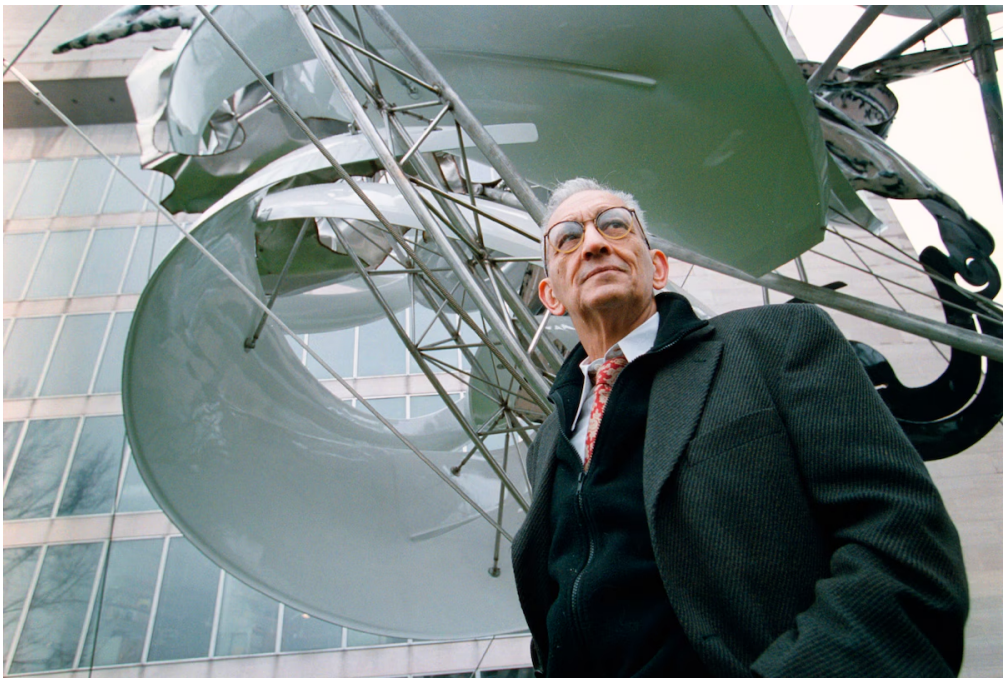
The Washington Post



Frank Stella stands near his sculpture "Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Schauspiel, 3X" outside the National Gallery of Art in 2001. Photo: Susan Biddle/The Washington Post

CONFINED BY EARLY PRAISE, FRANK STELLA FOUND FREEDOM IN EXTRAVAGANCE

BY SEBASTIAN SMEE
May 5, 2024

I flew from London to New York once to interview Frank Stella, the acclaimed painter and sculptor who died Saturday at 87. The interview took place in his studio in downtown Manhattan. Stella was courtly, charismatic and formidable. Even when he wasn't speaking, a terrific intelligence came off him like steam.

He showed me around, then gestured to a seat that, in my memory, was a good 20 feet from his own — a Swedish rocking chair, no less. The cavernous space felt like a stage set. Stella lit up a cigar, then, in a voice that reminded me of Joe Pesci in "Goodfellas" (he was of Italian descent), said, "Ask away."

The interview proceeded, and at some point — it was unavoidable — I asked him about his involvement with the art movement known as minimalism. I knew he had long since moved on from minimalism, and even repudiated the label. But to most students of modern art, Frank Stella was still the exemplar, the paradigmatic minimalist painter.

He heard me out, took a long puff on his cigar, then leaned back in the rocking chair. "I never felt that minimal," he said.

I think I may have giggled. It was true: This guy was maximal. He was physically small but larger than life — a brilliant maverick, sure of himself, ferociously ambitious, afraid of no one.

As an artist, Stella was also — and I think we can see this more clearly now — overrated.

He is not much to blame for this. Anyone so heavily hyped, and by such a small but powerful club of art establishment champions, will inevitably look diminished when the world wakes up, rubs its eyes and regains a sense of perspective.

It's to Stella's great credit that he ran away from his own reputation before his champions had a chance to restrain him. But that doesn't mean he ran toward greatness.

Stella was just 23 when his first exhibition catapulted him into the limelight. That was in 1959. Alfred Barr, founding father of the Museum of Modern Art, bought one of his early paintings. His successor, William Rubin, proceeded to give Stella two full-scale retrospectives — an unprecedented honor for any artist, let alone one so young. For the next three decades, Stella enjoyed an unrivaled run as MoMA's favorite son.

Visitors stand in front of "The Duel D" (2001) at the 2011 exhibition "Frank Stella — New Works" in Jena, Germany.
Photo: Jens Meyer/AP

Avant-garde painting in those days could seem like a chess endgame played by students of Samuel Beckett and Ludwig Wittgenstein, fussing between moves over art's relationship to modernity. Abstraction was the house style, and "truth to materials" a sort of unquestioned credo.

The most acclaimed American artists were engaged in a race toward purity. Purity meant ridding art of illusionism (that is, anything recognizable from the real world) and narrative (pictures in service to storytelling).

In many ways, Jackson Pollock had set the agenda a decade earlier. By purging his canvases of imagery and dripping paint in rhythmic, evenly distributed patterns all over his large canvases, Pollock had made painting seem freshly autonomous. That's to say, it was its own thing — not any kind of reflection of the world beyond it. Yet people persisted in seeing galaxies and mists in Pollock's work. Some thought they could see the residue of Pollock's soul.

Jasper Johns, a born skeptic, took things a step further by making paintings about painting. His deliberately deadpan flags and targets and numerals took things "the mind already knows" and subjected them to various processes. By dismantling mental clichés in this way, he arrived at what he called a "helpless statement." There was not, in other words, even a hint of romantic expressionism in his work.

Stella saw Johns's move, and now tried to go even further in the direction of self-referentiality.

"There are two problems in painting," he said at the time. "One is to find out what painting is, and the other is to find out how to make a painting." His solution was to merge these two "problems" into one, and to expose the invisible structures on which painting depended.

Thus, he painted thick black stripes in geometries that echoed the cruciform alignment of the stretcher supporting the canvas. The thin stripes between the black were not painted over the black; they were what was left behind — the bare canvas. In this way, Stella appeared to merge figure and ground, paint and support. The result was less a "helpless statement," as Johns had put it, than a "helpless thing."

"What you see is what you see," Stella said. He wanted his paintings to resist any kind of reading. Narrative or psychology or projection on the viewer's part would taint them, he thought.

Where did this urge toward purity come from?

It was rooted in left-wing, anti-Stalinist and anti-mass-culture ideas promoted by the period's dominant art critic, Clement Greenberg. Did I mention a club? Did I forget to mention that it was an all-male club?

One of Greenberg's followers was Michael Fried, who had studied at Princeton University with Stella. Fried and the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, who went to the Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., with Stella, found themselves fighting over Stella, each trying to claim him for their own arcane vision of what "advanced" art should look like.

In retrospect, all of this looks to most sane people like nonsense. The ideas of Greenberg and his fellow formalists were so narrow and fanatical as to be punitive. The punishment was felt not just by audiences, who were made to feel inadequate for not enjoying repetitious, empty canvases in intimidating museums and galleries, but also by art students all over the world, who were forced to treat this stuff seriously.

A whole generation was thus led astray.

Stella himself lost interest quickly, and he spent the majority of his career thrashing his way out of the box into which he'd earlier been squeezed. In the 1960s, he began shaping his canvases and painting them in bright, metallic house paints. He later combined paintings with sculpture, even introducing collage, and by the 1980s, he was in full pastiche mode, combining arbitrary patterns, baroque sculptural forms, poplike geometric shapes and clashing, extravagant colors.

Some of this stuff was exciting. Its comparative vulgarity certainly expressed an exciting sense of freedom. But most of it lacked an underlying purpose (unless repudiation counts as purpose). The work was all more or less impressive, more or less beautiful, more or less free. But it had the air of art made under self-imposed duress. As if Stella were under orders: Renounce purity!

When I visited his studio, some of the pastiche constructions I saw there were truly hideous. But I also saw elegant, unpainted sculptures made from tubular steel, partly inspired by Balinese dancing. I thought they were wonderful. And the way Stella spoke about them sounded so different from the manifesto-spouting philosopher-genius that his younger self had tried to resemble:

"These are all about center of gravity and gestures," he mused. "They don't look it, but when you get closer, they actually get very sort of warm and tropical. It's hard to imagine tropical stainless steel, but on the other hand, they are. They're to do with things like vines and the gestures of the dancers in the theater."

Stella's creative process, in other words, had become intuitive rather than programmatic. It certainly wasn't ideological.

"You have these forms, and you work them together, and then things start to happen," he said. "It's not totally predictable."

That, if you weren't sure, is how real artists talk. When they start talking about purity, run a mile.