

# HYPERALLERGIC



Frank Stella, 2015

Photo: Kristine Larsen, courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery

## ABSTRACT TRAILBLAZER FRANK STELLA DIES AT 87

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May 6, 2024

American painter and sculptor Frank Stella died in his Manhattan home on Saturday, May 4 at the age of 87 after a battle with lymphoma. With a career spanning over 60 years, Stella leaves behind a trailblazing legacy that reoriented the North American arts landscape and defied any strict characterizations of his work as it evolved across concepts and media.

Stella was born in 1936 in the Boston suburb of Malden, Massachusetts. Prior to attending the prestigious Phillips Academy in Andover as a teenager, he grew up surrounded by his mother's paintings and assisted with his father's handiwork, including repainting surfaces around the house. Stella went on to earn a Bachelor's degree in history in 1958 from Princeton University, where he was entwined with the school's art department and its faculty as well as their connections to the New York City arts scene.

Stella made his art-world debut at the age of 23 with his *Black Paintings* series (1958–1960), which was included in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition [Sixteen Americans](#) alongside the work of artists including Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, Jasper Johns, and Jay DeFeo. The artist's thin stripes of exposed canvas sandwiched between geometric streaks of black paint were to be read exactly as their name suggests, giving rise to his famous comment about the series during a 1964 interview with art historian Bruce Glaser: "What you see is what you see."

Just as the *Black Paintings* resisted the projections of viewers and critics alike, Stella himself resisted placing his shapeshifting art practice in a box. He soon ventured beyond the constraints of both the monochromatic and the rectangular through his monumental "shaped canvases," as indicated in subsequent series such as *Copper Paintings*, *Irregular Polygons*, and *Protractor*.

After his New York debut, Stella was recruited for critical group shows at the city's Jewish Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, selected to represent the United States in the 1964 Venice Biennale alongside Rauschenberg and two others, and, at the age of 33, became the youngest living artist to have a retrospective at the MoMA in 1970.

MoMA revisited his practice in 1987 through a [second retrospective](#), which celebrated the artist's departure from flatness and forays into three-dimensional wood and aluminum forms.

Stella ostensibly transitioned into a "Maximalist" practice between the mid-'70s and '80s through amorphous layered aluminum reliefs. As technology advanced, the artist began to create standalone, geometric sculptures and installations with the help of computer programs. Stella's later-career creations such as "Nessus and Dejanira" (2017) teem with unrestrained and multicolored energy, connoting the artist's lifelong sense of restless intensity and refusal to be pinned down.

Stella's work can be found in major art museums across the country, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, which hosted the Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth's traveling retrospective for him in 2015; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gardens; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among others.

Stella is survived by his wife, Harriet McGurk, five children, and five grandchildren. An ongoing [exhibition](#) of his recent sculptures is on view at Jeffrey Deitch gallery in New York through May 18.



Installation view of Frank Stella's "Bow Tie and Ribbons" (2016) (left) and "Alu Truss Star" (2016) (right) during his 2017 exhibition at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York  
Photo: Matt Grubb, courtesy Marianne Boesky Gallery