

Ellsworth Kelly

Chatham Series



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Ann Temkin

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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Ellsworth Kelly

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Cover: Ellsworth Kelly. *Chatham VI: Red Blue*. 1971. Oil on canvas, two joined panels, 9 ft. 6 1/2 in. x 8 ft. 6 1/4 in. (290.8 x 259.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Douglas S. Cramer Foundation. See p. 43

Back cover: Ellsworth Kelly. *Chatham XIV: Black White*. 1971. Oil on canvas, two joined panels, 8 ft. x 7 ft. 4 1/2 in. (243.8 x 224.8 cm). Private collection. See p. 59

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Foreword

Forty years ago, in September 1973, The Museum of Modern Art presented a retrospective exhibition of the work of Ellsworth Kelly, then fifty years of age. William Rubin, the director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the time, had invited Kelly to show his work at the Museum, and asked E. C. (Gene) Goossen, a professor at Hunter College and a good friend of the artist's, to organize the exhibition and write the accompanying catalogue. This was an important milestone in Kelly's career, following on the heels of the publication of two monographs on his work by John Coplans and Diane Waldman. That April, Kelly had had his first exhibition with the Leo Castelli Gallery, after nearly two decades showing with Betty Parsons and then Sidney Janis. This was an artist in his prime, whose position was justly acknowledged.

Kelly was at that point by no means a stranger to MoMA. In 1959, curator Dorothy Miller had included him in the exhibition *16 Americans*, just five years after his return to New York from a five-year stay in France. The Museum had acquired from that exhibition its first work by the artist, the painting *Running White* (1959), in February 1960. In 1969, Kelly took the unusual step of presenting *Colors for a Large Wall* (1951) as a gift to the Museum, where it had been included in the exhibition *The Art of the Real* the previous year. At the time of its making, long before Kelly could count on the eventuality of a celebrated career, he had decided that this painting belonged at this institution. His role as a great ally and supporter of the Museum has taken many forms in the intervening years; in 1990, he even served as a guest curator, organizing the second exhibition in the series "Artist's Choice," which he entitled *Fragmentation and the Single Form*.

Fast-forward four decades to the present. The collection at MoMA has grown to include a formidable 15 paintings, 5 sculptures, 38 drawings, 137 prints, and 1 poster. The list of generous Trustees and donors who have made this possible is long and illustrious: Irving Blum, Donald L. Bryant, Jr., Douglas S. Cramer, Kathy and Richard S. Fuld, Jr., James and Kathy Goodman, Agnes Gund, Sidney Janis, Philip Johnson, Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder, Emily Rauh Pulitzer, Solomon Byron Smith, David Teiger, and others.

In 2013, Kelly makes no concessions to the passing years, producing work of profound beauty and grand scale. The artist's studio is filled with new work in progress, the adjoining office bustling with the countless tasks related to a nonstop calendar of exhibition obligations and the ambitious task of producing a catalogue raisonné.

Amidst all this, time must be taken to notice the fact of a ninetieth birthday. At MoMA, we decided to celebrate the occasion by reuniting fourteen paintings that Kelly made in 1971 in his studio in Chatham, New York, just a year after he had moved upstate to Columbia County. Long acknowledged among Kelly's great achievements, the paintings in the series have not been seen together since their debut, at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, the year after they were painted. One of them, *Chatham VI*, is in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, the generous gift of the Douglas S. Cramer Foundation in 1998. The others reside in two museums—the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—and eleven private collections. We extend our profound thanks to each of these lenders for entrusting us with their paintings and thus enabling the presentation of the series in its entirety.

BNP Paribas provided the funding for the exhibition, and Agnes Gund supported this book; we are enormously grateful to both. We are likewise grateful to Jack Shear, Director of the Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, for his guidance during the process of organizing the exhibition and preparing this publication. And finally, we extend to Ellsworth Kelly our warmest congratulations and, more important, immense gratitude for bringing works of unique power and beauty to this Museum's audiences and to devotees throughout the world.

—Glenn D. Lowry
Director, The Museum of Modern Art



Ellsworth Kelly's studio,
Chatham, New York, 1972

CHATHAM

Ellsworth Kelly began the 1970s by uprooting both himself and his work. In the spring of 1970, he decided to trade the bustle of Manhattan for the quiet village of Spencertown, in upstate New York. Since 1963 he had been living and working in the Hotel des Artistes building at 1 West 67th Street. Eager for country air, he had spent the summers of 1968 and 1969 in Bridgehampton, Long Island. But he wanted more of an escape than the East End could provide, so took some meandering drives upstate to look for possible homes. In Columbia County, two hours north of the city, Kelly found a Victorian house that suited him on a winding road in Spencertown. Just in case country living did not work out as he hoped, he kept the studio on West 67th Street, but soon after he settled into the house, he commenced a search for a good place to paint.

Kelly remembered that Jaime Sabartés, Picasso's close friend and biographer, had described how Picasso identified a desirable studio by noticing a building's windows from across the way.¹ Adopting the same strategy around Spencertown, Kelly was quickly led to an imposing brick building that occupies about seventy feet of frontage on Main Street in the town of Chatham, five miles from his house. The building is distinguished by four nearly-twelve-foot-tall windows along its upper floor (fig. 1). Kelly's target happened to be above a row of businesses including a barber shop. One day Kelly asked the barber, whose patron he would soon become, about the building's upper floor. It turned out that the barber co-owned it with the shopkeeper next door, and that the space was used to store the town's Christmas lights. Kelly asked if he could take it as a studio; the barber agreed to relocate the decorations and to rent the space to him for \$50 a month.

The building boasted a colorful history. Erected by one George W. Cady a century before Kelly's arrival—stone letters on the brick facade announce it as "Cady's Hall 1871"—the structure featured storefronts and a box office at street level and a large open space with a stage and balcony on the upper floor. Thirty-eight feet deep and seventy-one feet long, this space had served a variety of functions during its early years, ranging from banquet hall to ballroom to temporary venue for Episcopal services. In 1907, an owner called Charles Allen had begun to operate the hall as Cady's Opera House. Chatham, located at the junction of railroad lines going both north-south and east-west, was easily accessible to performers and thrived as an entertainment center. In addition to live performances, the Opera House featured a silent-film night each week and,

on Saturdays, transformed itself into a roller rink. Over the coming decades, the venue's name and ownership would change many times, as Chatham adjusted to a world in which railroads and vaudeville mattered less. Its bookings slowly petered out and by the 1960s the hall had been vacated.

To convert this storied space into a painting studio, Kelly had to install plumbing and heating and do an intensive cleanup. The task was both arduous and intriguing: the prompter's box beneath the stage, for example, revealed a multitude of curios such as magicians' trick cards. Kelly built a ramp on which he could slide paintings up to the stage, and racks on which to store them. The twenty-foot-high walls had decades worth of peeling paint; Kelly covered them with panels of sheetrock. He used the north wall as a painting wall and hung finished paintings on the east wall, between the windows.

One of Kelly's reasons for leaving the West 67th Street studio was that his paintings couldn't fit in the building's staircase or elevator and had to be lowered to the street atop the elevator cab, a process his art-mover's insurance company would no longer cover. In Chatham, a door in the studio's west wall opened to a stairway leading one flight down to a parking lot in the back of the building. (A door in the north wall met a stairway to Main Street.) Now it was easy for Kelly and a helper to do all the necessary art-moving. Kelly also needed more spacious accommodations for a body of work whose scale had jumped significantly in the last few years. The proportions of the space were so satisfying that when he built a new studio in Spencertown many years later, he would copy them almost exactly.

Perhaps most important, the Chatham studio offered Kelly the gift of isolation. He made the most of this, deliberately keeping to himself. Throughout his career, while savoring the company of close artist friends, he had forged a path quite apart from dominant trends and tendencies. Around 1970 in New York City, painting had largely ceded the stage to Conceptual art, as many artists turned away from making works that could be perceived as luxury goods. Alone on Main Street in Chatham, however, Kelly followed the internal logic of his own vision. Going to the studio early and staying late, he finished more than twenty paintings in his first year there. Early in 1971, Kelly began what would become a series of fourteen paintings that he would decide to name for the new studio.

MULTIMONOCROMES

The Chatham paintings belong to a category that Ellsworth Kelly can rightly call his own invention: multicolored works created by joining together two or more single-color panels. These works show how 1+1 (or 1+1+1 and so on) can equal 1; as such, they might be given the paradoxical label of "multimono-



Fig. 1.
Ellsworth Kelly outside
his studio, 13 Main Street,
Chatham, 1970

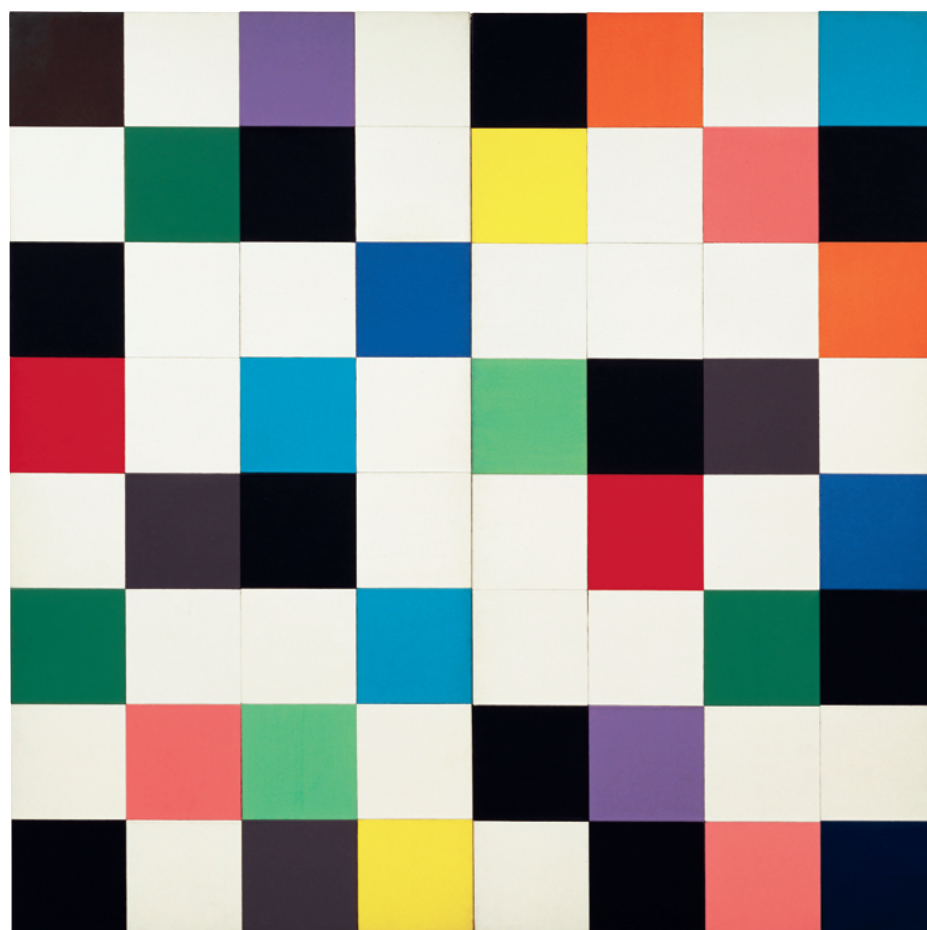
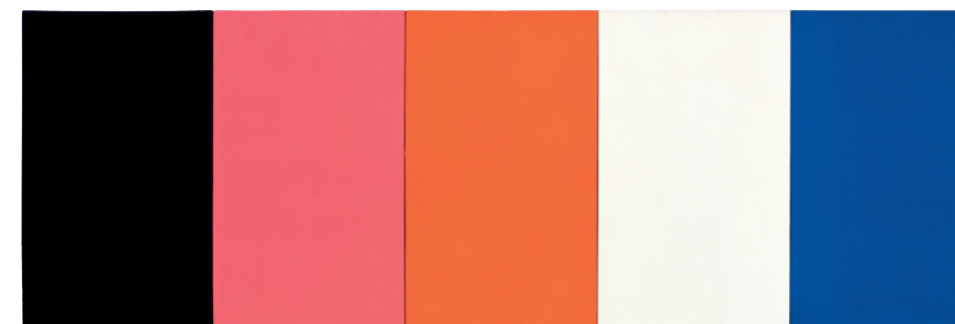


Fig. 2.
Colors for a Large Wall, 1951.
 Oil on canvas,
 sixty-four joined panels,
 7 ft. 10 1/2 in. x 7 ft. 10 1/2 in.
 (240 x 240 cm).
 The Museum of Modern
 Art, New York.
 Gift of the artist

Fig. 3.
Painting for a White Wall, 1952.
 Oil on canvas,
 five joined panels,
 23 1/2 x 71 1/4 in.
 (59.7 x 181.0 cm)
 Glenstone



chromes.” Kelly’s process in creating them is the same one used in making monochrome paintings: covering a given surface entirely in one color. But the conceptual task, and the premise of the painting as a whole, is the precisely calibrated relation of two or more areas of color presented on individual canvases. In Kelly’s multipanel works, monochromes are a means to an end rather than ends in themselves.

The practice of making paintings out of joined monochromes dates back to Kelly’s stay in France from 1948 to 1954. By that point in the twentieth century, a tradition of monochrome painting had been established through pioneering works of the 1910s and ’20s by Kazimir Malevich and Aleksandr Rodchenko, and was about to be extended by such artists as Yves Klein and Ad Reinhardt.² What would set Kelly’s approach apart, however, was the resolute absence of gesture or incident on the surfaces of his canvases. Compared to a painting by Kelly, the mottled texture of Malevich’s *White on White*, or the ghostly layers in a black painting by Reinhardt, can be considered expressive. Writing in 1963, William Rubin praised Kelly’s surfaces as “scrupulously bland,” noting that this affect-free approach made irrelevant “talent of a kind that Kelly may or may not have.”³ In France, Kelly had resolved to make “anonymous” work more akin to the religious art of the Middle Ages than to the easel painting of the modern era.⁴ He had decided that such anonymity demanded the complete elimination of a painterly handwriting.

A monochrome devoid of handwriting left the artist little room for invention apart from the selection of a color and a canvas size. The joining of monochromes, however, opened up a world of possibilities in terms of adjoined slabs of color. Between 1951 and 1954, Kelly explored this possibility to great effect. *Colors for a Large Wall* (1951; fig. 2) consists of sixty-four square canvases, painted individually on one-foot-by-one-foot stretchers and then attached to each other in an eight-by-eight grid.⁵ This breakthrough painting, anomalous in its large size, gave rise to a group of multipanel works that tested various arrangements

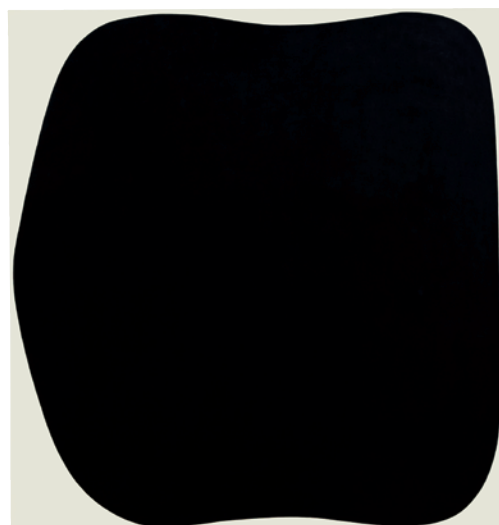


Fig. 4.
Black Ripe. 1955.
 Oil on canvas,
 63 1/4 x 59 3/8 in.
 (160.7 x 150.8 cm).
 Collection of Harry W. and
 Mary Margaret Anderson

of smaller numbers of colored units (fig. 3). In all of these works, the role of drawing is entirely removed from the surface of the canvas and given over to the literal lines of the panels' edges. Line is not recorded by the artist, but embodied by the fact of the panels' borders.

When Kelly came back to New York in 1954, he returned to the exploration of color and shape through single canvases, and especially through paintings in black and white (fig. 4). But in the mid-1960s, after a decade's hiatus, the multimonochrome reappeared as the focus of his work. In 1965, Kelly spent four months in Europe, perhaps prompting a revisiting of the fertile territory he had first charted on his earlier stay. Kelly also credits his revived interest in panel painting to the experience of cutting large, flat metal panels while making sculpture, an activity he pursued with vigor in the mid-1960s. Accordingly, these paintings dramatically increase the scale of the early-1950s paintings. Their presence is newly declarative, with a boldness resulting from, in most cases, the combination of square or rectangular panels of identical large dimensions. One group, the Spectrum paintings of 1966–69, introduced an expanded palette of thirteen colors, as well as the innovative format of tall strips arrayed side-by-side to compose the whole (fig. 5).

The Chatham Series were the first paintings in Kelly's twenty-two years of making abstract art to isolate the ell form as a theme. In so doing, they addressed the specific rubric of two-color pairings. The art historian E. C. Goossen noted the challenge of this approach in a catalogue essay for a Kelly retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in 1973: "To compete with the Old Masters—and the New—with only two colors and no activated surface, is like taking David's role against Goliath, but even David had five stones."⁶ The

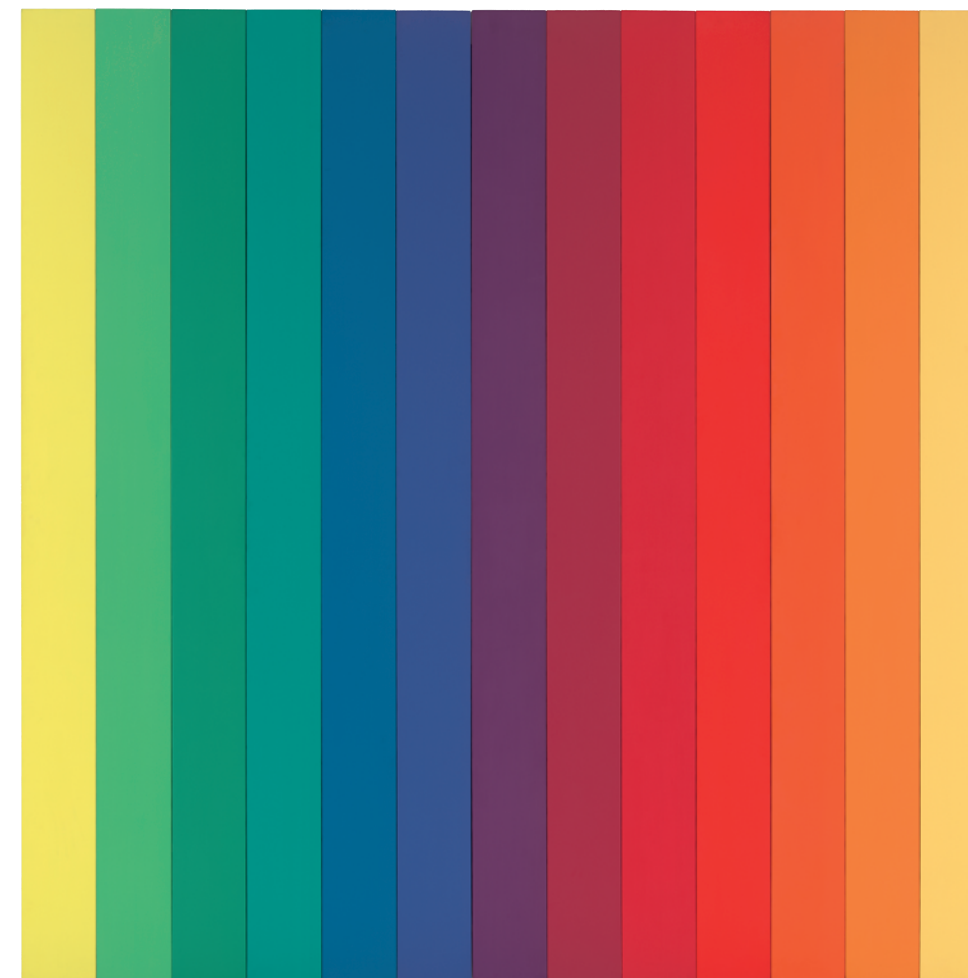


Fig. 5.
Spectrum IV. 1967.
 Oil on canvas,
 thirteen joined panels,
 9 ft. 9 in. x 9 ft. 9 in.
 (297.2 x 297.2 cm).
 The Museum of Modern
 Art, New York. Mrs. John
 Hay Whitney Bequest
 and The Sidney and
 Harriet Janis Collection
 (both by exchange), and
 gift of Irving Blum



Fig. 6.
Yellow with Large Blue. 1970.
Oil on canvas,
two joined panels,
8 ft. 6 in. x 9 ft. 1/4 in.
(259.1 x 275.0 cm).
The Museum of
Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles. The Barry
Lowen Collection



Fig. 7.
Black White. 1970.
Oil on canvas,
two joined panels,
28 in. x 13 ft. 4 in.
(71.1 x 406.4 cm).
Collection Siegfried and
Jutta Weishaupt, Ulm



Fig. 8.
Black Square with Blue. 1970.
Oil on canvas,
two joined panels,
10 x 10 ft.
(304.8 x 304.8 cm).
Tate Gallery, London.
Purchased with assistance
from the Friends of
the Tate Gallery



Fig. 9.
Green Orange. 1970.
Oil on canvas,
two joined panels,
70 in. x 8 ft. 11 in.
(177.8 x 271.8 cm).
Carnegie Museum of Art,
Pittsburgh. Gift of Charles
H. Carpenter, Jr., and
The Henry L. Hillman Fund

Chatham Series followed the completion of nineteen two-panel paintings that Kelly made during his first year in the new studio. Those were already works in which, John Elderfield wrote in 1971, “Kelly lays bare his art to a radical degree.”⁷ The paintings examined a variety of ways in which to juxtapose two areas of color. The possibilities include, among others, one color set beside another, the bases of the vertical rectangles flush (fig. 6); one color set beside another in two long and narrow horizontals (fig. 7); two side-by-side rectangles that meet at neither top nor bottom, giving a skewed effect (fig. 8); and two triangles sharing a central vertical (fig. 9).

The preceding paintings most pertinent to the Chatham Series are three that place a wide horizontal bar of color atop a narrower one, like a lintel over a central post. Two of these paintings adjoin black and white while the third confronts black with red (fig. 10). Here Kelly began to explore the question of finding equilibrium between two independent rectangles poised one above the other. These works led directly into the Chatham Series, in which horizontal and vertical elements share a common left-hand edge, and form an inverted ell rather than a tee.

Kelly has always stressed the fact that his abstract paintings have their origins in what he sees, in perceptions as opposed to concepts. The formats of the post-and-lintel and ell-shaped paintings are distinctly architectural in nature. Kelly’s keen interest in the built environment, emphasizing details such as cantilevers

and edges, is well documented in the photographs he has taken over the course of his career.⁸ The new studio, with its tall windows and a ceiling crossed by long wooden beams, provided an apt setting for this new body of work. Obdurately real, the paintings in the Chatham Series display none of the lyricism sometimes found in Kelly’s panel paintings. They are forthright declarations whose success depends entirely on their compositional precision; they are utterly self-reliant. This path of thought suggests a connection besides that of architecture, albeit one the artist would surely dismiss: there is a remarkable if unintended element of self-reference in the Chatham paintings, as their shape is contained not once but twice in the mellifluous name ELLsworth kELLY.

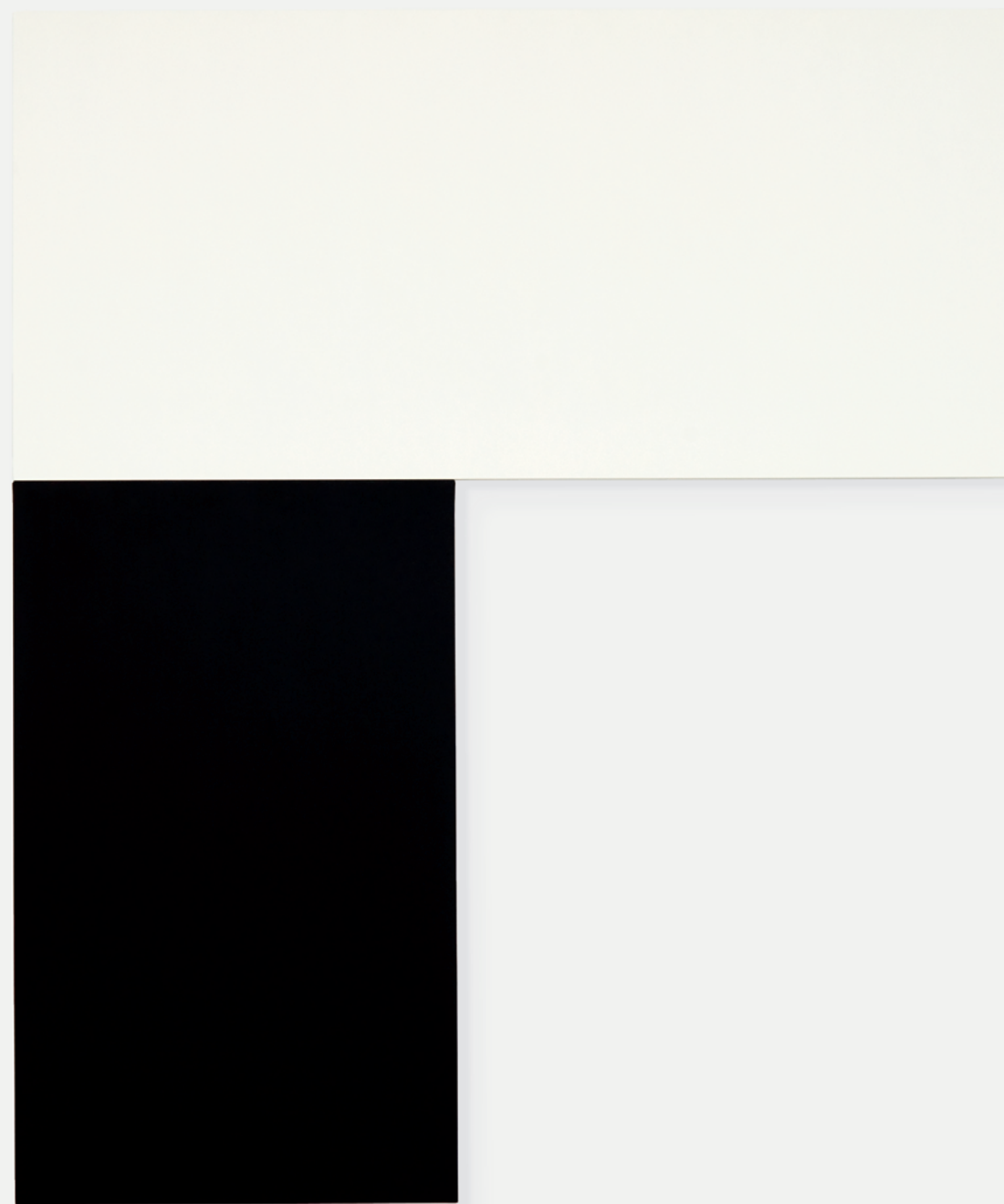
BLACK, WHITE, RED, YELLOW, BLUE, GREEN

For the first few years of his work in the Main Street studio, Kelly focused almost exclusively on six colors: black, white, red, yellow, blue, and green. These are the colors of the Chatham Series. His attention to this set of colors dated back twenty years, as demonstrated by his book project of 1951, *Line Form Color*. Kelly had described the book to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, from which he unsuccessfully sought funds to produce it, as a wordless volume “which will be an alphabet of plastic pictorial elements.”⁹ Eventually

Chatham Series

I-XIV

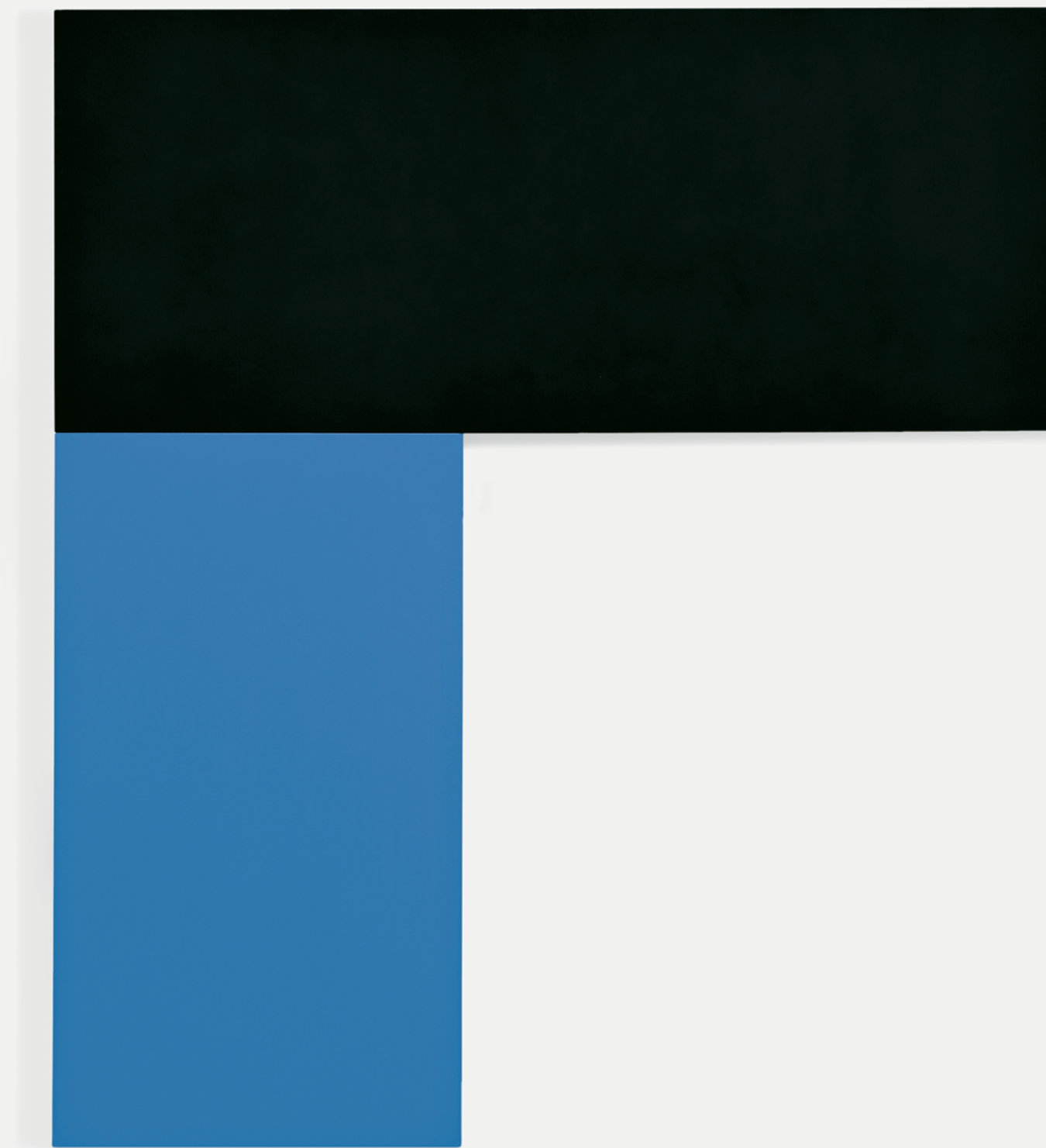
Chatham I: White Black
1971/2004
Oil on canvas, two joined panels
8 ft. 1/4 in. x 6 ft. 9 in. (244.5 x 205.7 cm)
Collection of the artist



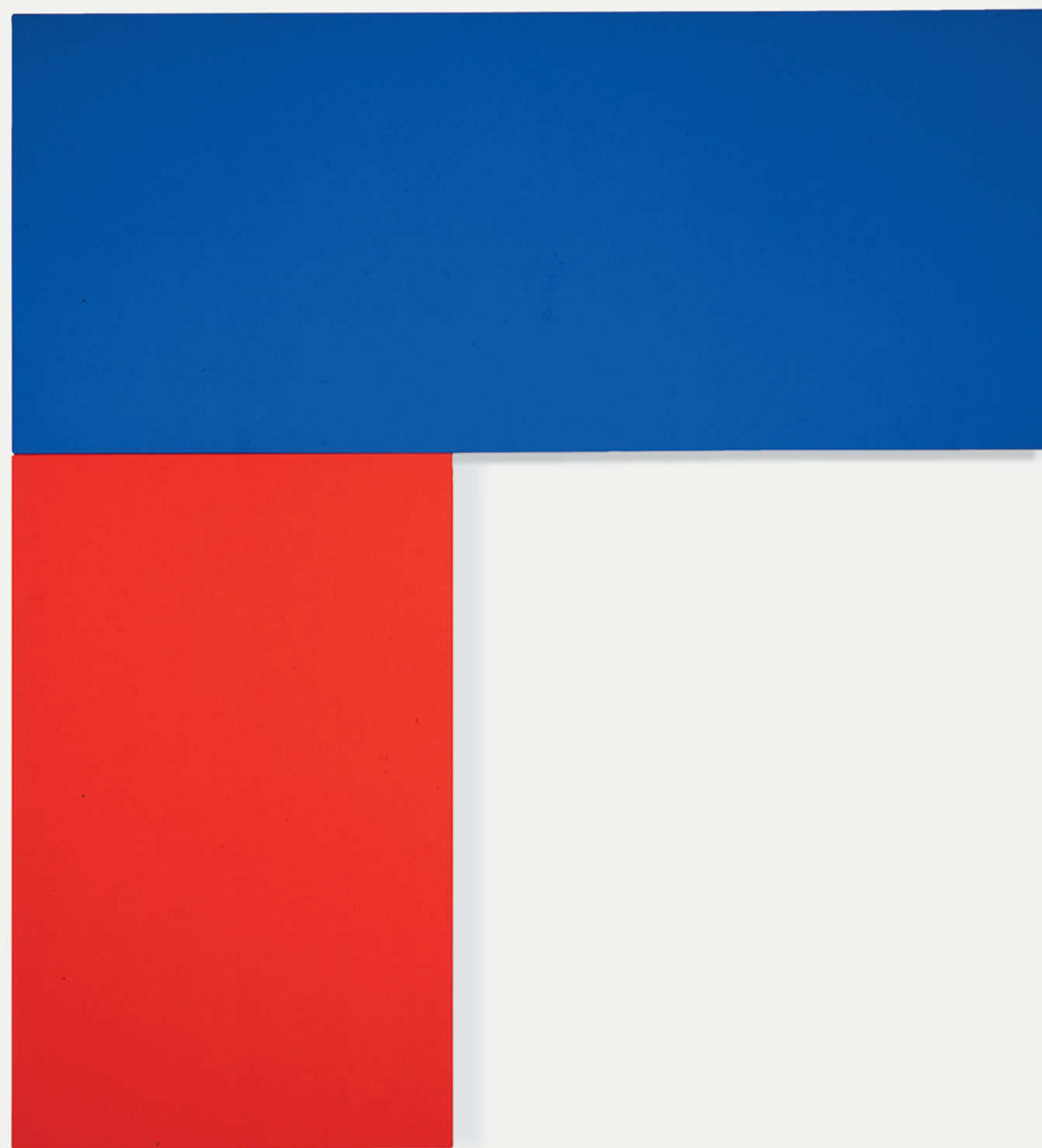
Chatham II: Blue Red
1971
Oil on canvas, two joined panels
8 ft. x 7 ft. 3 1/2 in. (243.8 x 222.3 cm)
Private collection



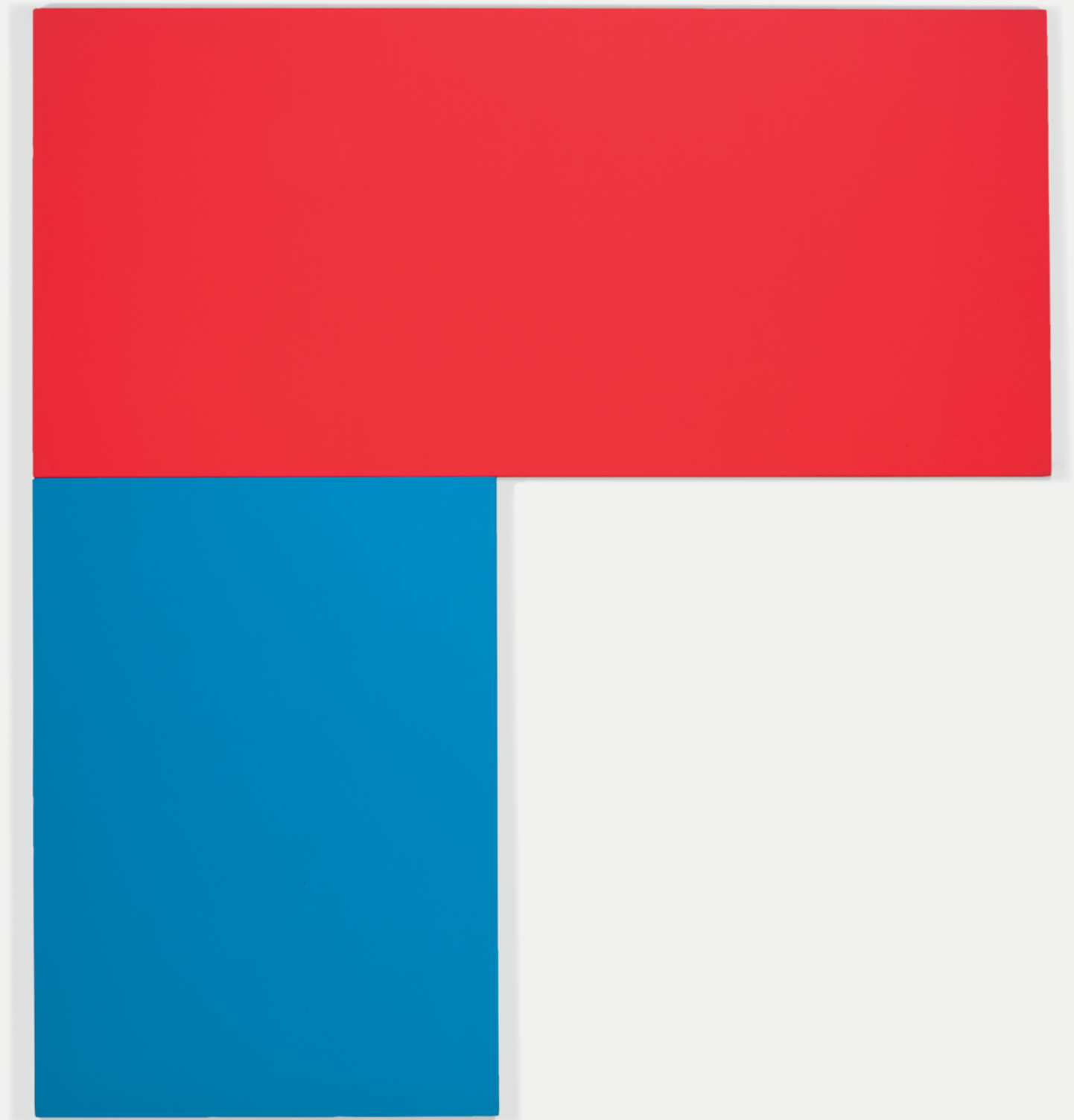
Chatham III: Black Blue
1971
Oil on canvas, two joined panels
9 ft. x 8 ft. (274.3 x 243.8 cm)
Robert and Jane Meyerhoff Collection



Chatham IV: Blue Red-Orange
1971
Oil on canvas, two joined panels
9 ft. x 8 ft. 3 in. (274.3 x 251.5 cm)
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.
Gift of Daniel Melnick



Chatham V: Red Blue
1971
Oil on canvas, two joined panels
9 ft. x 8 ft. 3 1/2 in. (274.3 x 252.7 cm)
Glenstone



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