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Galleries Celebrate Ellsworth Kelly at 90

By **CAROL VOGEL**

“When you reach 90, 89 and 91 really aren’t important,” Ellsworth Kelly said cheerily. “It’s just another year.”

The artist was on the phone from his studio in Spencertown, N.Y., where he doesn’t seem to have much time to bother about his birthday.

Few artists make it to 90 — for Mr. Kelly that would be on May 31 — and fewer still are actively producing work that is being bought and exhibited. It’s little wonder then that the art world is already celebrating. Last week “Ellsworth Kelly: Singular Forms,” a show of paintings and sculptures from 1966 to 2009, opened at the Mnuchin Gallery on the Upper East Side. And a window of Calvin Klein’s shop on Madison Avenue features a sheath dress with horizontal bands of black, white, red and blue that is an updated version of one that Mr. Kelly designed in 1952 while living in the south of France.

Unlike Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst, Mr. Kelly has never created merchandise like T-shirts, jewelry or skateboards. Nor did he set out to design dresses. But on a shopping trip to the outdoor markets in Sanary-sur-Mer, a fishing village in Provence, he bought bolts of cotton that he used to make “Red Yellow Blue White,” a five-panel painting in cloth now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. “There was leftover material, so I gave it to Anne,” he recalled, referring to Anne Weber, a school friend who was with him in France. His instructions were for her to make a dress connecting bands of color, each the same length. “She made it, but the bottom panel was longer than the rest,” he said.

Disturbed that the symmetry wasn’t right, he accused her of ruining the dress, even though she explained that this was “the new Dior length.”

“Anne’s mother burned the original,” Mr. Kelly said.

But the dress was not forgotten. When Sharon Coplan Hurowitz, a Manhattan art adviser, was assembling a collection of Mr. Kelly’s prints for a foundation and traveling exhibition, she happened on a photograph of Ms. Weber wearing the dress. “It was made in the same spirit as the painting,” Ms. Hurowitz said. “I argue that the dress is a drawing if not a sculpture.”

Convinced that it needed to be reunited with the painting and recorded for fashion history, she asked Mr. Kelly if she could work with him to have it remade.

Once he consented, Ms. Hurowitz asked Harold Koda, who runs the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for advice about who might make it. Mr. Koda suggested Francisco Costa, the women's creative director at Calvin Klein. Mr. Costa ended up making the dress the way Mr. Kelly envisioned. Now one is going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute and another to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. (Only 10 dresses were produced, and Ms. Hurowitz said the remaining 8 were probably destined for museum collections.)

Museums are also noting Mr. Kelly's birthday: the National Gallery of Art in Washington has an exhibition of his prints on view through Dec. 1; the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia has put together five sculptures in a show that opens on Thursday; the Phillips Collection in Washington will exhibit his panel paintings starting on June 22; and on May 25 the Museum of Modern Art will open a show of the "Chatham Series." The 14 paintings in that series are the first Mr. Kelly made after leaving New York for Spencertown in 1970. They have not been shown together for more than 40 years. Special installations at the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Tate Modern in London, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art will open soon.

A show at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea, opening on May 11, will feature paintings and sculptures produced within the past two years.

EL ANATSUI, IN BROOKLYN

The Brooklyn Museum has been collecting African art since 1900. It was also the first American museum to present African objects as art rather than ethnographic data, and in 1923 it organized one of the largest exhibitions of African art anywhere. Right now its special exhibition is "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," devoted to Mr. Anatsui, the contemporary African artist known for his magical wall hangings fashioned from everyday materials.

This week the museum announced that it has acquired "Black Block," its first work by Mr. Anatsui. The two-panel wall hanging from 2010 is part of the show. "It's one of his signature pieces," said Eugenie Tsai, the museum's curator of contemporary art.

Unlike the colorful, shimmering wall hangings that Mr. Anatsui has become known for, "Black Block" is monochromatic. When the exhibition closes in August, "Black Block" will travel with

the show to the Des Moines Art Center, the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach and the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego.

DEFEO MEETS NEW YORK

Jay DeFeo, the San Francisco painter who died at 60 in 1989, is far better known on the West Coast than she is in the East, despite a retrospective of her career now at the Whitney Museum of American Art. A pivotal figure in the 1950s Beat culture of artists, poets and musicians, DeFeo is most closely identified with one work, considered her finest achievement: “The Rose,” a nearly 12-foot-tall painting that took eight years to complete, weighs a ton and is in the Whitney’s permanent collection.

Mitchell-Innes & Nash, dealers with spaces on the Upper East Side and West 26th Street in Chelsea, will be representing DeFeo through the Jay DeFeo Trust. “Her work intersects three areas of interest to us,” said Lucy Mitchell-Innes, a gallery founder. “Abstract Expressionism; European art from the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s; and women artists.” (The gallery also represents Martha Rosler.) DeFeo “also was involved in different media including drawing, painting, sculpture and photography,” Ms. Mitchell-Innes added.

The gallery is planning an exhibition of work from all periods of DeFeo’s career in its Chelsea space next year.

DESIGN (35 OF 49 ARTICLES)

The Beauty That Beyond the Final