

The sunlight breaking through the towering trees and across the clearing at the Leland Iron Works catches a shock of white hair as someone rounds the corner and heads this way. A voice calls out, and one is immediately rapt into the ever-shifting world of the ineffably charming Lee Kelly. The artist's warm welcome and an invitation to walk the property with him to see his latest works is filled with a gentle banter and easeful jocularity. The tree-filled grounds contain a virtual retrospective of some fifty years of Kelly's work in welded metal, which spurs a conversation that suggests the intimate connection between aesthetics and biography in his world. With an easy smile and openness, the ruggedly handsome Kelly seems disarmingly approachable, like an old friend, yet elegiac moments arise in any time spent with this complex man; they reveal the limits of the artist's public face and suggest the depths of emotion and intellect below the surface.

One of the premier sculptors of the Pacific Northwest, Lee Kelly has made a unique place for himself in the region. Much sought-after for public and private commissions, Kelly has managed to survive and prosper over the years solely from his art, without having to fall back on the necessity of teaching to support its production. Traveling an artistic journey from painting to sculpture—gestural abstraction to a spare geometry—Kelly's aesthetic course has mirrored the vocabulary of the post-World War II era as it moved from abstract expressionism to minimalism into post-modernism.

Born in McCall, Idaho in 1932, Kelly grew up in Portland studied at the Portland Museum Art School with Louis Bunce and Frederick Littman. He quickly became one of the leading young Turks of the Oregon art scene, creating adventuresome painted sculpture and large-scale canvases of turbulent forms and harmonic color. Having found his artistic footing in abstract painting, and enjoying a critical success, Kelly rapidly began to push beyond the two-dimensional limits of working with oil-on-canvas to invent ever-more complex organic forms out of welded sheet metal, painting on their surfaces to add richness and pattern. These initial sculptures grew spontaneously out of the process of their making; occupying a space between painting and sculpture, the hollow metal works evoke the forms of nature and the primal rhythms of jazz. No longer drawn and discovered shapes created by the gesture of a brushstroke on canvas, Kelly's works become growing, rapturous forms attaining true volume in physical space.

Inspired in part by the example of the great American sculptor David Smith's Terminal Iron Works, and following opportunity, Kelly bought farmland in 1962 near Oregon City and established the Leland Iron Works as his base of operations. Planting trees wholesale across the pastureland, and slowly remodeling the dairy barn to accommodate his ever larger and more complicated works, Kelly created a nurturing place that would inspire and sustain his life and work for the next forty-odd years.

The late 1960s found Kelly moving away from the spontaneous abstraction of his welded, painted sculpture toward a clearer, more struc-

tural vocabulary. Opening up and simplifying the forms, the work of that time takes on a decidedly architectural quality that signals the shift from object to space-defining installation in his aesthetic concerns. He also abandoned painting at this time to focus on the ever more complicated, large-scale welded work and his growing number of public commissions. Subsequent remodeling of the studio to accommodate heavy-duty hoists and overhead booms enabled Kelly to achieve monumental, architecturally scaled, multipart pieces. Where earlier the bravado moment had driven the work, now drawing and planning came to the fore in his practice. Predictably, that shift accelerated the simplification of forms for Kelly and spawned a new interest in the junctures between forms and the bolted joints that lock them together. Slabs, platforms, stairs, post-and-lintel structures form the vocabulary of Kelly's practice in the 1970s, as a host of major public commissions enabled him to define place and experience for the viewer in new ways. His concerns now become silhouette, volume, mass, the distance between components, and the space thus created that invites the viewer to actively engage with the work. Materials, not paint, define the color and surfaces of the sculpture during this period, as he worked with Corten and stainless steel in addition to mild steel. Sandblasted, ground, and enameled surfaces come to dominate the practice, and Kelly incorporated light and water as elements in some of his commissions. As a result, the grounds

of the Leland Iron Works display a handful of brilliant fountains that delight the eyes and ears and confirm Kelly's mastery of a Zen-like reduction of forms to achieve a blissful, pure state.

The late 1970s also saw Kelly return to Asia for the first time since his Korean War duty twenty-five years earlier. Since then, he has returned to Nepal annually to trek and work, and as a result, he has established a relationship with a bronze foundry there that produces small-scale castings for him. His travels have subtly influenced the content and formal vocabulary of the works, from sources as diverse as the devotional flags and prayer wheels of Tibet and Nepal to the monumental architectural ruins of Angkor Wat. New forms, small decorative elements, color, and gilding have entered the late work as the complexity of these diverse places filters through the artist's eye and mind to generate a new richness. Willowy totemic pieces, cart-like forms, and layered groupings with complex curves and counter-curves defining the overlaying forms are coupled with exotic surfaces such as silver or gold leaf over vermilion for an almost-baroque affect. Like a fresh wind in the trees of the property, new ideas emerge to be explored, new challenges to be conquered.

At seventy-four, Lee Kelly is fully engaged in the world and working with a vigor that would challenge a person half his age. Taking on new commissions, he is stretching the parameters of his formal vocabulary to find contemporary forms and solutions to the problems that have engaged him for over half a century in his search to give voice to a celebration of life and love, form and sensation, in the immediacy of sculpture.

IN A SPACE BETWEEN

