

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

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Ellsworth Kelly: postcards from the artist's psyche

Brimming with anarchic humour and surreal surprises, these collaged miniatures are the star of a New York exhibition

Ariella Budick MAY 18 2022



'Lake Pend Oreille', 1980 © Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



'Sand Dune I', 1977 © Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

The Ellsworth Kelly that Ellsworth Kelly presented to the world is a parade of perfectionism. His paintings distil the messiness of nature — all that heaving, growing, shedding, rotting, sticky mess — into concentrated fields of colour cut into geometric shapes. A green rhombus echoes a pasture as seen from the air. A red pie slice might be a lone petal plucked from a rose. You can feel these high-gloss objects breathe, their cool brilliance still redolent of their earthy source. They seem to have issued fully formed, freshness and finish fused in one vibrant surface.

But a three-part exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York invites us into the backstage area of Kelly's psyche, where insights, feelings and states of mind are stashed in jumbles that he rummaged through for decades but never meant the rest of us to see.

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There are two galleries of paintings, two blocks and several decades apart. The works from the 1980s have the just-unfurled air of a young leaf. The later ones are sleeker and more industrial.

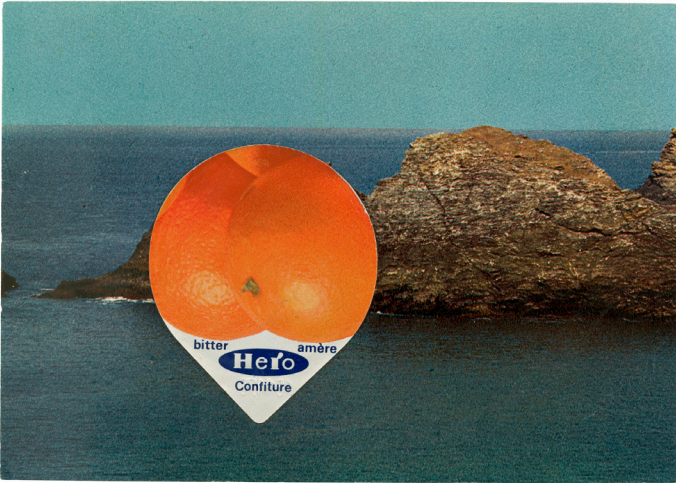
And then there's the heart of the show, a roomful of postcard collages — private studies that brim with anarchic humour, surrealistic juxtapositions and formal virtuosity. Here, in miniatures that Kelly sometimes sent to friends but that have rarely been displayed, he played intricate games of perception, challenging the eye to decode depth, relative size and the meaning of an allusion. The postcards served as a diary of sorts — or, as the critic Barbara Rose suggests, “an outlet for the wit, whimsy and nostalgia he leaves out of his immaculately abstract art”.

This section opens with a photo of the Statue of Liberty, or rather her unmistakable pedestal and torch, the rest covered by an androgynous naked leg bending at the knee. Kelly toys with scale in the paintings, shrinking skies or magnifying flowers so that they occupy similarly sized patches of real estate on the wall. Here, the human limb he's clipped from a magazine or newspaper looks immense, dwarfing the giant statue.

The collage dates from 1957, when Kelly was living in New York after a six-year sojourn in Europe, and it has a giddy, celebratory quality. There's sex and freedom in the air. The disembodied figure's bottom obscures Lady Liberty's face, her crown forms a spiky pubic tuft and the erect torch sticks up from loins to sky.



'Statue of Liberty', 1957 © Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



'Orange', 1977 © Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



'San Gabriel Mountains', 1984 © Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

If the paintings are about refinement and subtraction, the collages are by nature additive. Kelly uses both media to shatter the world around us into fragments and undercut our sense of continuity and coherence. Sometimes that means creating startling visual harmonies and drawing attention to their strangeness. He overlays a close-up of a two-toned wingtip shoe on a vista of “Spectacular Southern California Snow-Capped Mountains”. The curve and peak of the toecap, the ridges along the soles, the punched holes and the texture of tooled leather — all these scrumptious details, designed and photographed to elicit consumer lust — dovetail with the luscious peaks. It’s almost as if the shoe has morphed into a glossy black lake. A punchline lurks in there somewhere, but Kelly asks the viewer to complete it, perhaps by imagining a hike through the High Sierras in such fancy footwear.

Commercial postcards and Kelly’s paintings have something in common: they both reduce vast panoramas to graphic statements, boiling out the grit, the contradictions and the personal vagaries. But Kelly is always after some sort of disturbance in the field, destabilising what you think you’re seeing. In his sublime botanical drawings (not on view at Matthew Marks), a few confident strokes delineating a bit of foliage or a pair of pears also manage to hint at piled boulders, contorted limbs and wild forces of tension and drag.

In the collages, he achieves a similar effect, only this time by accretion. A ripped boarding pass gets plastered over the Sagrada Família church in Barcelona; a dry leaf follows the curve of the Seine in an aerial shot of Paris; a marmalade label hovers over a Mediterranean island like a hot-air balloon. These items of torn and salvaged bric-a-brac, applied on to generically idealised views, reintroduce the rough edges of experience.

In some collages, you find yourself trying to peek around the upper layer to the idyll beyond; in others they merge. Item 1: a man’s face printed on a scrap of glossy paper roughly torn into a Kellyesque polygon. Item 2: an aerial shot of the Philipsburg peninsula on Sint Maarten. Separately, they seem irreconcilable, but together the topography of town and skin have become hard to tease apart. The beach’s curve mirrors the man’s smile, and his eyelid continues



Philipsburg, Sint Maarten, Netherlands Antilles

'Face/Philipsburg', 1974 © Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

a road, fringed with palm-frond eyelashes. The whole ensemble hints at the kind of memory with which tourists take possession of the places they go (or “discover”), inflecting landscape with their loves and disappointments.

Kelly began his career around the time that jet travel and a strong dollar put the entire world within reach of middle-class Americans; postcards showed them what to see, allowed a few square inches for an envy-inducing message and packaged the whole experience compactly enough for discount postage. The collages violate that neat arrangement with a spirit that’s variously mysterious, acerbic and wry. “I think what we all want from art is a sense of fixity, a sense of opposing the chaos of daily living,” Kelly said in the 1990s. “This an illusion, of course... In a sense, what I’ve tried to capture is the reality of flux, to keep art an open, incomplete situation, to get at the rapture of seeing.”

To June 25, matthewmarks.com