

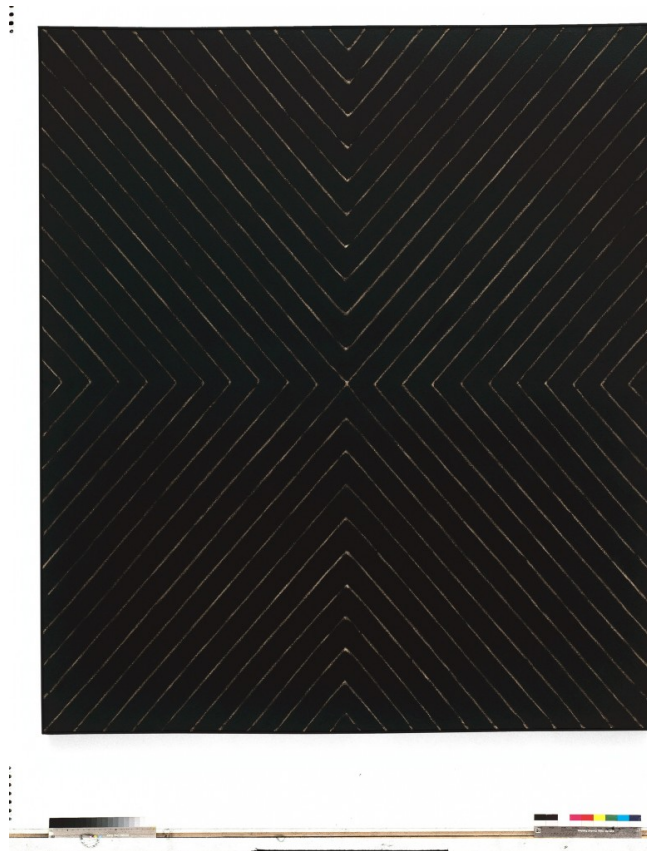
Review: Frank Stella at L&M Arts

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Black, Aluminum, Copper Paintings

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Zambezi. 1959, by Frank Stella. Enamel on canvas; 90 3/4 x 78 3/4 inches (230.5 x 200 cm) ©
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Hindsight is 20/20, but only because it cannot look forward. It's not true that Frank Stella's work developed "logically" according to any preconceived idea. It's only easy to say so retrospectively, but it would be a mistake to make the notion retroactive. In other words, the idea reads well backwards from our moment to Stella's, but not the other way around. The desire to reduce painting to its "essence," which Stella's work uneasily partook in, was only ever historical. Another way to say the same thing is that there is no "essence" of painting

divorced from a particular historical moment. That should be clear enough by now. But it was clear already to the best modernists, Stella among them. His work found its motivation in reduction, but the reduction was never linear. His work, as with all history, involved leaps and bounds in logic. His recent exhibit of pictures from 1958-62 at L&M Arts, obliquely evinces such ruptures, and that is precisely its success.

The exhibition featured 16 pictures from three separate series: the black, aluminum, and copper pictures. Three principal issues animate all these works: the formal device of the stripe, borrowed from Jasper Johns's flag pictures; the all-over mark of Jackson Pollock; and the attempt at non-relational painting, where decision making is eliminated. Yet some works remain stronger than others.

It isn't clear, for example, that Stella's black pictures would have met with such success today (regardless of their being featured in Dorothy Miller's *Sixteen Americans* in 1959) were it not for his later works, the aluminum and copper paintings among them. It is a retrospective light that shines brightly on the earliest pictures, which (we can with historical distance say) provided a foundation for the more rigorous logic of the later works, which are stronger.

It is with the aluminum paintings that Stella introduces the shaped canvas into his painting. He continues reckoning with the same three major pillars, but only in a highly curious way. With the aluminum works, it is no longer clear whether the canvas, through its particular shape, dictates the direction of the stripes; or if the stripes, emanating from the center of the picture, shape the canvas. (William Rubin raised precisely this in his 1970 catalog essay for Stella's MoMA retrospective.) Because it is impossible to pinpoint the genesis of the aluminum pictures, they are in a sense "whole," painted to be perceived in one immediate instance. (This, too, was Rubin's point.)

And yet this wholeness, where no parts are perceived independently of the work's entirety, is itself deeply peculiar, for it makes of the shaped canvas a non-relational painting. This is an astonishing reversal: whereas most shaped pictures are built so as to be highly compositional, insofar as they are built of numerous small decisions that are evident at each turn of the canvas's edge, the aluminum pictures, despite being shaped, are an attempt at removing the artist's hand.

The leap here was grand. In order to further the non-compositional achievements of his black pictures, Stella had to risk introducing composition through the shaped canvas. In no way was this a logical step. The entire enterprise of his work was put on dangerous ground. Yet it did not collapse under its own weight due to the precision of its calculation. Reading the aluminum pictures through the black

ones makes it easy to lose sight of Stella's shift. It is important not to do so.

The development of copper pictures was perhaps even more peculiar. *Telluride*, although sized as a study at only 22 1/2 by 27 inches, may take best in show. (No wonder the gallery used it on its press release.) Yet it is no study. A much larger version with the same name was painted in the year prior. This alone says much about the non-linear way in which Stella worked. But the question remains as to why he painted both pictures. Perhaps it had something to do with grasping its form more fully. The large canvas, no doubt, imposes itself on the body, while a smaller picture can make for better reading for the eye. But this is only a hypothesis. The fact that it is not immediately clear why Stella would paint the "study" after the larger painting is the greater point. Retrospective logic does much to make sense of history, but Stella was a painter's painter, which means that certain question may remain unanswered. "I would like the paintings to be their own justification, so that anything asked of them would be irrelevant," he remarked. Hindsight is 20/20 because the questions it raises are not always applicable in front of the paintings themselves.