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Frank Stella in his studio in upstate New York, photographed on Dec. 18, 2019. Douglas DuBois

The artist’s Minimalist abstractions helped change the direction of painting at the start of his career. Now at the end of it, the 83-year-old artist looks back to his beginnings.

The Constellation of Frank Stella

By: Megan O’Grady
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STARS — THE KIND that appear in the cosmos — have coordinates, not addresses, and the same is true for certain earthbound luminaries, too. One gloomy November morning, I follow my GPS to an anonymous set of buildings in the Hudson Valley. The rain buckets down forebodingly, but I know I’m on the right track when I make out a set of immense cast-aluminum and stainless-steel sculptures by the side of the road, a few of them distinctly stellar in shape. For good measure, the name “Stella” is spray-painted on a piece of wood indicating the entrance.

This hangar-like structure, about a 90-minute drive north of Manhattan, has been Frank Stella’s studio for the past two decades. The vast space, more easily traversed by golf cart than on foot, is divided into rooms for both fabrication and display. Here, I find more star variations: The grandest has 12 points and is made of glossy black carbon fiber. At over 20 by 20 feet, it’s puffily imposing and gently comic. Its neighbors are a pair of cleverly interlocking wooden stars, one in teak, another in birch, the humble quality of the carpentry a counterpoint to their complexity of form, reminiscent of da Vinci’s illustrations of the Platonic solids. More futuristic are two slightly smaller ones made from polished stainless steel; they’re what might have resulted if Buckminster Fuller had created cat toys for giants. When I look closer, I notice that some of them have built-in bases on their bottommost points that resemble little shoes: These stars have their feet planted on the ground.

As does the man himself. Stella, dressed in khakis and a blue fleece zip-up that has “Team Stella” stitched on it in white, is now 83, but he’s retained the scrappy, unpretentious persona he’s famous for, as well as the curly hair and glasses. This is the man who, nearly six decades ago, gave Minimalism its great tagline by proclaiming: “What you see is what you see,” his words a rallying cry for what art could be, and, equally, could do without. A fixed light in American art’s galaxy since the 1960s, he has arguably influenced visual representation as powerfully as Andy Warhol.

Recent works in Stella’s studio, including “Nessus and Dejanira” (2017, left) and “Four Piece Table Sculpture” (2019, center). The artist’s new show is dedicated to his long exploration of star-shaped geometrics.Credit: Photo by Douglas DuBois. Left: Frank Stella, “Nessus and Dejanira,” 2017, aluminum and fiberglass © 2020 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Center: Frank Stella, “Four Piece Table Sculpture,” 2019, RPT and steel © 2020 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Unlike many mid-20th-century artists who rose fast only to seemingly collapse under the pressure of their own reputations, Stella kept pushing himself by using new forms, materials and technologies. When he felt he’d reached the limits of the flat canvas, he built out from it in reliefs inspired by “Moby-Dick” and Polish villages. In the 1980s and ’90s, he made metal sculptures that looked like race cars or jet engines turned inside out, as well as unwieldy canvases covered in Pop-colored riots of form — operatic assemblages of cones, pillars and graffiti-like brushwork, like something Charlie Sheen’s character might have had in his home in the 1987 film “Wall Street.” That the godfather of Minimalist painting turned into a progenitor of the contemporary baroque has always flummoxed critics.

Perhaps the secret to his longevity, his decade-upon-decade habit of creating, is again a matter of balanced forces, the measures he’s taken to temper his bright-burning ambition. When we meet, the artist has just celebrated the arrival of his fifth grandchild, Sophie. (Stella, who has five children, has been married to Harriet McGurk, a pediatrician, since 1978, and they live in the same house in Greenwich Village he’s owned since the 1960s; his first wife was the art critic Barbara Rose.) He seems to lack any real self-destructive impulse; he never succumbed to matters of lifestyle. When I ask him if he has any vices, he dodges. “You have to ask my wife,” he says dryly.

He has (at least) two, it turns out: cigars and fast cars, both of which have informed his work in various ways, from sculptures based on three-dimensional representations of his own smoke rings to his use of technological innovations derived from the auto industry, like carbon-fiber skin over steel or aluminum frames. In 1982, he was caught driving his silver Ferrari 105 miles per hour in a 55-mile-per-hour zone on the Taconic State Parkway, and in lieu of jail time, he delivered public lectures on his painting. His racing days are now long over, and he can no longer do much of the physical labor involved in art-making. And so it might seem he’s come full

circle, returning to the deceptively simple geometries he was making six decades ago, only now expanded into three dimensions.

The artist cites a painterly 19th-century landscape and a geometric 20th-century mural as influences on his own work.
Credit: Jonathan Schoonover

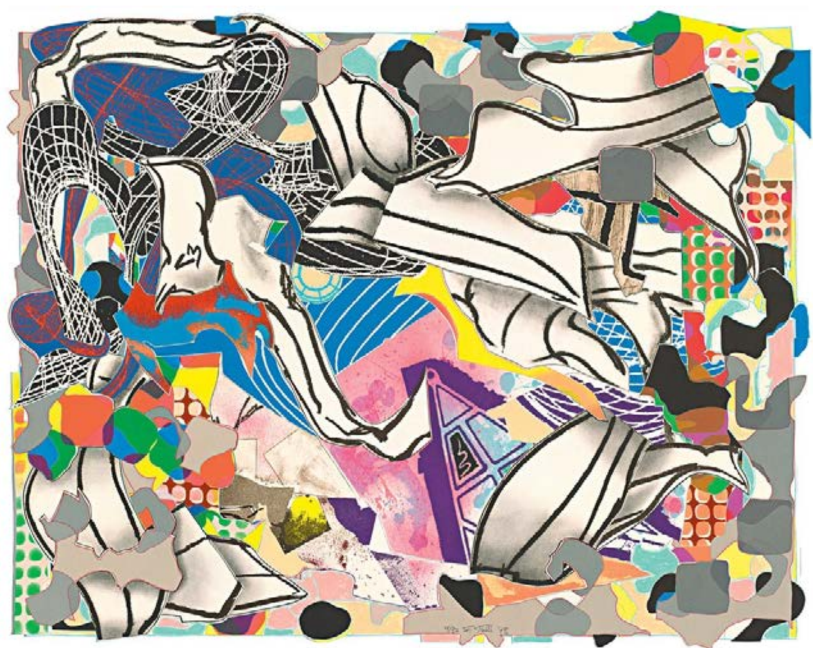
Tentatively scheduled to open in May, a new show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, in Ridgefield, Conn., "Frank Stella's Stars, A Survey," will focus on Stella's use of the form at both ends of his career. Many artists have become fixated on the creation of a particular shape or motif throughout their lives: Jasper Johns and flags; Pablo Picasso and guitars; Louise Bourgeois and spiders. The ceaseless exploration of one form helps create an artist's aesthetic universe, and Stella is part of this tradition. *Stella* means "star" in Italian, but the artist's interest in the shape — in geometry, the star polygon is recognized in both two and three dimensions with varying numbers of points — is spatial, not narcissistic. He initially made star drawings in the 1960s (a set of lithographs from 1967 titled "Star of Persia I; and II," first exhibited at the Aldrich in 1969, will be included in the show), though the majority of the exhibition will showcase the more recent sculptural work I observed in his studio, a study of the potential of the star in different materials, scales and formal variations, never repeated in the same way. "Even with something as stable and as knowable as the star, Stella is able to reinvent it every time he approaches it and make you look at it in a different way," says Richard Klein, the Aldrich's director of exhibitions.

Star polygons have long been bound up with all sorts of human metaphysical projection, used as religious symbols and in ranking systems. As motifs associated with honor and glory and jobs well done, they decorate everything from national flags and sheriff's badges to toilet-training charts. But most of all, they symbolize the limits of human understanding, their geometric representation inseparable from their existence as celestial objects, luminous spheres of gas held together by their own gravity. Their lyricism aside, stars are our most archaic form of navigation as well as our best clues to the dimensions of the universe. Because light travels at a finite speed, the glow of a distant star is perceived by our earthbound eyes long after it has ceased to exist. Similarly finite, perhaps, is the rate of human understanding: In art history, we're continually revising the past based on our relative position to it; the importance of an artist or an entire movement might become visible only in retrospect. So what, one wonders, is left to say about a man who has been famous now since the 1950s, and all the more so at a time in which figuration and portraiture have made comebacks, and when we're all questioning art's relevance in a scary new decade?

STELLA NEVER WENT to art school, but from an early age, he had a no-nonsense relationship with a paintbrush: His father, a gynecologist, paid his way through medical school by painting houses, with Stella as his young assistant. "My father would make me sand the floor; we had to do the sanding and scraping before you could hold the brush and then paint on the wall. So it was that kind of apprenticeship and familiarity," he says. While repainting the porch of their fishing cabin in New Hampshire — Stella grew up in the Boston suburb of Malden — his mother, a fashion illustrator and homemaker, decided to make a Jackson Pollock on the floor, dripping the paint in swirls. "And my father had to explain to her that maybe it was good in art, but it wasn't going to work as a floor covering because we didn't have any sealer."

More works in Stella's studio, including "Hercules and Achelous" (2017, center) Credit: Photo by Douglas DuBois.
Frank Stella, "Hercules and Achelous," 2017, aluminum © 2020 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A story in one of his mother's Vogue magazines, featuring models posed in front of a painterly Franz Kline-esque Abstract Expressionist backdrop, provided him with an early clue that art wasn't only about figuration. At Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., in the early '50s, when European abstraction was a prevailing force in studio art, Stella was especially influenced by the work of Hans Hofmann, a kind of proto-Abstract Expressionist from the '40s, and the Bauhaus color theorist Josef Albers. "I had no mimetic ability," Stella tells me, "but I was never interested in finding one, or cultivating one. No, I worked directly with the materials, actually. The big deal in postwar American painting was 'its materiality,' and so that was heaven for me."



Stella's "Ambergris" (1993). Credit: Frank Stella, "Ambergris," 1993, from the "Moby-Dick Deckle Edges" series, lithograph, etching, aquatint, relief, engraving and screen print on TGL handmade paper, courtesy of the National Gallery of Art © 2020 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

He started painting more seriously at Princeton, where he played lacrosse and wrestled, majored in history and studied art with William Seitz, who would become a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and with the painter Stephen Greene. After graduating in 1958, Stella moved to New York. “When I left school,” he says, “I wanted to see what it was like to paint all the time. And at that time, it was between the Korean War and Vietnam, and we still had selective service. My induction exam was in September, so I thought, ‘I’ll go to New York [in the meantime], get a place, and I’ll just paint and work and do odd jobs, and see what it’s like to do nothing but paint for three or four months.’ And then, unfortunately — or rather, fortunately — I failed my induction exams. And when I called up my father, I said, ‘I’m sorry, I have to go back to New York, I failed the exam.’ He said, ‘Too bad, it would have made a man of you.’ The most important thing for them was that I shouldn’t be a burden on society.” He pauses. “And we know what they meant by ‘society.’”

Stella was only 23 when his work was included in a group show, “Sixteen Americans,” at MoMA in 1959. His “Black Paintings” — bands of matte enamel (he used house painter’s brushes and house paint) separated by pinstripes of exposed canvas — startled critics for their extremity of reduction, their intentionally flat affect, their refusal to appease. Cool, clever, and somehow less angstily reverential in feel than the Abstract Expressionist era that it helped supplant, Stella’s work is now widely seen as a crucial evolutionary link in modern art, and a catalyst for the Minimalist movement to come. His emphasis on two-dimensional surfaces was a clear rejection of the idea of painting as a window into a three-dimensional space.

His participation in the MoMA show, alongside Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly and Louise Nevelson, launched his career — four of his paintings were included in the exhibition — but his first gallery show, with New York’s Leo Castelli a year later, resulted in few sales. Stella eked out a living painting houses, renting cold-water flats and sharing studio space with Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton, his friends from Phillips Academy, but listening to him, it’s impossible not to feel nostalgia for a time in which you could arrive in Manhattan, these days largely a gated community for the wealthy, and simply go about making your art.

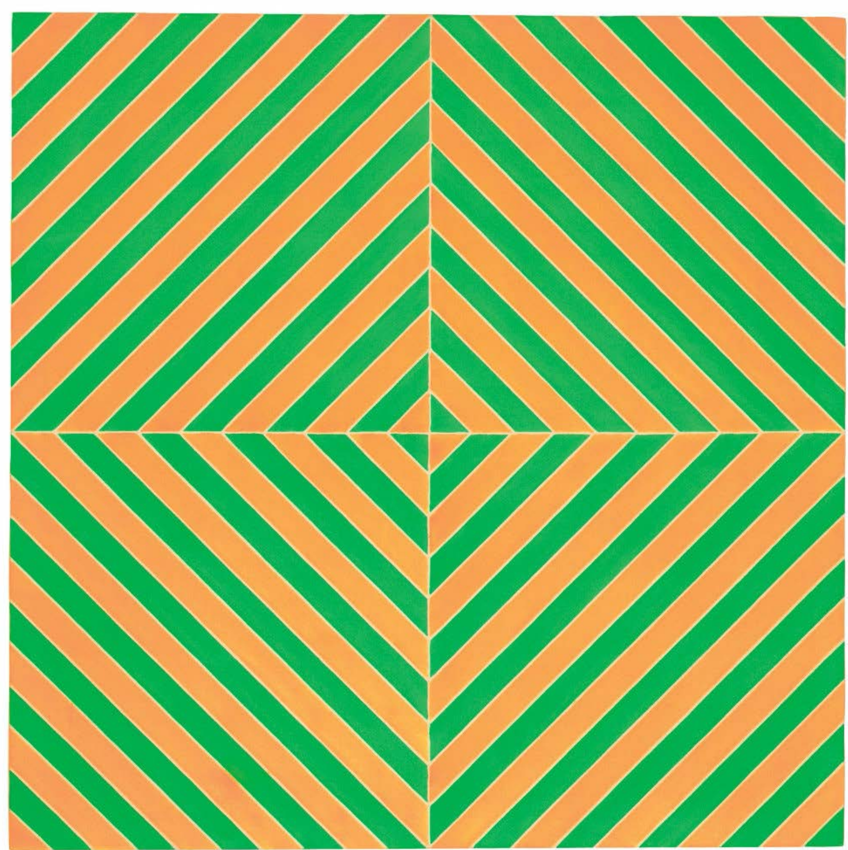
Stella’s “Firuzabad” (1970). Credit: Frank Stella, “Firuzabad,” 1970, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y. © 2020 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

“THERE’S AN ELEMENT of luck and things like that to it, but the fact of the matter is that the system was pretty supportive,” says Stella when I remark on how he seemed to be exactly the right artist at exactly the right time. In New York, he was granted a sense of license to do whatever he wanted with paint, inspired by the artists he revered, among them Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman and Pollock. Stella found his own canvases growing larger — large enough to have to be placed on the floor. “They were no longer easel paintings,” he says. “Basically, I was standing up in front of a painting that was a little bit bigger than I was, and

that was the working on it, like the way you would paint a wall in a house. And that was the kind of thing that I felt comfortable with." He singles out the abstract painter Helen Frankenthaler, who studied under Hofmann, as the artist he believes was one of the most undervalued in her lifetime. "They were always interesting, always good, and very, very difficult paintings she made, and she was lucky if she could sell any of them," he recalls. Early in his career, she proposed a trade with him, but he was too intimidated to take her up on it.

When I ask him if he's in touch with anyone from that time, he shakes his head. "No. The problem now is everybody's dead or dying. I'm in the category of 'Is he still alive?' artists. Yeah, you laugh, but I can show you a letter — a guy was asking if I was still alive because he liked my work so much."

By the end of the 1960s, Stella had lost interest in flat surfaces. He started making constructions of felt, paper and wood that protruded from the surface of a stretched canvas in a relief. He named these works, like 1971's "Chodorow II," after synagogues destroyed by the Nazis. In a way, the work could be seen as a kind of inverse of the type of painting that had dominated Western art since the Renaissance, which drew viewers into the canvas. "The idea behind it all was to build a painting rather than paint a painting," says Stella. "If I built it first, it was all mine, and then I could paint on that — and that's all." The simple story would be that the Minimalist turned Maximalist when the former wore out its usefulness.



Stella's "Fez (2)" (1964). Credit: Frank Stella, "Fez (2)," 1964, fluorescent alkyd on canvas, gift of Lita Hornick, digital image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, N.Y. © 2020 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

On many occasions, material experimentation offered a pathway forward: "That's a kind of necessity, because you get bogged down, you get worried. You're always looking for something, as they say, a way out of the darkness. And it's inevitable that you look to things. You look to what other people are doing, and you look to what's available, and you can't help looking for things. Mostly you look within the art world, but that seems like a limited vision, so you have to look outside. You have to get with the real world eventually."

In at least one such moment, Stella found himself compelled to look back in order to move forward. He used his 1982-83 residency at the American Academy in Rome to delve into the legacy of Caravaggio and Rubens.

That research led eventually to “Working Space,” his 1986 book derived from a series of lectures that he delivered at Harvard in the early ’80s, in which he framed his new work as an answer to a crisis in abstract painting. Stella’s “Moby-Dick” series, which he began that year and continued until 1997, considered abstraction’s ability to illustrate narratives, with silhouettes alluding to waves and ships. The ’90s and early aughts were critically tough for Stella’s hectic forms, and yet many works from this time — his mural-size “Moby-Dick”-inspired 1992 print, “The Fountain,” for example, or his underrated work in rugged painted metal, especially 2004’s “Ngebat,” a twisted construction of stainless steel and carbon fiber — now seem freshly exhilarating. You could argue that every artist working in Europe and America today has, in some fashion, been unconsciously influenced by Stella, and there are those who more explicitly credit him as an influence, such as the assemblage artist Jessica Jackson Hutchins and the abstract painter Sarah Morris.

If entropy is the natural direction of all things — the laws of physics, anyway, as well as contemporary art — some things in our universe do, in fact, remain constant: Stella’s star, at least, built on the principles of space, light, speed and seemingly infinite expansion, is unlikely to dim from art history anytime soon. “Basically, everything is about being an artist,” he says as we part ways. He pulls out a cigar as I thank him and gather my coat and umbrella. “You’re welcome,” he smiles. “And don’t say anything about the smoking.”

It’s an open question just how well Stella’s ethos has fared over time. Once so thrillingly radical, Minimalist painting has inevitably lost some of its charge over the years; at a time in which art is often wrapped up in social and political questions, shunning pictorial representation and symbolic meaning for the essentials of color, shape and composition can feel oddly safe, something everyone can get behind: colorful geometries that could be printed on an Ikea duvet. And yet the sheer scale and panache of Stella’s early work are undeniable. At the Art Institute of Chicago’s Modern Wing, I often observe tourists stopping dead in their tracks in front of “Hatra I,” one of the first “Protractor” paintings Stella made beginning in 1967, which consist of sweeping, intersecting arcs, the shape of the canvas echoing that of the paint. Glowing with bright acrylic and measuring 20 by 10 feet, it still imparts a contact high. Sitting in Stella’s presence and revisiting his work with him, I think what a misunderstanding it is to consider Minimalism as soulless or academic, a mere visual palate cleanser. On the contrary, it seeks feelings less easily named, an almost somatic response, a full-body awareness. What you see is what you see, but what you feel has always been important, too.