

A LOVE AFFAIR WITH PLANTS

Ellsworth Kelly's plant drawings at the Metropolitan Museum demonstrate the eloquence of line and form.



Ellsworth Kelly (American, b. 1923) Four Sunflowers, 1957, Graphite on paper 20 1/2 x 24 3/4 in. Private collection © Ellsworth Kelly Photograph Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

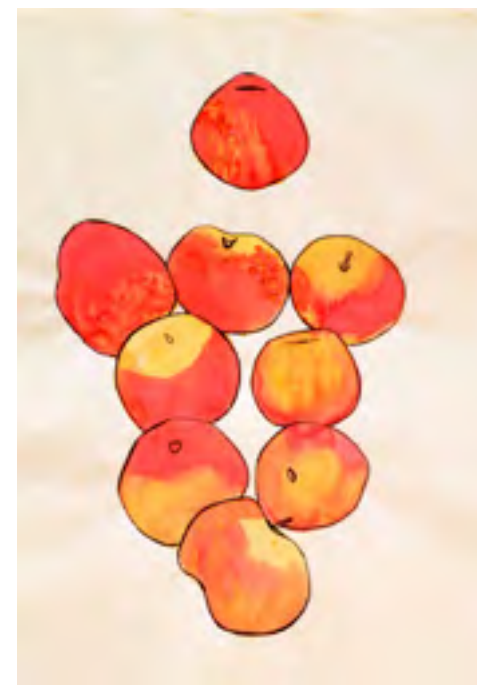
by Sara Evans

Eighty-nine-year-old Ellsworth Kelly is one of the pillars of Abstract Expressionism, a major figure in both Color Field and Minimalist painting. His abstractions are precise, tight and geometric, with color-block grids and intensely hued, hard-edged forms floating in space.

But there is a softer, less well-known side to Kelly's work. Along with his endless explorations of the possibilities of abstraction, the artist has, since the 1940's, when he lived in Paris, had a love affair with plants. These drawings are light years away from traditional botanical drawings, which usually feel obliged to reveal every nuance of every plant.

Kelly's botanical drawings are, in the truest sense, representational abstractions, in that they extract and convey, in the simplest of line, the very essence of each plant he draws. A cluster of apples, a stalk of corn, a long twist of seaweed, a woodland teasel, each is portrayed by Kelly in its truest form.

The current exhibition, "Ellsworth Kelly: Plant Drawings," on view at the Metropolitan Museum in New York until September 2012, is the first major museum exhibition dedicated exclusively to the artist's drawings of plants, flowers, and leaves. This exhibition, curated by Marla Prather, is made possible in part by the Gail and Parker Gilbert Fund and the Jane and Robert Carroll Fund. The selection



Ellsworth Kelly (American, b. 1923) Apples, 1949, Watercolor and graphite on paper, 24 3/4 x 19 3/8 in. Private collection © Ellsworth Kelly Photograph Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

of approximately 75 drawings begins in 1948 during Kelly's early sojourn in Paris and continues throughout his travels to his most recent work made in upstate New York. Kelly's renderings of plants, (he calls them portraits), are precisely observed studies of forms in nature. They are also steeped in memory and personal experience. "The most pleasurable thing in the world, for me," the artist once said, "is to see something, and then to translate how I see it." Although Kelly occasionally introduces brushed color in his exquisite depictions of blossoms, leaves, or fruit, he generally favors contour drawing in graphite or ink. Visiting this exhibit is an exercise in tranquility, a perfect way to pass a hot New York summer afternoon. (In conjunction with the exhibition, Schirmer/Mosel has published an exquisite book, "Ellsworth Kelly: Plant Drawings", by Michael Semff and Marla Prather.)

To experience Ellsworth Kelly at his most abstract, trot down to the Morgan Museum and Library, where three of his abstract sculptures are currently on view. Mr. Kelly is less known for his work as a sculptor. Yet his interest in the discipline dates to the 1950s and the early years of his career when he began to work with wood, attracted to the beauty of its grain and colors. In the ensuing years and to the present day, the artist has continued his three-dimensional explorations.

(The go-to dealer for Ellsworth Kelly's signed botanical lithographs is the Barbara Krakow Gallery on Newbury Street in Boston: www.barbarakrakovgallery.com.) ♦



Ellsworth Kelly (American, b. 1923) Wild Grape 1961 Watercolor on paper 22 1/8 x 28 1/2 in. Private collection © Ellsworth Kelly Photograph Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



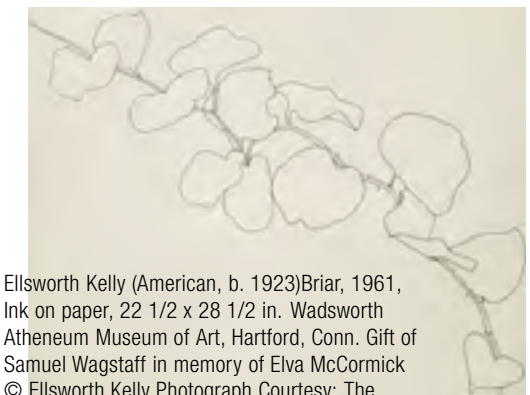
Ellsworth Kelly (American, b. 1923) Oak, 1964 Graphite on paper, 28 1/2 x 22 1/2 in. Private collection © Ellsworth Kelly Photograph Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Ellsworth Kelly (American, b. 1923) Seaweed, 1949, Ink on paper, 66 x 8 1/2 in. Private collection © Ellsworth Kelly Photograph Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Ellsworth Kelly (American, b. 1923) Teasel, 1949, Brush and ink with dry stylus on paper, 22 1/8 x 17 in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Gift of The Brown Foundation, Inc. © Ellsworth Kelly Photograph Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Ellsworth Kelly (American, b. 1923) Briar, 1961, Ink on paper, 22 1/2 x 28 1/2 in. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn. Gift of Samuel Wagstaff in memory of Elva McCormick © Ellsworth Kelly Photograph Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Ellsworth Kelly, Untitled, 1986, Bronze 120 x 17 1/4 x 1 1/4 inches, Edition of 2, Private collection, Ellsworth Kelly: Sculpture installation at the Morgan, Photography: Graham S. Haber



Ellsworth Kelly, Untitled, 1986, Bronze 120 x 17 1/4 x 1 1/4 inches, Edition of 2, Private collection, Ellsworth Kelly: Sculpture installation at the Morgan, Photography: Graham S. Haber