

ANGEL OF LIGHT

Unmasking the spirit of the age

TICKET IN HAND, I EXITED the ticket-counter door, faced toward what the Blanton Museum has called one of its most prized exhibits, and was instantly blinded by a flash of Texas sun. Once I had recovered, I could make out the clean lines of a white-stoned structure, sort of an over-sized igloo, stationed in the middle of a small yard while some pedestrian-looking office buildings hovered in the periphery. This was my hello to Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*.

Kelly, an outspoken atheist, a "transcendental artist," as described by his long-time husband Jack Sheer, set out in the twilight of his seven-decade career as a gallery artist to create his own secular version of a chapel. The sanctuary would stand as a memorial to his self-professed exploration of bold geometric lines, form, color, and light. It was to be a place of "calm and light," Kelly said, a breathing space for visitors to "rest your eyes, rest your mind."

Outside, it's hard to say that *Austin* is a place to rest your eyes. It is set apart by its whiteness and weirdness of configuration. Oddly enough, Kelly designed it as a cruciform—a cross-shaped building—whose stones appear to have been bleached several times over. Its dome-like roof and sharp edges give it a two-dimensional appearance from some angles, like an origami leaning up against a big sheet of sky. Once I had a chance to eye its peculiar architectural design (Kelly was an artist, not an architect), I could see that he filched a few elements from our conventional ideas of what actually makes a chapel a chapel.

First, the windows. Kelly didn't install any Christian motifs that hallmark our older houses of worship. No John the Baptist baptizing the repentant, no virgin pondering the words of an angel, no Peter walking on water, no Lazarus coming out of the grave. And, of course, there's no Christ either. Well, there is, sort of, but we'll get to that later. In place of motifs are unicolored panes of simplistic geometric shapes. Kelly was a minimalist, and he cabined his chapel's windows to just three modest designs: a grid, a circle of tumbling squares, and a starburst. He placed the designs on the facades' arms and foot, high above the heads of visitors and curious onlookers so they would have to look up. This was one way that Kelly sought to instill a sense of transcendence.

Next, the doors. Heavy and thick, they're not unlike the gothic-cathedral doors erected all over Western Europe. But these are bleak, devoid of any friezes, embossing, or engravings. And they are not manned by any type of clergy or Kellyan, but by museum volunteers. The ones I met were clueless about *Austin*, Kelly's other artwork, or even Kelly himself; they were just filling in. Kelly didn't station anything outside either—no landscaping, no trees, no statues or even art pieces. He made *Austin* to stand as an otherworldly edifice, solitary, on a well-manicured but

sterile lawn.

Stepping inside the foot of the cross, I was greeted by an austere concrete floor devoid of color, rugs, chairs, or furniture. The vacuum of space unconsciously draws you toward the intersection of the arms. It is here, at the center of the cross where you meet Kelly's only intended movement within the entire structure: the stochastically bright Texas sun shimmering across alabaster walls. Saturated blues, oranges, greens, and yellows arc up and down, sometimes across the floor, as the sun circumnavigates the sky outside. The colors sometimes wriggle over fourteen black-and-white marble panels Kelly sketched around the arms and leg of his cross. According to Kelly, they're just a nod to art history in chapel design. The panels, severe abstractions of Jesus' carrying of his cross to Golgotha, aren't subliminal expressions of Kelly's faith; he didn't have any. The panels are so abstract, in fact, I wouldn't have known that they had anything to do with Christ or the Gospel without reading Kelly's description of them.

Kelly salvaged a California redwood from a riverbed and cut and molded an eighteen-foot sculpture from it. He placed it at the head of the cross, just where you'd expect to find an altar. He called it his "Totem," his sacred object, in homage to the creature of man. The effigy cuts an impressive figure, towering over all of *Austin*'s visitors. As a free-standing object filling out its own space, it dominates the dull, marble Passion panels and meandering colors of light.

Kelly dictated each and every detail of *Austin* but died before he could see it finished. Obituaries described him as an artist who had rejected the idea of art as self-expression. Yve Alain-Bois, a noted art scholar, went even further, saying that his avowed muses were "impersonality," and the "eradication of subjectivity." Since its opening, critics have raved about *Austin*, touting it as an enlightened masterpiece inspiring contemplation and joy and cheering its "singular unity." One critic, intuiting a mystical element, wrote, "It is hard to deny its spirituality in the way it forces the viewer to pay attention to light, color, form, shape, and beauty." Another applauded its humanist manifesto: "Kelly has brought a cathedral down to earth. He has left us with a human work."

Kelly may have tried to push to the limits the boundaries of subjectivity in his art by masking his voice in severe abstraction, but he failed. That is because there is no "eradication of subjectivity" in art. Man, as a spirit being, is incapable of producing intrinsically objective art. Any creative work he does divulges the animating energy behind it. Kelly's *Austin* isn't any different.

For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the age of this cosmos, according to the prince of the authority of the air, the spirit that now animates the sons of unbelief, among whom we all formerly conducted ourselves in the lust of the flesh and in our thoughts, and were by nature the children of wrath.

While the Blanton Museum and the art world might hawk *Austin* as a place of joy and light, it is actually a house of shadow. A place of worship bereft of any holy drama or act of selfless love.

It has no virgin, no angelic vision, no prophecies of comfort.

It has no baptism, no spirit with power, no temptations, no foretelling of sufferings.

It has no garden, no crown, no robe, no beatings or crucifixion.

It has no Lamb.

It sees no resurrection, no ekklesia, no family, or heavenly city.

It offers no hope. It glories in an isolated existence that relishes psychical self-absorption.

Austin's walls speak volumes. You don't need to look very far to sense the strength of the hand animating Kelly's work. The abstractions of Christ's passion aren't harmless nods to chapel art. They are a conscious dismantling of the Glory having come down. The scriptures are clear that the pre-existent Word became flesh, a man who dwelled among us. John the Apostle testifies,

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the Word of life. This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify of it.

The Apostle Paul lays down in Colossians that the only avenue available for man's reconciliation to God Almighty was through the body of the flesh of Christ. And John affirms that any spirit that comes and denies that Christ ever came in the flesh isn't mere chatter, but the spirit of antichrist.

For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.

Kelly's commanding totem in a cross-shaped chapel should squelch any protests. It is not an idle piece, lending itself to simple form and design. Rooted and established in our ordinary notions of sacred space, it stands mutinous against a Gospel that Kelly decidedly and publicly rejected during his lifetime. He christened it his "Totem." A term freighted with centuries of profane worship.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being. . . . Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Some might scoff at the idea that a spiritual personality in any way animated Kelly's work, thinking it the stuff of hobgoblins, superstitions, or tomfoolery. But how coincidental is it that an outspoken atheist designed a "chapel"—a church, a house of worship—in the shape of a cross—why not a triangle, rectangle, trapezoid, or square?—obliterated the work of that cross through austere abstraction, and enshrined homage to the creature of man where an altar and the prayers of the saints should be?

Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

It is of no moment that Kelly was a well-respected New York gallery artist and not some voodoo shaman. The spirit of the age hasn't been curbed to the strata of lower socio-economic classes or less talented artists. Neither must it blind minds by brazen speechifying. Paul warned believers of his subtlety and his guile.

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means,

as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

Eerily enough, Paul also warned that Satan would masquerade as an angel of light.

For if he that comes preaches another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if you receive another spirit, which you have not received, or another gospel, which you have not accepted, you might well bear with him... For Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.

It is no wonder that those animated by him would do the same. The unregenerate world, a culture that lies in darkness under the authority of the evil one, might tout *Austin* as an inoffensive piece of secular art, but it is glaring that Kelly's designs involve much more than light, lines, and color.

But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

In his first letter to the church, John tells us his purpose in writing was so that we would know that we have eternal life. The whole world lies under the evil one, he tells us, and to that end, he admonishes us to "Keep yourselves away from idols." That line seems somewhat trite today. Who in the Western world worships idols? We buy tickets to gawk at them in museums. But the god of this world is still active in the earth, and *Austin* demonstrates the work of his hand. It is peddled as a piece of art, but in reality it is a sanctuary that houses an idol and stands as a shrine that subtly yet publicly mocks our Creator. **b**

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