

MONOCLE



Star Turn

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Abstract artist Frank Stella had his first Moma retrospective 50 years ago. We caught up with him as he prepared to show his latest colourful work, partly inspired by his smoking habit.

In his vast hangar-like studio in upstate New York, 83-year-old Frank Stella takes a seat in a slender black-leatherette recliner and rests the cigar he's been puffing atop the rim of a nearby ashtray. It is a habit he picked up in the 1960s in Zürich, he says, when his celebrity among US abstract art's emerging superstars was in its ascendancy. A contemporary of the likes of Cy Twombly, Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns (the latter of whom Stella is still friends with), he went on to join them in the pantheon of 20th-century art. The short, stubby black smokes readily available in Switzerland at the time felt like an appropriate accessory for a young artist. "I don't inhale so I'm good," he says with a chuckle.

Those cigars have accompanied him through a 60-year career, ever since he chain-smoked his way through the creation of his landmark series *Black Paintings* in 1959 – a set of images that made him an overnight sensation in contemporary art. Nowadays the smoke forms a more explicit reference point in his latest exhibition of sculptural pieces, on display at New York's Marianne Boesky Gallery. Many are monumental in scale, flashed by neons or sheathed in metallic panels and the bright pastel colours that have become a hallmark of his later work. "The new pieces we've made for the show are derived from smoke rings," he says. "It's a thing about turbulence, trying to capture that moment of movement. I guess I wanted to take a lot of particles and make them into a solid thing. It's a way of making sculpture that feels as though the piece itself is moving."

Stella, who rose to fame by exploring the limits of a picture plane – the flatness of colour on canvas, like in the *Black Paintings* or the brighter palettes of his murals – was an early proponent of three-dimensional printing. Some of his work was inspired by the shape of a 3D-printed perfume bottle he came across in the 1990s New York (years before the technology became widespread); other aspects of his sculpture have evolved to defy categorisation. The intrigue of interpretation is compounded by the classical references Stella often titles them with. The Greek myth of Atalanta and Hippomenes – transformed into lions for their disrespect for the gods – becomes a large, white, glossy mass that evokes fungi sprouting out of a woodland floor.

“Nessus and Dejanira on Jig”, an undulating, multicoloured star atop another fluid form, refers to Nessus, the slain centaur whose dying act was to gift a poisoned shirt to Heracles.

Despite the narrative and visual nature of these myths, Stella remains unattracted by working with representation. “I wasn’t ever interested in making art that wasn’t abstract,” he says. “I grew up with Hans Hofmann and Josef Albers and that was it –you can’t get any more basic than that. There’s still a lot of room, a lot of possibilities in abstraction, it seems to me.”

While Stella cemented his reputation as a pioneer of minimalism, his current sculptural work can feel like an elaborate departure from that pedigree (the painter and critic Walter Robinson once wrote that he admired Stella’s later oeuvre because “he is making the ugliest art it is possible to make today”). The appetite for Stella’s work has not waned, however, particularly among private collectors (actor Leonardo DiCaprio is one of his high-profile fans around the world). City developers keen to watermark their projects with public art have become important recent patrons; he is currently finalising a new sculpture for the much-debated Hudson Yards development in New York and a mural at the Mirvish Village residential complex in Toronto.

But it’s at private galleries, Stella says, that he’s always felt most comfortable, despite the huge impact that New York’s major institutions had on sealing his initial success. Moma’s prolific collecting of his early work made him a household name; he is the first living artist to have had two retrospectives there. “You can’t make art without the institutions. If the institutions don’t conserve culture and make it available then who will?”

Yet he understands that this can be a complicated burden. “Collecting is a difficult proposition [for institutions]. People assume it’s about the money – and it might be, a tiny part of it,” he says. “But it’s as much about trying to act now and guess what the artist’s value will be in the future. Yet 20 years later the judgment about what’s good is being made by people who weren’t there 20 years before. So how can they know?”

Stella raises himself from the recliner and walks to a table to inspect a gift from a Swedish art dealer, a glossy cigar box by Davidoff. “I’ve been in the art world a long time,” he says, smiling. “You know, patronage is really pretty simple – and it’s kind of brutal. I’ve never had patronage per se. I suppose it’s audiences, actually: they’re the patrons. They keep you going, one way or another.”