

‘Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons
make art which sells for a lot of
money – it’s about entertainment’

*He mixes his own paint, and does his own painting. Tim Teeman
meets Ellsworth Kelly, 88, one of the last great artists*

PORTRAIT Todd Eberle



Ellsworth Kelly in his
Spencertown studio with
Red Curve, 1986-2006

The studio, in the upstate New York rural hamlet of Spencertown, is huge, light, many-roomed, modern and slate grey. In an office anteroom, Ellsworth Kelly is dressed in brown shirt and brown trousers scuffed with dried patches of white paint. He has a weatherbeaten face, wispy white hair and clay-coloured lips. Then I see the thin oxygen tubes going into his nose. I ask what they are for and he hustles me into a studio room “to see the new work”.

Kelly, 88, is one of the foremost masters of American abstraction, famed for his canvases of vivid colour and contrasts. Along with Jasper Johns, a near-neighbour, Kelly is one of the last living artistic greats of his generation, with casual anecdotes about brushing up alongside Picasso and Miró and the theatrics of Giacometti. He is still working determinedly, with a show of his giant wood sculptures in Boston currently running until March, and exhibitions featuring his drawings of plants and new black and white canvases on display in Munich, also until next spring. Age has not slowed him. In January he will exhibit new colour canvases at Matthew Marks, his New York gallery, while the city’s Metropolitan Museum of Art will exhibit the plant drawings in June.

Kelly’s partner of 27 years’ standing, Jack Shear, runs his life and business affairs with an assistant, Sandi Knakal; two art assistants stretch Kelly’s canvases for him, but Kelly mixes all his own oil paints and does his own painting: almost a curio today in the world of brash, celebrity artists such as Jeff Koons, well known for using staff to realise their creations. The tubes in his nose are connected, via snaking thicker rubber tubes, to oxygen canisters; from room to room he discards one headset of rubber tubes for another.

“They just found out my heart doesn’t make enough oxygen,” Kelly reveals, showing me the new colour paintings to be exhibited in New York this month. “The machines make oxygen, then I have tanks I carry around outside. I guess it’s my age. I smoked in Paris for a few years but that was years ago. They said my blood was in bad shape for a non-smoker and all I can think is it’s the turpentine that I’ve been using for 60 years.” He had been in Madrid for the opening of a show when he had trouble breathing and “found I couldn’t walk that much”.

Suddenly he indicates the paintings in front of us: beautiful, vivid contrasts of colour that use relief and radial curves; orange overlaps blue, blue overlaps black. He was first interested in relief when he started painting in 1949 in Paris, white on whites at first, before his best-known early work, the 64 panels in *Colors for a Large Wall*, first used multiple



‘Picasso invited me into his car, but I didn’t go. He was a rogue, a wild guy, the most creative of all’

colours. “I was painting figuratively in 1948 and 1949, then asked myself, ‘What am I going to do?’” he recalls. “I could see what Picasso and Matisse were doing and I met [Francis] Picabia, [Georges] Vantongerloo and Giacometti. He was wonderful, very whimsical. He came to an opening of mine, and said, ‘Oh, you’re the one who did that big picture [*Colors*]; let’s look at it.’ He liked it and I said I’d like to see him once in a while, but I never stayed long. I last saw him at La Coupole. He sat down. My companion and I stood up, and knocked our glasses of water over. He looked at us and said, ‘Wow, you guys are really impressed, aren’t you?’”

Kelly bumped into Picasso, his enduring inspiration, “several times in some strange ways”, including when he was 24, walking near the artist’s Parisian studio when Picasso’s car ➔

Kelly in his Broad Street studio in New York, 1956

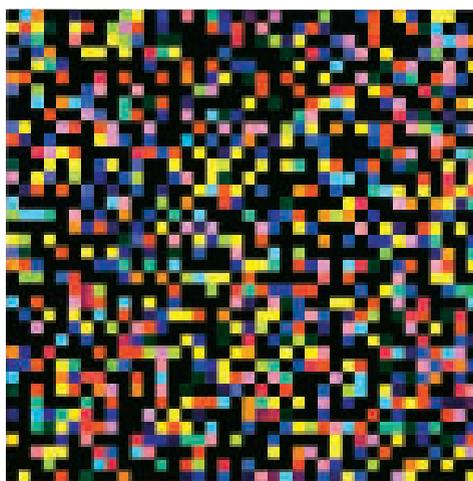
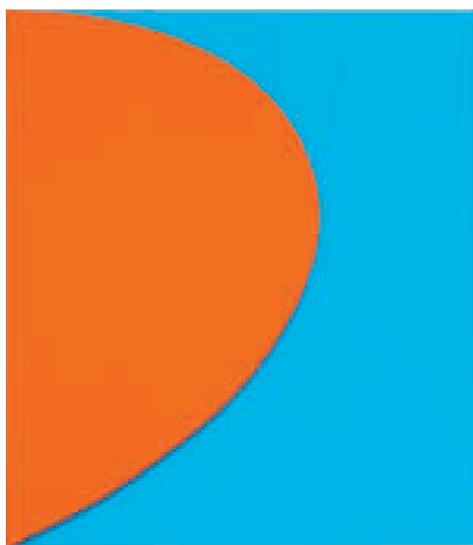
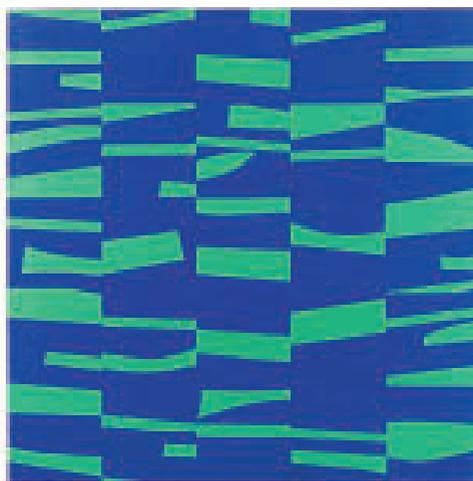
almost backed into him. “He was in the back seat. I went, ‘Ahhh.’ He leaned forward and said, ‘Do I know you?’ and I said, ‘No.’ He invited me into his car but I didn’t go. I didn’t speak very good French and he would have kicked me out after five minutes. Picasso was a rogue really, a wild guy, the most competent and creative of all the artists in that school in Paris. He and Matisse flowed back to each other and influenced each other.” Perhaps his most dramatic encounter was with Joan Miró at the Spanish painter’s studio in Majorca in the Sixties. “He was worried about his place with the new generation of Abstract Expressionists. I was the messenger. He said desperately, ‘What’s going on with these American painters? I’m being forgotten.’ I said, ‘You’re not being forgotten; you’re the master Miró.’”

Suddenly we are standing beside a Picasso drawing Kelly owns. “Look at the way he breaks up the body: here’s an arm resting on a breast and a knee; the other breast is resting on the back. The foot close to you is small, the other one is huge, making a centrepiece of her private parts. It’s beautifully drawn.” Why did Kelly choose to major in the abstract? “The figurative seemed too personal,” he replies. “There was nothing more that I could do after Matisse, Picasso, Brancusi and Mondrian. I felt like I had to do something I hadn’t seen before, and in Paris I began to see new things like architecture which echoed that. I began to look at things and make them abstract.”

He is much happier talking about painting than personal matters, though his adventures in Paris appear a world away from Kelly’s stultifying New Jersey upbringing. He was closer to his father, Allan, an insurance company executive, than his mother, Florence: “I didn’t want to work for anybody and felt drawn to arts and museums. My dad said, ‘Whatever you want to do is OK.’ My mother was rather strict. By the time I was 17 or 18 we didn’t see eye to eye at all.” He was a “very solitary” small boy who didn’t like sports. His paternal grandmother and mother took him birdwatching, an early inspiration as most birds featured two or three defining colours: “I was astounded by the abstraction of the colours of the birds.” He was also ill with a lung disease that, before modern surgery, doctors had to cut into his back to treat.

“I felt a little bit outside my family,” he says. “I’ve never been a family person at all, because it’s not very smart. You have to find yourself. Parents have their job, I suppose, but most of them are more interested in themselves and if they only let their children alone, some of them might have a few of their own ideas or go wild.” However, his mother supported his application to the well-known artistic Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he had a “good time” finally living away from home.

After Pratt, he joined the army and a unit



Works by Ellsworth Kelly,
from top: **Meschers, 1951,**
oil on canvas; **Orange**
Relief with Blue, 2011, oil

on wood; Spectrum
Colors Arranged by
Chance, 1951-53,
oil on canvas

nicknamed the Ghost Army, “nowhere near the front line”, devoted to creating objects such as inflatable tanks to deceive the enemy. In 1946 he enrolled at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (“where all I did was draw and paint nudes”). He hitchhiked to New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the work of Picasso and Brancusi. Then came the École Nationale Supérieure in Paris, where he started painting, had his first solo show and those encounters with artists. Returning to the US in 1954, Kelly asked his mother for \$200 for the boat and \$200 for the passage of his paintings. “Overly protective”, she was “always annoyed” by his decamping to Paris, he thinks. “Maybe mothers have that feeling to have their children close to them.”

Kelly says the English “got” his art early. Laughing, he recalls meeting Francis Bacon in 1962 over supper. Because the sybaritic artist was so drunk, Kelly escorted him home: “I was young, shy.” At his studio Bacon told him it had just been broken into by – it turned out – George Dyer, who would become Bacon’s companion: “The joy of meeting someone who comes to steal your painting,” says Kelly, smiling. Did Bacon flirt with you? “He assumed...” says Kelly, “in a way, yeah.” Did you have sex? “No, no, no.” You turned down Francis Bacon, I say. “Well he was drunk,” says Kelly. Did you fancy him? “No, no, no, but as an artist, yes.” He was also a friend of Lucian Freud’s – “really alert, contemplative” – and met Henry Moore at the Serpentine Gallery. Moore shook his hand and said grandly, “Oh I know your work... of course I don’t.” Both men laughed. “That’s how artists talk to each other,” says Kelly.

In New York, he knew Andy Warhol in the late Fifties, when the artist was very young and “always wearing suits. He had his Factory and frankly I was not very much moved by that.” Around the same time, he and a group of artists including Robert Indiana and Agnes Martin lived and worked together in Lower Manhattan. He was good friends with Roy Lichtenstein (“serious, a very hard worker, whimsical”) and stays in touch with Jasper Johns, although there seems to be a *froideur* there. When I ask if they are friends, Kelly says, “I need to be careful what I say. I see him once in a while – close friends, well, no, but as friends go... yeah, he’s a good one.”

For Kelly, “The public still hasn’t accepted abstract art. Warhol is all about content, but in my pictures there’s not really any content but an abstract content, which is elusive: it’s in the shape, colour and how to look at what’s happening in the picture. People say, ‘You take a lot out of your paintings.’ I say, ‘I don’t take a lot out. I don’t put that much in to begin with.’ I’ve always counted on things coming to me in a flash.” Did he make money quickly when he started out? “No, very slow, but rents were ➔

\$45 a month back then. In Paris in 1958 I was getting \$200 for a painting. A year later I sold one to the Whitney [Museum in New York] for \$1,500. Slowly it went up. I wasn't that concerned about money as long as I could continue doing what I was doing. Paintings became valuable when people moved their money away from antiques."

How does Kelly feel about Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and the cult of the high-rolling celebrity artist? "You can't avoid their work," he says. "It's complicated. Younger artists are searching for a new way; their painting, performance art, scattered art – a lot of it is figurative and I automatically discount anything figurative. I've lived for 60 years with abstraction. I left figurative art because I was bored of it. Why make art of something you've looked at? I want to make art of something I haven't seen before. I'm not a talking person. Words don't come as easily as ideas do. I don't feel it's normal to be open about things. Tracey Emin loves the opposite."

He is private, then? "I don't like exposure. I see the auction catalogues. I know Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst make art objects which sell for a lot of money, but they're on a different plane than Picasso, Matisse, Pollock, de Kooning and Rothko. There's a tradition of painting, of art, which is being broken up with their kind of performance and entertainment." Does he see it as art? "They feel they're making art, I guess. I'm still painting the way I always have. I paint for painters I have liked, or who are older than me: Picasso, and going back farther, Monet and Manet and the Renaissance – I'd like to know what they would think of my work. Of course that's silly, but someone said that for the younger generation the Renaissance doesn't count any more because they're into something very different, which is adventuresome, full of energy, breaking things. Picasso said you always have to break something to put it together. I don't agree. When I get an idea, I'm very excited it's come."

Has he suffered from depression? "Yes, I have," he says tersely. "Two years ago. It's all part of growing old. You can't understand it. I kept it to myself. You don't talk about it. Then things get better. There are medicines for things like that." Does he take them? "Yes, all old people take half a dozen pills. I have good doctors. I feel great now that I've got my oxygen. I can paint. I can do everything except move around, I can't fly. My doctor said my depression was like getting a disease as you get older. You lose some of the chemicals in your body and they give you the right chemicals to fill in what you lost." Had he suffered from it before? "No. I've never doubted anything about my work and about my life."

He shows me one of his large black and white reliefs: a square white background with a downward-sloping slash of black on top. People

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have posited that these black and white works are about war, but they're not, he says. "They're very positive, not at all pessimistic and grave." What did he intend with its abstract monochromatic slashes of colour? "I like the speed in the diving downward curve of the black," he says, looking intently at the work. "It's a very swift, modern shape like a porpoise or a bird and it's flashing in front of a section of life, the white. It's very satisfying to me to do something that gives the eye some exercise."

Shear walks in with lunch. Handsome, with a luxuriant crown of salt and pepper hair. At 58 he is 30 years Kelly's junior; he had told me earlier on the drive from the train station that the couple had met in a photo-print shop in Los Angeles where Shear worked. He says Kelly won't talk about their relationship. "Who cares?" says Shear. "I don't mind if no one knows about me." But Kelly's homosexuality is known and Shear's name is occasionally mentioned in passing. Why mute it, I ask. You've been together for 27 years: it should be a matter of record and pride, it's a long and sustaining relationship. "Whose business is it?" replies Shear gently.

In fact, Kelly does talk about the relationship. Shear "protects", as he puts it, Kelly from many things and encourages him from his relative seclusion to do others. The "deal" when they got together was that Shear couldn't paint or sculpt, "which was fine by me", says Shear (Kelly has experienced being "used" professionally by other partners, he says). Shear is a photographer who has taken well-known pictures of figures including William Burroughs and Christopher Isherwood and is planning a book of male nudes. Does the age difference matter? Shear laughs: "He's like an 11-year-old."

Jack seems lovely, I say to Kelly. "Oh, he's wonderful, very generous, very smart. He's a good photographer, too," says Kelly. Was it love at first sight? "Well," he says, "I had an assistant who wasn't working so well, and I met him and I asked if he wanted to change jobs and come East, and he finally said he would." (Shear tells me they had a "wonderful, romantic" honeymoon shortly after getting together in St Martin in the Caribbean.) You've been together for 27 years, I say. Kelly smiles. "It seems like... pffftt," he says, gesturing to time passing in a flash. "He's got a wonderful head on his shoulders and we talk

a lot." Is love important to Kelly? "Well, love is very evasive as you get older. A lot of things that mean something when you're young don't mean as much when you're older. It's about how you live and get along with your mind. I'm so damned occupied with my work."

Was growing up gay in harsher times difficult? "I really haven't had any problems in my life," he says quietly. "Just my painting, my career, haha." Unlike artists such as Bacon, drink or drugs bypassed him: "I'm not interested in hyper things. I was hyper enough anyway. I understood that whatever makes you high makes you low and I don't like the low. I like a glass of wine with meals, but I hate getting drunk. The next day you're not yourself."

Were his parents finally proud of him? "My dad was. Very. He liked seeing me in newspapers. With my mother it felt like a block. They wanted me to come to see them in New Jersey, but I would only spend the afternoon there. I did my duty. They were very ordinary and I think that in order to do the painting I do I am extraordinary, different, extraordinarily different. In some way growing up in my mother's house made me a painter." He pauses, as if alighting on the thought for the first time. "There wasn't much interaction there, and I think with a lot of creative people the desire to create is because there's an emptiness to be filled. And I had that, from the age of 12 to 25. You have to become an adult, to live your life, and that emptiness – that's what my painting was about."

I ask about his legacy and Kelly says it's "delightful" to see his works online, sometimes unlabelled, floating colourfully in cyberspace. Does he feel fulfilled? "You look back at all the work you've done – and I've done more than 1,000 works – and that's fulfilling enough. Death is inevitable. I want another 20 years but you never know. Can I live to be 100? It would be nice: now that I have my oxygen I can keep going and the rest of my body seems OK, but the lungs are important and if the doctors say it's getting worse it just depends on how much time I have left. But I feel pretty good and I have been exercising."

Shear has walked in. "I think we're finished, Jack. He can get on the next train," Kelly says sharply. He turns to me. "Well, it's been interesting to talk to you. I like your eyebrows: they're very strong." He seems solitary, I say, as we walk towards the door. "I am." Were there many relationships before Shear? "I have had many friends who have been very close to me," he says. "And they die. Or move on." How important is companionship to him? "Very, and as you get older you find that it's too bad people live alone." He looks at Shear. "You have to watch out for this fellow," he says. "I've said more than I wanted." But he's smiling, the oxygen tubes tickling his upper lip. ■