



*For decades now,*

# WILLIAM KLEIN

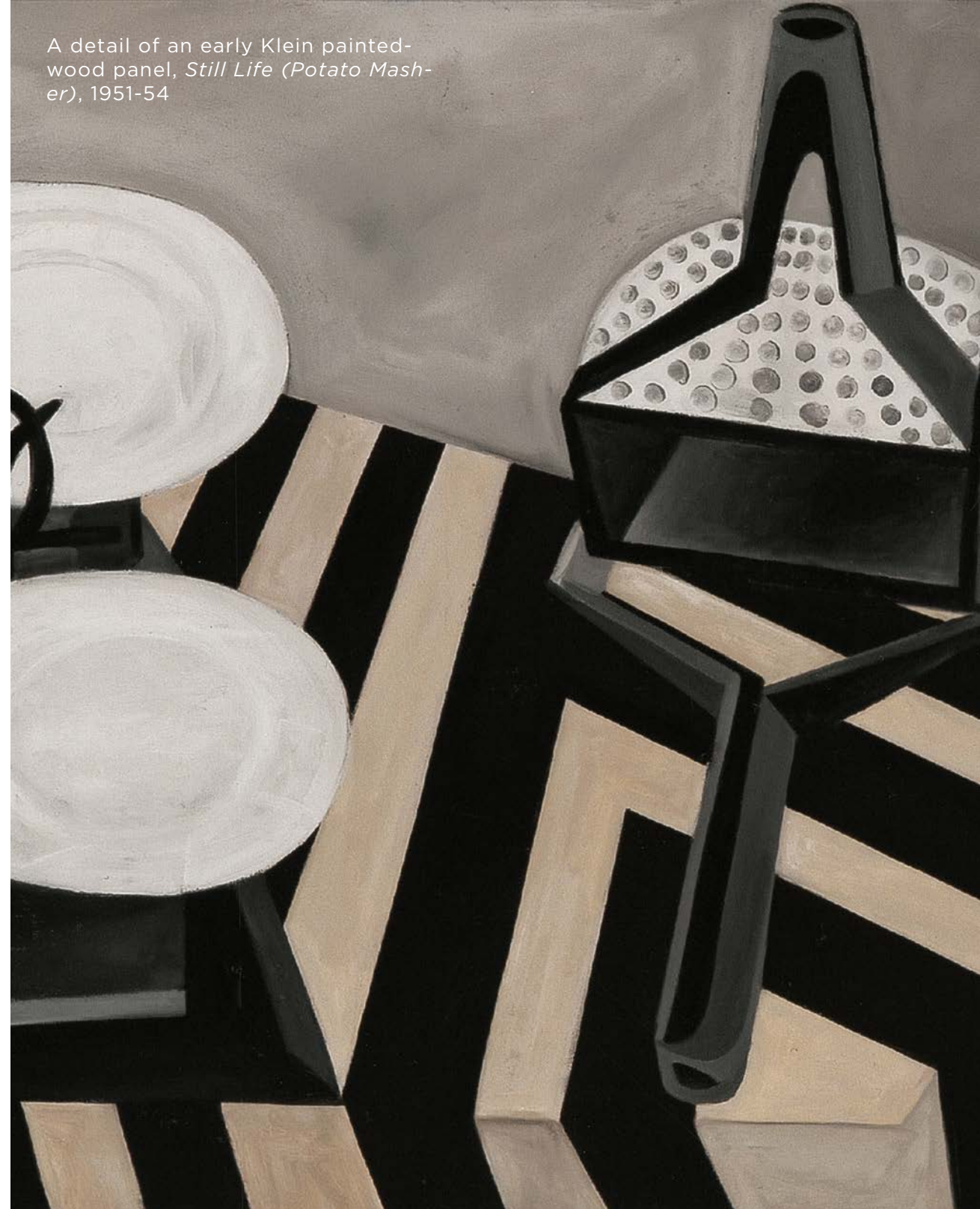
has been considered a legend of 20th-century photography, surrounded by a mythos that is usually said to have begun in 1954, when Alexander Liberman, the then-creative director of Condé Nast, lured him to New York to be a *Vogue* photographer. Klein's startling pictures, many of which captured models out and about in the city that never sleeps, took the world by storm, and, before long, his street photographs and films did, too.

William Klein is known as a photographer yet a current exhibition at Howard Greenberg Gallery in New York features paintings he created in the 1950s and '60s. Here, Klein is shown with some of the rarely-seen paintings in his Paris studio with his son, Pierre, in 1965.

A detail of an early Klein painted-wood panel, *Still Life (Potato Masher)*, 1951-54

**B**ut now, a new show at New York's Howard Greenberg Gallery, called "William Klein: Paintings, Etc." demonstrates that there is an even earlier Klein story to be told. It's about how he first made his name as a painter in the early 1950s, after he had decamped to Paris on the G.I. Bill and studied with the proto-Pop painter Fernand Léger. Through April 27, some of those paintings are on view, together with a handful of experimental abstract photographs. (Two new monographs also delve into this territory, *William Klein: ABC* from Abrams and *William Klein: Paintings, Etc.* from Contrasto.)

"For a long time he held us off," says Kate Stevens, the director of London's HackelBury Fine Art, who discovered the paintings in a remote corner of Klein's studio after a two-year persuasion campaign. When she finally unearthed the work, shown at HackelBury last fall, she and Marcus Bury, one of the gallery's co-owners, were stunned. "When we pulled them out, you could see the building blocks of what came afterwards," Stevens says. "All the ingredients are there, the palette, the composition, everything."





**T**his becomes abundantly clear when viewing the paintings at Greenberg: Cubist-inspired still-lives and geometric abstractions made between 1948 and 1954, they have a palette limited to black, white, yellow and red and compositions that seem to grow more chaotic over time, suggesting the scraped and layered *décollage* poster works that later became a hallmark of Nouveau Réalisme.

Left: *Thick Vertical Lines on Black*, 1953. Above: *Muhammad Ali, Miami*, 1964, an example of Klein's painted contact sheets

Last month, on a visit to New York, his hometown, Klein didn't seem particularly interested in discussing the past. During a week-long stay that included a talk at the Museum of Arts and Design, which is screening his films through April 25, the nearly 85-year-old photographer crashed through the city like a rock star, keeping his handlers — and reporters — waiting for hours, even threatening to cancel a long-planned book signing at the gallery so he could make new photographs of the St. Patrick's Day Parade. (He almost made good on the cancellation threat but finally turned up, drenched with sleet and snow, for the last half hour.)

“New York is still the same old shithole,” Klein snarls on a phone call from his home in Paris the following week, his vowels sounding remarkably Frenchified for a native New Yorker. “It's really uncomfortable and hard to take.”

*Lettrist painting for mural (detail), 1963-64. Inset: Klein speaking at MAD with critic David Company (photo courtesy of Barbara Julius)*





**“I DON'T LOOK BACK IN ANGER.  
I LOOK BACK AND I FEEL OKAY.”**

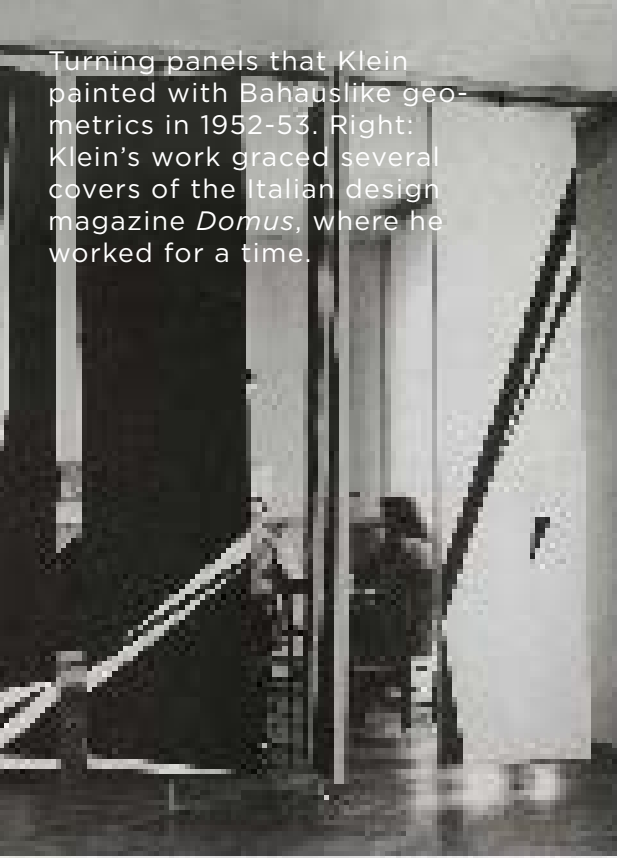


**D**espite his reliance on a cane these days, he still cuts a rangy, leonine figure, and despite his recalcitrance, he warms up the moment he senses a receptive audience. “He’s one of those true ego-artists,” says Karen Marks, Greenberg’s director. “If there’s someone knocking on the stage door, he will give an autograph.”

Even so, Klein won’t discuss the paintings. “I haven’t been preoccupied with them,” he says. “They were in my stock room.” Instead, he focuses on how the work, after hanging in several well-received European shows in the early ’50s, led him to reinvent himself as a photographer.

Photos from left: *Black Barn + White Lines*, 1949, and *Barn on Walcheren Island*, 1949, which both depict a Belgian barn attached to a house in which the painter Mondrian once lived.

Turning panels that Klein painted with Bauhaus-like geometrics in 1952-53. Right: Klein's work graced several covers of the Italian design magazine *Domus*, where he worked for a time.



**D**riven by Léger's advice to get out of the atelier and into everyday life, in 1952 Klein accepted a commission from Italian architect Angelo Mangiorotti, who had seen his first solo show at the Galleria del Milione, in Milan. Mangiorotti had devised a set of room-dividing panels, and he hired Klein to paint them with Bauhaus-like abstractions. "They were on rails," Klein says. "They turned and they moved and they blurred when people turned them around and spun them." After photographing the pieces, Klein had a revelation. "I saw the blurring of these geometrical forms, and I thought, 'This is a new way of dealing with circles and squares and triangles.'" From there, he began experimenting with blurred photograms in the darkroom. "It was an opening to another dimension," he says.

**A**fter Liberman spotted his early photographs in a show in Paris, that new dimension returned Klein to New York. The artist spent his time back in the city teaching himself to make what he laughingly calls “fotografia povera” (the street work that later made him famous) and “fotografia rich” (his fashion shots for *Vogue*). At Condé Nast, he recalls, “I had assistants, I could do blurs, I could flash, I could use multiple exposures and make sets.” But his true passion was working solo on the street, with one camera, two lenses and the chutzpah to jam himself into the middle of the St. Patrick’s Day Parade (“I have a sort of relationship with it,” he says) or groups of children and commuters, recording their blurred, grainy faces for posterity. “New Yorkers have always been kind of naïve,” he says. “Everybody thought they would win the lottery and that they were big deals. So being photographed was something flattering.”

Clockwise from top: A scene from Klein’s 1966 film *Who Are You Polly Maggoo?*; *Smoke + Veil, Paris (Vogue)*, 1958; *Dorothy Blowing Light Smoke Rings*, 1962





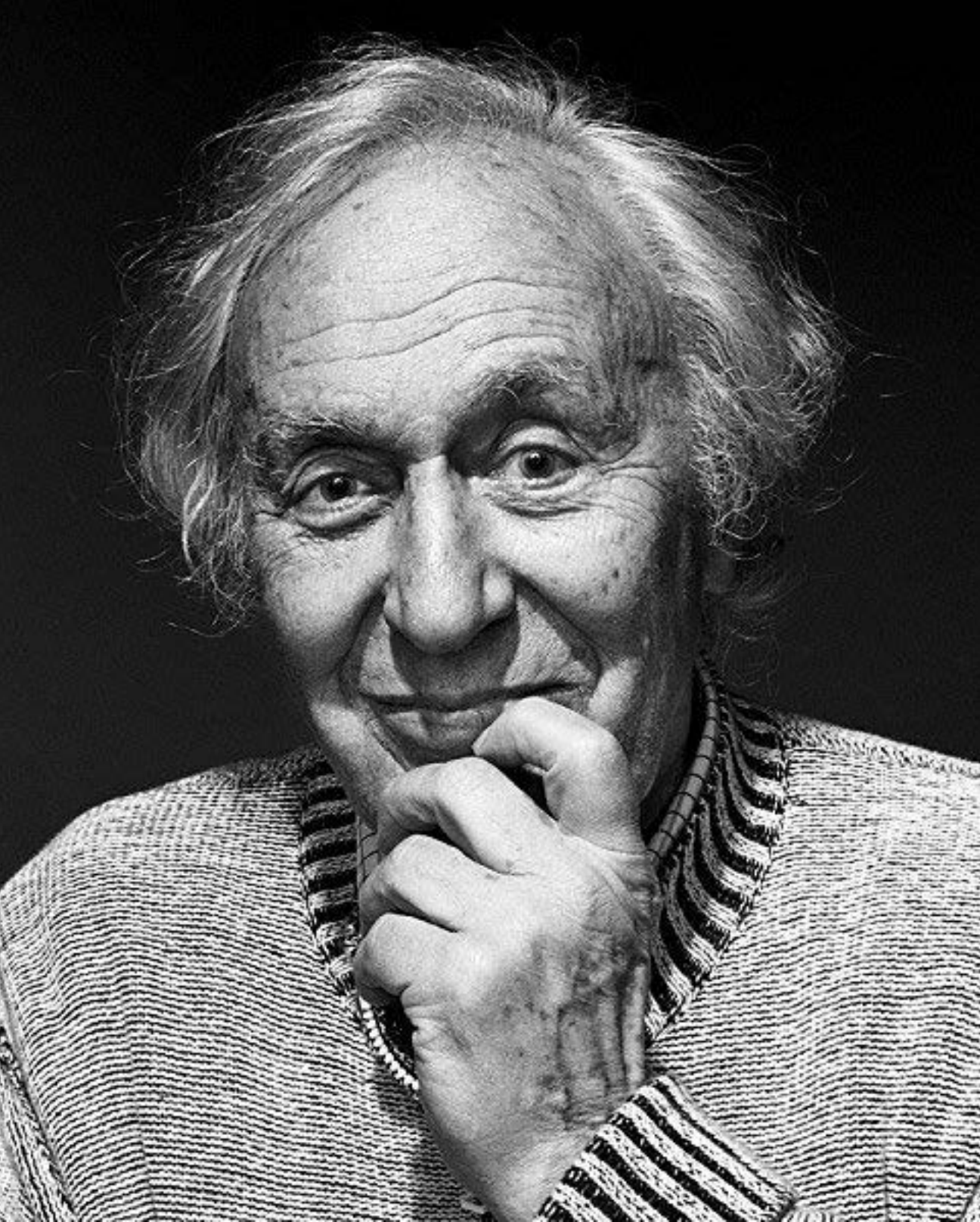


*Mural Project No. 1*, was conceived in the early 1950s but only finished last year. Now well into his eighties, Klein still accepts commissions to make these large-scale works.



Those sorts of street-life pictures (a third of which were taken at the parade, he says) comprised his first book, *Life is Good & Good for You in New York*, published in 1956. Klein designed it himself, often assembling the images into a rough checkerboard, like advertising placards on the newsstands he had also photographed. Rejected here, it was published in France to much acclaim. Then, in 1958, Klein made the movie *Broadway by Light*, a meditation on the light bulb-filled marquees and ads of mid-century Times Square. “I used photography to make books,” he says, “and these books for me were like movies. It was one way of getting into them.” (He has since made about two dozen films, on subjects ranging from the Paris fashion world to Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver.) Much of his oeuvre was also seen in London last fall, in a huge Tate Modern retrospective, which opened during the Frieze fair.

Klein’s *Mural*, 2007, incorporates various images from his career.



**P**hotography contributed to Klein's life in another way, too: He grew up at the seedy edge of Morningside Heights, a Jewish boy in a largely Irish and anti-Semitic neighborhood. As a kid, "the problem was how do you look at people?" he recalls. "Once I had a camera and I knew how to use it, I would photograph people that I wouldn't like to look at without a camera, because I felt myself a little bit hidden, as if I had a right to take somebody's photograph."

And what about now, when it comes to looking back at those early paintings? "It was exciting at the time," Klein says. "I don't look back in anger. I look back and I feel okay."

*William Klein (Portrait), 2013, by an unknown photographer*