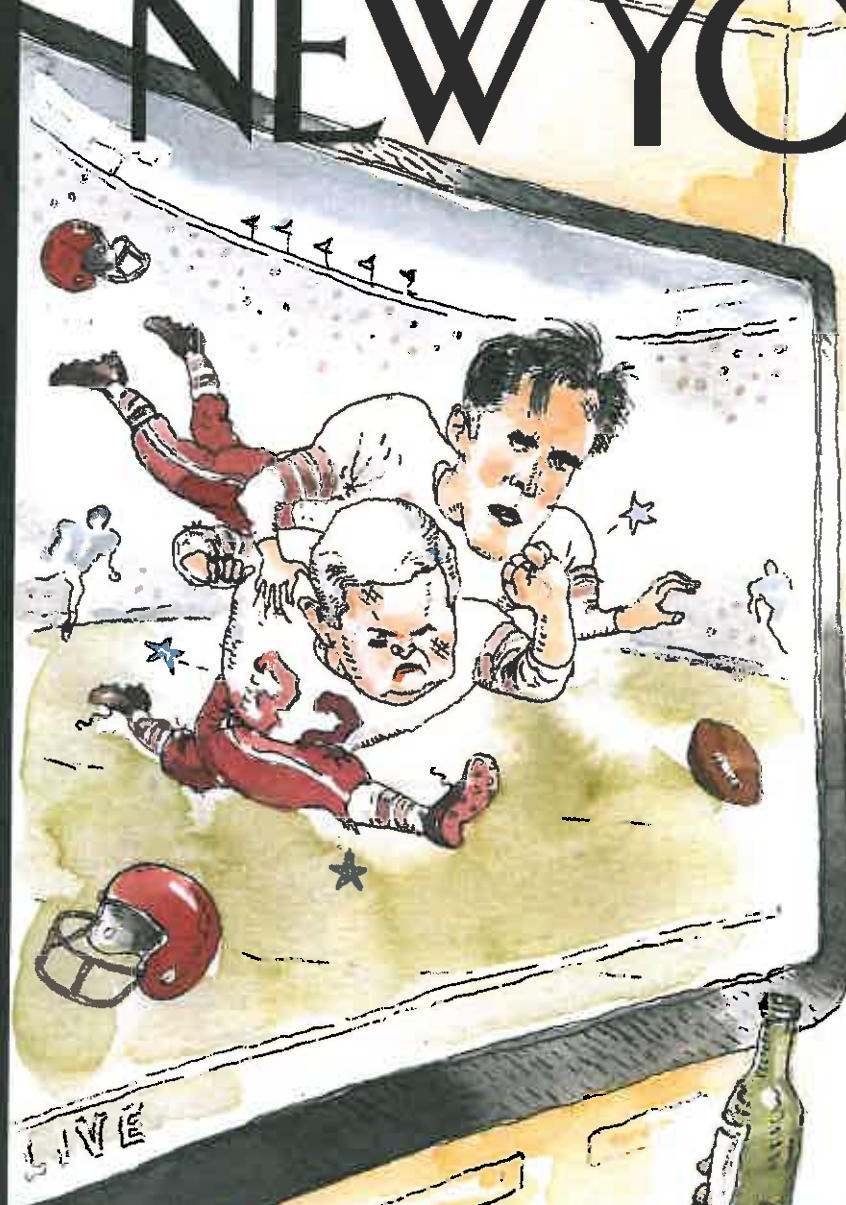


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Speaking to U.N. employee, Smith self-administers pop quiz.

S: I think I know the six floor languages of the U.N.

U.N. GUY: Yes?

S: Arabic, Chinese, Russian, French, Spanish, and English.

U.N. GUY: Very good.

S: I looked them up.

Scene 3: Harlem, West 128th Street, Freedom Hall, home of Freedom Socialist Party, exotically left-wing gathering spot and bookstore where Paul Robeson-like character in "Agent 6" no doubt would have felt right at home.

Smith and Tucci listen politely as resident true believers, fresh from study group on roots of women's oppression, elaborate on toxicity of capitalism. Good manners further prevail as Smith, browsing bookshelves, picks up Leon Trotsky biography and orders a subscription to *Freedom Socialist: The Voice of Revolutionary Feminism*. "I got my Trotsky book and my newspaper. Twenty dollars. Who says capitalism doesn't work?"

Bystander asks Tucci, "What are you expecting from tonight?"

Tucci says, "I'm expecting to go home." And does.

Smith lingers, pondering one last sound bite to oblige Germans. "There we were, having caviar before. And we ended up here. God, we're despicable, aren't we?" Then he steps into chauffeured dark-blue BMW and drives off. Into the night.

—Mark Singer

THE ARTISTIC LIFE STUDIO VISIT



Ellsworth Kelly, the painter and sculptor of implacably beautiful abstractions, is, except for Jasper Johns, the last hero standing of the mighty American avant-garde that succeeded Abstract Expressionism. But, rather than rest on his laurels, Kelly, now eighty-eight, is reaping more of them. One cloudy morning not long ago, he bustled about his vast, museumlike studio, showing visitors works and plans for imminent

shows and commissions. The studio's nobly proportioned, austere architecture, by Richard Gluckman, is set in luxuriant woodland south of Albany, where Kelly has been since 1970 and now shares a house with his partner, Jack Shear, the energetic director of Kelly's foundation. Carefully situated wooden chairs by Gerrit Rietveld and Antoni Gaudí greet visitors in the studio's entrance hall—a rare decorative touch in a building that trumpets functionality. Down the road a bit, the house is another, gemütlich matter, furnished by Shear with eclectic elegance: items both modern and antique and a dazzling, up-to-the-minute kitchen. "Jack has wonderful taste," Kelly enthused. Shear said, "Our deal is that I see to the household decisions, and Ellsworth does his work."

The artist looks younger than his years, though he suffers from a lung condition and must trail tubes from oxygen pumps as he moves from room to room. No, he never smoked. He blames "sixty years of breathing turpentine."

Tabletop models in the studio—tiny reproductions applied to little cardboard walls—prefigured two retrospectives: one of them, of works in unpainted wood, is on view at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts until March 4th; the other, of black-and-white paintings at the Haus der Kunst, in Munich, opened in tandem with a show, at that city's Pinakothek der Moderne, devoted to his efficiently lyrical line drawings and lithographs of plants. On July 4th, two large relief paintings were permanently installed at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing—none too soon, Kelly remarked. The works, sponsored by the nonprofit organization the Friends of Art and Preservation in Embassies, were unveiled at the White House by Laura Bush in 2003. But the Ambassador to China at the time deemed one—a white horizontal panel cantilevered across the junction of a red panel, at the top, and a blue one, below—"too French." (It was during the "freedom fries" phase of the Iraq war.)

Kelly served in Europe during the Second World War with an Army camouflage unit, known as the Ghost Army, which created inflatable tanks and planes and other enemy-fooling simulacra. Starting in 1946, the G.I. Bill staked him to study art in Boston and then in Paris, where he spent six years developing his

acutely succinct aesthetic. At first, he imitated details of Parisian window frames, bridges, and shadows; the results are like Malevich or Mondrian, tinged with Dadaist effrontery. "I wanted something with less personality, for people to look at and not find a lot," he said. After moving to New York in 1954, he startled an art scene that was in thrall to the emotive cadenzas of Abstract Expressionism by showing monochrome panels, arrayed in grids or side by side. Later, on single canvases, he would paint two or three simple shapes dead flat, in clarion hues; and he began to fashion tall, slablike sculptures, their sides subtly curved. A forty-foot example of the latter, in gleaming stairless steel, stands sentinel over an immense lawn, formerly a baseball field, outside his house. A twin of it stands outside the U.S. Embassy in Berlin.

Kelly spoke wonderingly of the luck that made his career possible. He said, "If I didn't have those years in France, I don't know what I could have done," and recalled meetings with Constantin Brancusi, Francis Picabia, Georges Vantongerloo, and other eminent moderns. A collection of drawings, propped on a cabinet in the studio, bespeaks debts and affinities to Europeans including Corot, Picasso, Matisse, Kirchner, and the late German wunderkind Blinky Palermo. Kelly and Shear argued mildly over whether the striking bleed-through of glue in an abstract paper collage by Palermo was intentional: Kelly thought yes, Shear no. Among Americans, Kelly said, his best friend was the Pop perfectionist Roy Lichtenstein, whose death, in 1997, he still mourns.

"Painted divisions are lies," Kelly said, explaining why, since the sixties, he has overlaid separate canvases when using more than one color. He was looking at four new works: curved shapes atop rectangular ones, flush at the edges. The potent color combinations—blue/black, green/blue, orange/light blue, yellow/white—depart from an earlier series dominated by angular black shapes against white grounds. He said, "To keep finding things to do is hard. Rothko could go on forever with his format. Not me." The gestation of any new formal idea takes him a very long time, he said, and "time is closing in on me." He gestured dismissively. "But I can still paint."

—Peter Schjeldahl