

Faith Ringgold vs. Ellsworth Kelly

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Left: Ellsworth Kelly, *Colours for a Large Wall*, 1951 (MoMA). Right: Faith Ringgold, *Harlem Renaissance Party Quilt*, 1988 (Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC)

In 1920s, the increasing large black communities in Harlem produced a group of intellectuals, who achieved unprecedented success. This movement was first known as the New Negro movement and was characterized by creativity in writing, art and music and became a defining characteristic of this era. At the beginning of the twentieth

century, the African American community established a middle class, which was most recognizable in the cities. Harlem was one of these centres in New York City. This community expanded greatly as many more Africans migrated into the United States after the First World War.

As the black community was growing, racism became the most harmful problem for this new society. Faith and her pictures of families in the 'Harlem Renaissance Party', 1988, reflect their pain. Faith Ringgold was born and raised in New York City. Her mother was a fashion designer and perhaps the most influential person in her choice of a career in art. She produced many of her pieces using fabrics, some of which are known as story quilts. Faith is also an influential artist in her own right, who affected many modern artists in addition to African American artists. Her narrative style inspired several authors and produced some seventeen books for children illustrated by her. She is the founder of national black feminist organization and a very active feminist artist. After her first marriage and subsequent separation she made a trip to Europe, where she found herself experiencing a new perspective on the world around her. In 1963, she painted her first political work, which is now considered to be the first of her pieces in a mature painting style as an artist. That same year she began painting the 'American People' Series of oil paintings.

Faith has consistently followed the feminist art movement; her pictures of women of colour emphasize the race and heritage of African American women. She

narrates the stories of women and their lives, their children and what they do in colourful, geometrically organized and playful pictures. Her style incorporates African influence but it is uniquely American. The feminist art movements started after Faith's first visit to Europe. She was gradually drawn to feminist art through experiment in her work portraying women and by consistently working the theme. In the early 1970's Faith was in great demand as many American women were organizing non-profit galleries in America and around the world.

Faith was always continually concerned with black and feminist issues. She participated in first black art exhibition in Harlem in 1966. Around 1970, she started to make masks, modelling the heads of women whom she had known. She developed this work by turning them into full sized, stuffed busts made of fabric, again reflecting her mother's influence. The series was called the 'Harlem series'. Around the same time, she made a series of narrative quilts, reflecting her appreciation for traditional women's handiwork. This was 1988, the same year that she created the Harlem Renaissance Party. Her passion for colour and clear lines combined with geometry picture the cultural complications experienced by African American, who were generally

outcasts. The black community did not have the support of white society as if they lived a life in exile. Geometric shapes are often considered cold and unchangeable as there are no breaks or openings in their lines. Faith puts her stylized faces in a square surrounded by sharp, straight edges. She portrays the delineation between social groups of the Harlem neighbourhood. In the Harlem Renaissance Party People are dressed up wearing suits and ties. Women have makeup, look well dressed and tidy. There is a balance between faces of the women in a comparison with male faces. She portrayed them as equal individuals.

Ellsworth Kelly was also an American artist; he was a painter associated with many styles such as hard edge painting and colour field. He was also known for being a minimalist. He often used simple colours and shapes in creating his art work. Ellsworth was raised in New York City, living in many different houses as his mother moved them into a new house every year. As a child, he showed special interest in simple and natural forms and colours. After joining the army and coming back to New York he started creating pictures that are notably different from other artists of his time. His Painting in three panels was notable as he used more than one panel of canvas to create a

single piece, reducing a triptych to its simplest and most basic form.

'Colours for a large wall' was created by the left over pieces of paper, which he used as a series of collages previously. Although the picture is unified there are changes in size and colours. The original picture was black and white. Ellsworth's style is mostly known as hard-edged and colour field. Hard-edge painting is a painting in which abrupt transitions are made between areas of colour. Colour areas are often of one, unvarying colour. Colour transitions, sometimes along straight lines or curvilinear edges of colour areas are also common. The Hard-edge painting style is related to Geometric abstraction. Colour field is primarily characterized by large areas of flat and solid colours which are spread across the canvas. The painted area is often flat with an unbroken surface. The image you get is very consistent in form and appearance.

Kelly was inspired by simple and natural architectural forms. He changes the configuration of the image by changing the texture and the structure of the form in the real world. As you will note in the picture, he used simple colours and forms to create a complex image, which is an intellectual and therefore subjective interpretation of the real world. Although the picture looks

clean, it appears to swell and float throughout the entire composition. Kelly's use of complementary colours was also his signature and one of the characteristics of his work.

Kelly and Faith both had lonely childhoods. For Faith feeling like an outcast and growing up in New York was much like Kelly. The time he spent bird watching, isolated in his imaginary world perhaps explains why both artists became so creative and used highly developed styles in their work. Kelly's painting looks like a big piece of canvas covered with colours, and it shares the same sense of deepness and wonder as Faith's 'Harlem Renaissance Party'.

Faith explored colours in reference to her faces as she painted the characters in the middle. She used harmony and balance in placing dark and light colours in a sequence. Kelly did the same by placing darker squares randomly and yet balanced against bright colours. They both used restricted colours in expressing the emotion in the pictures. Emotions are specific, heavy, clearly defined and well hidden. Faith used dark yet shiny colours where Kelly conveyed the same visual effect using contrast in his composition. In Kelly's picture black in contrast with white or brighter areas seem to follow the same composition as Faith used in her work.

Geometric shapes and straight lines although more visible in Faith's work, follow the same pattern in both compositions.

It seems as Faith and Kelly both had a limited, discrete number of people, who influenced their lives. The limited number of faces in Faith's work does not conflict with Kelly's restricted number of squares. Kelly's restraint was perhaps self-imposed, a form of intellectual audacity, while the restrictions placed on Faith came from outside. Their constant travels to Europe had them both witness a lot of changes and that perhaps changed the way they looked at their surroundings. The modern, intellectual style supported Kelly's reduction to absolute form and colour, while Faith was bolstered by the rise of women and the suffragette movement.

The two artists' work come in contrast, where Kelly's piece is generally brighter. There is a noticeable space between the squares and it seems as if he is expressing his inability to get closer to people or become attached to things. His identity was hidden deeper beneath the surface as a homosexual; as for Faith, being a black woman perhaps had much to do with the use of abstract in her style of work. Kelly's first work was done in black and white. The use of colour changed through time in

his paintings and that's perhaps a defining characteristic whereas Faith's stayed almost the same.

Kelley's intellectual mind affected the development of his work whereas Faith stayed loyal to her theme of work and her stories. Kelly was swayed by the competitive attraction of the modern movement, a movement dominated by the male influence, as well as the post-impressionist use of colour. Unburdened by external constraints he was able to incorporate new ideas:

'I started doing sculpture in 1959. I had no commissions then. They were painted, similar in style to the paintings ... At a certain point, I decided I didn't want an edge between two colours; I wanted colour differences in literal space. I always felt that a painted edge between two colours was a depiction somehow'.

Kelly was a hard-edged painter searching to express his ideas while Faith is a feminist artist looking inward to find her identity. Their sexual orientation as well as their social and political references made them unique individuals, who expressed their feelings through colours and pictures. While one is a feminist the other was more concerned with his individuality.

Nonetheless, they both share a large number of admirers in the art world and perhaps continue to inspire many more.