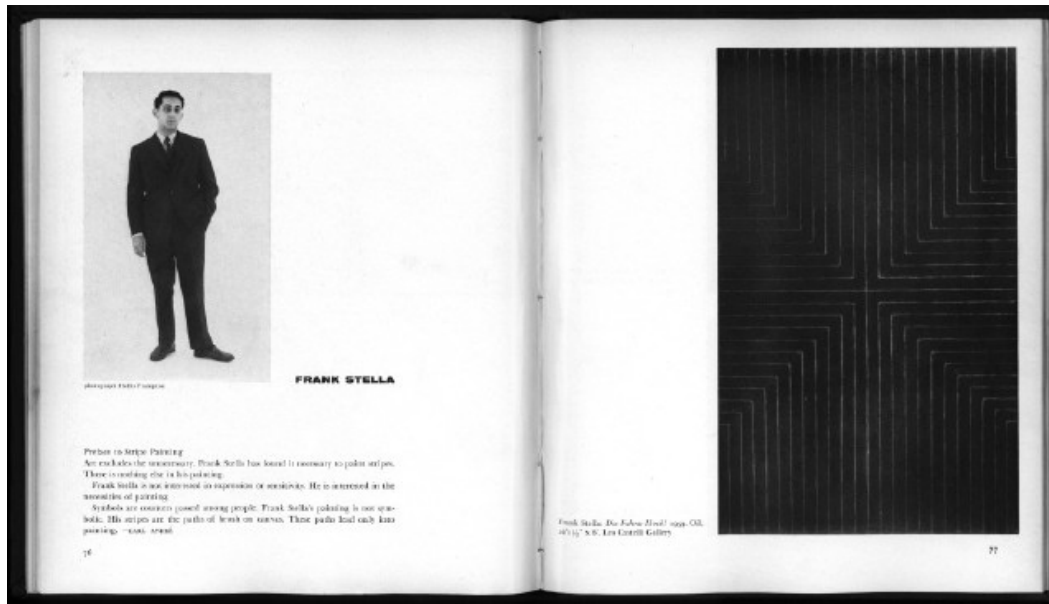


HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Cosmic Comic: Frank Stella's Fine Disregard

by Thomas Micchelli on May 26, 2012



*Frank Stella double-page spread from the exhibition catalogue "Sixteen Americans,"
Museum of Modern Art (1959)*

The first thing I noticed about Frank Stella's classic "pinstripe" paintings from the late 1950s-early 1960s — gathered from hither and yon for the splendid exhibition, [Frank Stella: Black, Aluminum and Copper Paintings](#) — is how at home they looked in L&M Arts' stately Upper East Side townhouse. The second thing I noticed is how funny they are.

Actually, it was "[Bethlehem's Hospital](#)" (1959) that did it for me. But once the hilarity of one painting shakes loose, it's hard to miss it in the others, despite their scrim of arrogance, resentment and control.

I found “Bethlehem’s Hospital” amusing for a rather dumb, technical reason: it is the only horizontal *Black Painting* in the show that has no vertical axis. It is composed entirely of overlapping rectangles (as heretically spatial as that might sound), which start at the canvas’s upper and lower edges, growing ever larger until they meet in a single pinstripe across the painting’s middle.

As anyone who has ever turned a sheet of typing paper on its side would know, its orientation is known as “portrait” when vertical and “landscape” when horizontal.

The point being that when something is wider than it is tall, even a blank sheet of paper, we think of it as panoramic, with the expectation of finding the heavens above and terra firma below.

The outwardly expanding rectangles along the lower half of “Bethlehem’s Hospital” (which, as has been pointed out [elsewhere](#), may be a reference to [Bethlem Royal Hospital](#), or Bedlam, London’s notorious insane asylum) undermine that assumption.

The right angles along the bottom edge slice up what we expect to be a solid base, conveying the impression that this otherwise imperious-looking painting has been cut adrift from gravity’s demands. It is both belligerent and weightless, like Wile E. Coyote when he runs straight off a cliff and hangs momentarily suspended in midair.

While the other *Black Paintings* in the show don’t possess the formal conditions that set “Bethlehem’s Hospital” apart, they share its ironies.

Like Andy Warhol’s celebrity portraits, they present their subjects as graphic

emblems in the most straightforward way possible — icons of ideas rather than of Hollywood stars.

And like Warhol, Stella cast himself as the coolest cat in the jungle, a deliberate parry to Abstract Expressionism's heat. This pose is inextricably linked to his paintings: big, bituminous and striped, staring down at you with their weird titles and exacting facture, they dare you not to take them seriously.

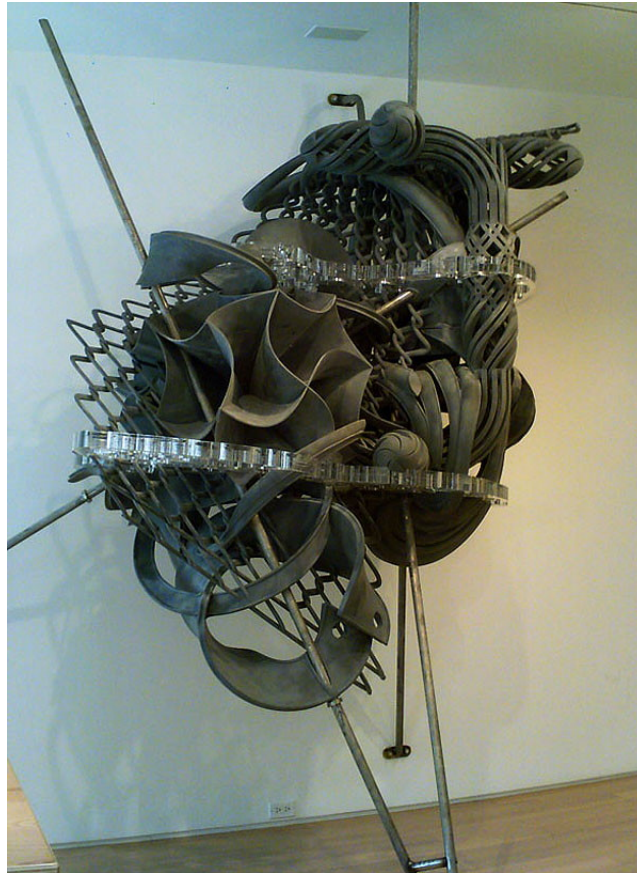
But their saturated self-consciousness, like Warhol's [Elvis](#), also snickers at the very idea of serious art.

Both of the exhibition's catalogue essays, by Robert Pincus-Witten and Katy Siegel, refer to *Sixteen Americans*, the show organized in 1959 by Dorothy Miller for the Museum of Modern Art, where the *Black Paintings* were first shown (including "[Die Fahne hoch!](#)" (1959), currently on display at L&M Arts).

Sixteen Americans, which handed the then-unknown Stella the most auspicious debut of postwar American art, arrived as Abstract Expressionism was at its last gasp and upstarts like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg were already sticking forks in it.

Leafing through the catalogue today, with its smudgy black-and-white reproductions, Stella's paintings come at you like a smack in the kisser. And it's not just because they're so stripped-down, symmetrical and impersonal, while everyone else's (including Johns and Rauschenberg, along with Louise Nevelson, Ellsworth Kelly, Al Leslie, Jack Youngerman, Richard Stankiewicz, Wally Hedrick and Jay De Feo) clings in one way or another to the handmade and the organic.

Here is a young painter calling other painters on their bullshit. And he does it in a not very nice way.



Frank Stella, "k.359" (2012), mixed media, 124 x 111 x 77 inches (installation photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

If Stella, Rauschenberg and Johns perceived AbEx's emotional signifiers — the loaded brush, the dripping paint — as headed toward hotel lobby kitsch, the latter two, Southern gentlemen both, tweaked those signifiers by imitating them in an irreverent context. If their critique was pointed, it was also openhearted and respectful of their elders.

Stella's wasn't. His work, backed by his interviews and writings, expressed

disdain for the previous generation's psychological struggles and claims on transcendence, asserting that paint is only paint.

In the same *Art News* interview from September 1966 where he delivers his best-known one-liner ("What you see is what you see"), he also states:

I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting – the humanistic values they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the object-ness of whatever it is that he's doing. He is making a thing. All that should be taken for granted.

And so "What you see is what you see" is a comment on the obvious. And its visual correlative — stark black enamel stripes arranged in a predetermined symmetrical pattern — is the work of a precocious smart aleck (whose youthful callowness is also on display in the title of the 1958 *Black Painting*, "[Arbeit Macht Frei](#)") demonstrating the true condition of the art form.

Stella's attention-getting tactics aside, it is astonishing that what he was doing then — which was received as both ultra-radical and instantly blue-chip (MoMA acquired "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor" [1959] through the *Sixteen Americans* show) — feels as of-the-moment as his most recent work (currently on [view](#) at FreedmanArt). Which, for an artist who's just turned 76, is a feat in itself.

The shaped canvases of the *Copper and Aluminum Paintings* (completed between 1960 and 1962) are just as funny as their black counterparts, if not

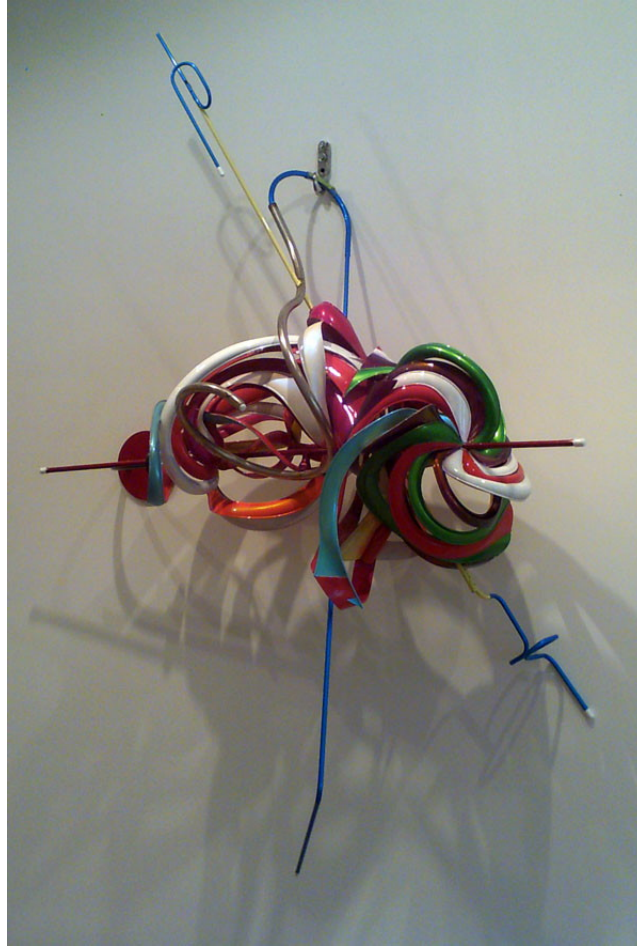
more so — especially “[Avicenna](#)” (1960), made from aluminum oil paint on canvas with a literal hole in its middle.

The stripes and notches of the *Copper* and *Aluminum* works conspire to create relief-like mirages of projecting and receding planes, something the proponents of absolute flatness in painting — who relied on Stella as a touchstone — certainly did not have in mind. That these optical effects are bouncing around a surface that’s suffused with an aura of high formalism makes them seem even sillier.

In her essay, Katy Siegel points to the hole in “Avicenna” as the “[m]ost extreme” example of the “element of totalitarianism” in Stella’s paintings, which “deliver experiences colored by exhilaration and control.” The hole in “Avicenna” indicates:

... a single ideal viewing position, one that the artist explicitly dictates. As Stella has said, he doesn’t want the viewer moving around in front of the painting — he controls our apprehension absolutely.

The control that Stella exerts over his art accounts for its intelligence, pertinence and frequent prescience, as well as its occasional rote quality and dull patches. Despite his often startling transitions, whimsy plays a very small role in his process. Even when his work is at its wildest, he steadily churns along, his ideas inexorably evolving.



Frank Stella, "k.305 (ABS Red)" (2012), mixed media, 94 x 75 x 33 inches

This method may feel suffocating to some, but only through its strictures was Stella able to free himself. Later in the *Art News* interview, he responds to a question about the economy of means in his work:

Yes, but there's something awful about that "economy of means." I don't know why, but I resent that immediately. I don't go out of my way to be economical. It's hard to explain what exactly it is I'm motivated by, but I don't think people are motivated by reduction. It would be nice if we were, but actually, I'm motivated by the desire to make something, and I go about it in the way that seems best.

The “way that seemed best” took the form of punctiliously brushed-on black enamel stripes, which retain their power more than a half-century later. Pointedly, the only painting in the L&M show that does not manifest this type of fastidious control — the first *Black Painting*, “[Delta](#)” (1958) — is also the only one that looks dated.

For a comedian, precision is everything. To miss a beat or to step on a line is disastrous. It is also in the nature of a comic to test the limits of taste, as Stella has done with his German titles in the late 1950s and his glitter-encrusted works of the 1970s.

From the time Stella made his debut, he knew exactly what he was doing. In the *Sixteen Americans* catalogue, the other fifteen Americans are portrayed in studiedly casual photographs. Not Stella, who dressed up in a suit and tie for a full-length formal portrait by Hollis Frampton. And he had his studio mate, Carl Andre, write a nine-sentence “Preface to Stripe Painting,” which concludes:

His stripes are the paths of brush on canvas. These paths lead only into painting.

While Stella’s path no longer leads only into painting, it continues along a feedback loop that leads from one work to the next, processed and fabricated according to impeccable standards.

Which is perhaps why he was so dismissive of struggle and transcendence in art; with his dependence on control, how could he have proceeded with his work if he spent too much time stumbling around in the dark?

The new wall-mounted sculptures and smaller pieces on pedestals at

FreedmanArt are marvels of compression and expansion: clusters within clusters intersected by straight rods and curling tubes, with textures ranging from high-gloss to matte, and colors from gunmetal gray to custom-car greens, pinks, purples, yellows and blues.

But the curves and angles are all firmly geometric, and the component parts, even when extending precipitously into space, are anchored to a central axis. There's no danger of their spinning apart or collapsing into themselves.

The expert choreography of shapes in the new work reminds us that Stella has rarely turned in anything less than a polished performance. But when he does, usually in the form of maquettes for larger works, the results are remarkable — open, raucous and dicey.

For a comic like Stella, who prefers to control “our apprehension absolutely,” rehearsals are almost always closed to the public. Otherwise, he'd be letting us in on the joke.

[Frank Stella: Black, Aluminum and Copper Paintings](#) continues at *L&M Arts* (45 East 78th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through June 2, 2012.

[Frank Stella: New Work](#) continues at *FreedmanArt* (25 East 73rd Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through September 27, 2012.