Rock* depicts a creature with blond Bo-Peep hair, giant breasts and swelling hips. In *Wrist Corsage*, a naked woman with an exaggerated behind and emaciated arms looks at a portrait of a boyish girl. Rusty reds and acidic greens dominate here, and like these colors, Yuskavage's vision has darkened and become more Mannerist than in her previous works.

But many of these paintings get bogged down in unnecessary narrative detail and academic, illustrational style. *Still-Life*, the biggest canvas in the show, ends up looking like standard sci-fi cover art; it leaves one to wonder whether Yuskavage's technique—in spite of its being hailed by no less than Chuck Close—isn't simply a sort of brainy calendar art. —Jerry Saltz

Sam Goodman and Boris Lurie, one of a number of similar pieces exhibited in the "No-Sculpture Show" at the Gertrude Stein Gallery in New York that year. (A catalog of this trivial exhibition seems to have been influential to an aesthetic scene that developed in Los Angeles in the late 1980s.) A video by Kurt Kren of a Gunther Brus action of 1967 reiterates the Viennese Actionists' love of all things bodily and disgusting. George Maciunas, a leader of the Fluxus movement, is represented by a clinical plastic box from 1973 that documents a number of different craps.

Almost half of the works in the show give equal time to the BMs of other species: Not Vital's bronzed cow-pies; Dieter Rot's "chocolate" bunnies; Rosemarie Trockel's photo-etchings of *Caterpillar Fa(e)ces*, which look like really cute lint. British artist Chris Ofili sculpts with elephant doo, in what would appear to be a rather desperate attempt to reconnect with his African heritage.

Only a few pieces really exploit the abstract, sensual richness of the material under examination. Among them are Tony Tasset's luscious, cast-iron *Snake* and Florio Ruenter's mysterious black-and-white photograph of a communal Yemeni loo. And in the end, it is only the fun-loving Gilbert & George who break the monotony of monochrome with their poster of Day-Glo logs floating high above their own shit-eating grins.

—Peter Nagy