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Artist Frank Stella Continues to Provoke

Since 1958, artist Frank Stella has been courting controversy and creating remarkable art in various media. Today, he continues to open new gallery shows and prepares for a 2015 retrospective at the Whitney Museum

MAN AT WORK l Stella in his studio in Newburgh, NY, where he creates massive sculptures. *PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN GAUT FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE; ©2014 FRANK STELLA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK (ARTWORK)*

FRANK STELLA HAS BEEN around a long time: a working artist in New York since 1958 and a part of the conversation, albeit in varying degrees, since the following year, when his sober "Black Paintings," with their wide black stripes alternating with unpainted lines of raw canvas, first shocked the art world. His cool, seemingly unemotional approach teamed with his Andover-Princeton pedigree to make him an intellectual of the downtown scene. As he has aggressively, continually reinvented himself, from pared down and rational to flamboyant and sensual, from two dimensions to three—eventually producing a massive, if uneven, body of work—Stella has championed art as a cerebral endeavor. He can be a polarizing figure, but no one has ever challenged his mental rigor.

Today, at 78, a white-haired, unshaven, yet spry-looking Stella is blunt about the other requirement for his art making: physicality. After two back operations, two knee replacements and a new hip—"That's probably why I like titanium," he quips—his body has lost some of its strength over the past decade, changing the direction of his practice the way his nimble mind once did. His days of painting immense canvases, which stretched up to 50 feet long and 10 feet tall, are behind him. Now he looks to less athletic techniques such as computer-aided design. "It's hard to paint," he says on a sunny September morning in Chelsea, not far from the Greenwich Village townhouse where he's lived since 1967. "Some people are good at painting with their hands, but I need my whole body. You have to have balance and control, and you have to be able to move fast—I don't have

that anymore. You have to be able to think, and I can't concentrate for more than two or three hours."

Nor does he make his giant sculptures by casting molten metal—the strain is too much. Pointing to a picture of *Fishkill,* a hulking steel 1995 piece assembled from castings around his studio, he notes, "Physically, I'm not really capable of doing this anymore." Even with the cranes he has in his studio in upstate Newburgh, where he spends a few days a week, "it's hands-on." Age has also cramped his notorious love of speed. Though a sometime passenger says Stella still drives with a lead foot—he was once arrested for doing 105 mph on the Taconic State Parkway and sentenced to deliver art lectures—Stella claims his stomach can't take it, and he's traded in his Ferrari for a Volkswagen. What hasn't slowed down is his drive to make art.

New and old Stella is on view in concurrent shows now open at Dominique Lévy in London and New York and at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York. Boesky is presenting *Fishkill,* alongside newly fabricated works. (After insisting for decades that his three-dimensional works were just another form of painting, Stella is finally relenting and using the S-word to describe his latest series.) With a process called rapid prototyping, he imagines a piece on the computer, digitally inserting and deleting elements before sending the specs to a fabricator, which manufactures the finished product, often in aluminum or titanium. *Puffed Star II* (2014), one of a group of five variations, is bright and shiny and seems to teeter on the edge of minimalism while also evoking the slick, reflective surfaces of artists such as Jeff Koons and Anish Kapoor. "They're maximal sculpture but reductive at the same time," Boesky says. "The same forms [from his early works] are there, but now they're on steroids." Lévy's two-venue group show, which inaugurates her London space, features early work like Stella's *5 Eldridge Street (Blue Horizon),* a 1958 canvas named for conceptualist godfather Sol LeWitt's old address.

For much of his career, Stella was represented by the late Leo Castelli and the now-defunct Knoedler Gallery. When he began discussing joining Boesky's gallery last year, "I said, 'It's such a huge undertaking,' " Boesky recalls. "He said, 'Aw, c'mon.' " Since her forte is new work, Boesky approached Lévy, whose specialty is scholarly shows and shrewd deals in the postwar market, to co-represent Stella in an unusual joint venture. It's a partnership that could prove particularly profitable, since Stella is still energetically producing work and is said to own a sizable amount of his oeuvre. His early work remains the most in demand: Stella's auction record, $6.66 million last May at Christie's, is for a 1964 painting, *Abajo*. Lévy and Boesky are young enough to be Stella's daughters. Boesky jokes that his good-natured banter makes her feel more like his third wife—Stella has been married to Harriet McGurk, a pediatrician, since 1978; his first wife was art historian Barbara Rose.

The dual shows serve as an amuse-bouche to the major Stella retrospective the Whitney Museum of American Art is mounting next year, his third in New York. The previous two were at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1970, when Stella was 33, making him the youngest artist ever given a retrospective there, and in 1987. Michael Auping, chief curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, which is co-organizing the exhibition, thought the prospect of a re-examination of Stella was a "no-brainer"—until he calculated that Stella has made more than 55 series over the course of his career, each with approximately 50 pieces, producing in the vicinity of 3,000 artworks, which Auping will need to whittle down to 85.

STELLA WASN'T one of those kids who always knew they wanted to be artists. He grew up in Malden, Massachusetts, where half of his left pointer finger and part of a thumb were lopped off in a childhood accident. Stella's father was a gynecologist. His mother enjoyed painting conventional landscapes and portraits. Together they painted Santa Claus on their windows at Christmas. She had attended fashion school, and Stella credits a*Vogue* layout, featuring models posed in front of Franz

Kline's graphic smears of black on a white canvas, for his eureka moment about abstraction. "I said, 'I could do that,' " Stella recalls. He'd never been a whiz at figuration anyway, and at Andover, abstraction in the European vein reigned. Perhaps even more important to his education there, the art studio was always open. "Elitism has its big advantages: The paint was free," he says. At Princeton, he played lacrosse and wrestled, majored in history and fell under the art tutelage of William Seitz, who would become a curator at MoMA, and painter Stephen Greene. After graduating in 1958, with the summer to kill before being drafted, he came to New York, where brushy, loose and improvisational abstract expressionism, then into its so-called second generation, was the dominant force. "I wanted to paint for a couple of months," he says. Failing his army physical, he was obligation-free, so he kept at the canvases, experimenting with paintings of stripes, which owed an obvious debt to Jasper Johns 's *Flags,* when he foundered. "The painting wasn't going anywhere, and I painted it out in black," he recalls. "The next morning, it didn't look all that bad."

The accidental invention was *Delta,* Stella's first "Black Painting," and its stark simplicity would roil the art world in the 1959 MoMA exhibition *Sixteen Americans*. Stella was 23. His participation in the group show, alongside Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly and Louise Nevelson, was also pretty much an accident, Stella says, though one senses a certain revisionist self-deprecation in his version: MoMA had previously produced *Fourteen Americans* and*Fifteen Americans,* and Dorothy Miller, the revered curator, simply needed one more artist for her latest lineup. "She was stuck at 15 again. I was, in fact, the 16th American," he says. "That was the real reason she put me in the show."

The reaction was intense and unusually vitriolic: One among many aghast critics singled out Stella's canvases as "unspeakably boring," while the museum, reportedly out of embarrassment, declined to hand out images of his work to the press.

"The Black Paintings," created from 1958 to 1959, remain Stella's most famed works, and Auping says that a section of the retrospective will be devoted to them—whether Stella likes it or not. "Frank is always looking forward," he says. "He loves the 'Black Paintings,' but he's over it. I keep saying, 'Frank, it's like the Rolling Stones having a concert and not playing "Satisfaction." You can't do that.' "

To this day, Stella insists he doesn't see what all the fuss was about. The dark canvases had clear precedent, he says. "I knew what was going on. They fit in. It wasn't like it was all my idea," Stella says, reeling off works by Kazimir Malevich, Rauschenberg and Ad Reinhardt. The art historian Irving Sandler recalls seeing the show, and panning Stella's paintings in his review. "It was very shocking to people reared in abstract expressionism, as I was," Sandler explains. "I really thought that if Frank's painting was art, everything I thought was art wasn't and vice versa. There was nothing like it." (Sandler quickly came around and now describes Stella as "one of the most influential artists of the 1960s, if not *the* most influential.")

In Stella's mind, though, his art was not a negation of abstract expressionism—in his heart he was an abstract expressionist. "I would look at my paintings and say, 'OK, where does that stand next to a de Kooning or a Kline?' " he says. "I wouldn't have been an artist if it weren't for abstract expressionism. That's what I wanted to be. In the end, you can't be an abstract expressionist if you're born 20 or 30 years too late. It's over by the time you get there."

FOR STELLA, BEING AN ARTIST was never supposed to be about finding one thing and sticking with it. "You expected that your work would evolve," he says. "More than now, people were quite critical of somebody that was repetitive." The first inklings that he would upend the boundary between painting and sculpture were his "Aluminum Paintings," which he showed at

Castelli in 1960. In these "shaped canvases," the geometry depicted in each painting governed its form, as if it were continuing into space. Downplaying the move, Stella says, "I'm not trying to be a wiseguy, but a rectangle is a shape, too." Though he may not have been the first to liberate painting in this way, his angled canvases were attention-grabbers, particularly the letter-shaped "Copper Paintings." "I was interested in the limit—how much could you take away and still have it read as a painting, not as an object?" he says. "Of course, Barney [Newman] did that painting that was one inch wide [*The Wild],* which he was very proud of, but I didn't think it was very pictorial."
Stella had created a pathway to minimalism; his 1964 proclamation that, in his paintings, "what you see is what you see" had become a rallying cry for the movement. But by the '70s, as his works grew increasingly baroque, protruding from the wall in a riot of form and color, there was an uproar from Donald Judd, the high priest of minimalism, and his acolytes.

Stella was unbowed. He persevered in his exploration, using his 1982–'83 residency at the American Academy in Rome to delve into the dramatic legacy of Caravaggio, Rubens and Velázquez. Stella's ambitious 135-work "Moby-Dick" series, begun in 1986 and continuing until 1998, considered abstraction's ability to illustrate narratives, with silhouettes alluding to waves, ships and sea creatures. The '90s and early aughts were critically and commercially tough on Stella's loud, crumpled and swirling forms, which sometimes looked as though the contents of a candy store had exploded. Some suggest Stella should have been more discriminating about what he allowed to leave his studio. Now, Auping says, with abstraction on an upswing again, contemporary artists have absorbed the many lessons of Stella: Wade Guyton's digital paintings hark back to Stella's geometry, for instance, and Sarah Morris's bands of intense color are dead ringers for Stella's "Protractor" series.

For Stella, his third major American retrospective is "a lot of pressure." Being out of favor, he admits, was not easy. "You just feel old," he says. "You don't know if you belong." He can be snide about the 21st-century art world, sniffing that in his day the Venice Biennale and Documenta often had "ideas, which are hard to come by now." He can also be nostalgic, noting that he never got to see his paintings hanging in the 1966 Biennale because "I didn't have the money to go to Venice." And he can be surprisingly unpretentious about the oft-presumed supremacy of art. "A lot of smart and gifted people can do other things," he says. "There are plenty of people that can go beyond art."

As for himself, Stella says, "I always liked making things. I find it embarrassing to be an artist."