

ARTFORUM

FEBRUARY 2016

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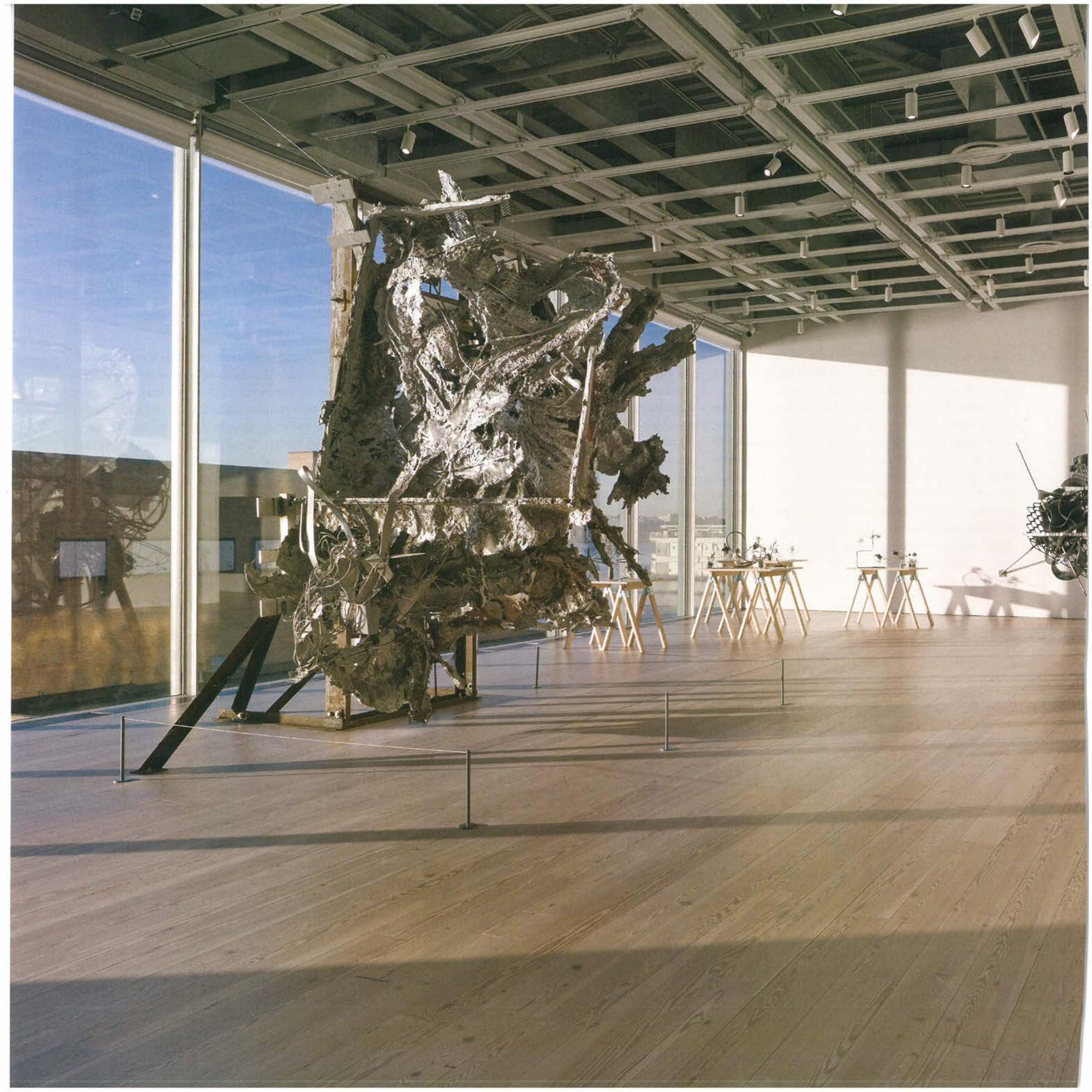
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\$10.00



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View of "Frank Stella: A Retrospective," 2015–16, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2015.
From left: *Raft of the Medusa (Part I)*, 1990; *Circus of Pure Feeling for Malevich, 4 Square Circus, 16 elements*, 2009; *K.459*, 2012; *kandampat*, 2002. Photo: Ronald Amstutz.

Below: View of "Frank Stella: A Retrospective," 2015–16. From left: *The Grand Armada (IRS-6, 1X)*, 1989; *K.81 combo (K.37 and K.43) large size*, 2009; *Damascus Gate (Stretch Variation III)*, 1970. Photo: Chandra Glick. Right: Frank Stella, *Die Fahne hoch!*, 1959, enamel on canvas, 10' 1 3/4" x 6' 7/8".



Frank Stella

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART,
NEW YORK

Thomas Crow

A RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION presupposes an identifiable individual as the author of its contents. The philosopher Mark Johnston, however, cautions that we may place too much weight on this commonsense apperception where the issue of selfhood in any profound sense is concerned: "We do not find much evidence that in tracking objects and persons through time we are actually deploying knowledge of sufficient conditions for cross-time identity." What permits us to assume on the basis of intermittent exposure to any physical person, he asks, that there is in fact a continuing self that coherently links all the disconnected samplings we experience over time? Such have been the dramatic transformations and reinventions over Frank Stella's long career—and likewise the critical dismay at enough of them—that the Whitney Museum of American Art's retrospective in New York asks the viewer to consider

where the artist's consistent self might be discovered. Traversing the exhibition also prompts the question of whether we can or want to discover any such thing.

The Whitney installation is not chronological, but the famous early series with their systematic variations in uniform pigments—black, aluminum, copper—cluster with enough proximity to impress upon visitors how the young Stella proceeded by breaking down his procedures along a limited number of constants and variables. Every painting expressed a different set of values established within each of these parameters before work on the actual canvas began. Throughout the 1960s, confidence in this presupposition held as Stella moved through the "Irregular Polygon" series, 1965–66, and "Protractor Paintings," 1967–71. Even the "Polish Village" pieces of the early '70s maintained in their carpentered relief construction a strongly reassuring family resemblance to the shapes and arrangements that had grown familiar since the artist's effective public debut in the 1959 group exhibition "Sixteen Americans" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Then, starting in 1975, something seemed to crack open in Stella's orderly progression, such that the existing edifice of explanation and understanding collapsed. Out of the intensely hued, scribbled, and patterned shapes in the low-relief "Brazilian Birds" series, 1974–75, his high-relief assemblages in the "Exotic Bird Paintings," 1976–80, and "Indian Birds," 1977–79, lifted their curving, vividly decorated aluminum-sandwich components off the wall in ways that defied in their multiplicity any rationalized parsing.

So much is a familiar story to those who observed this change firsthand; just as familiar is Stella's consequent loss of a significant critical following and, with it, a living

presence in the curriculum of modern art—however much he continued to find favor with collectors, patrons, and some portion of the general art public. Seeing the selection from the bird cycles at the Whitney, however, prompts the thought experiment mooted above: What if those pieces had been brought forward in the later '70s by a previously unknown artist, a younger aspirant we might call Un-Stella?

Perhaps the first response might have been to liken these works to the brightly painted shapes in stitched-together, unstretched fabric by Kim MacConnel—then conveniently grouped with various other artists under the "Pattern and Decoration" heading. No unflattering association, this, but Un-Stella's birds generate a harder, urban vibe, reinforced by the near riots of colored patches and squiggles glinting with ground glass. Unburdened by the crux of Minimalism, Un-Stella exuberantly arrives well in advance at the place where half the entrants in the "Times Square Show" and "New York/New Wave" would find themselves a few years later.

This trailblazing young artist would now enjoy a prominent place in the history books. Had not perceptions been fixed on unitary artistic identity (for all that the concept had been disavowed in the realm of theory), the praise offered the actual Stella by a few lonely voices would likely have been more general. In order to glimpse what might have been, one can turn to Stella's longtime editorial supporter, Philip Leider, who declared in 1978 that the artist had "achieved for abstraction a renewed animation, life, vitality, that has already about it something of the sheerly miraculous. One would be blind not to see it, catatonic not to feel it, perverse not to acknowledge it, spiritless and obtuse not to admire it."

Below: Frank Stella, *Circus of Pure Feeling for Malevich, 4 Square Circus, 16 Parts (detail)*, 2009, stainless-steel tubing, wire, ProtoGen RPT. Installation view. Right: View of "Frank Stella: A Retrospective," 2015–16. From left: *Jarmolince III*, 1973; *Piaski II*, 1973. Photos: Chandra Glick.



AS IT HAPPENED, of course, the blind, catatonic, perverse, spiritless, and obtuse existed in greater numbers than Leider probably anticipated. And what this critic perhaps underestimated was the degree to which Stella's mid-'70s transformation had been preceded by less overt but comparable liberties taken at prior stages in the development of his art, all made clearer by the ensemble of works available in the Whitney retrospective.

The "Irregular Polygons" are, well, irregular—decidedly so in comparison with all the paintings in parallel stripes that preceded them. Right from the beginning, a certain play of illusion had arisen from the angular perspectives created where Stella's stripes changed direction. But these effects are subdued and could be classed as unintended

Stella was never afraid of prettiness in his art—and so has presented a puzzle since the turn of this century by largely divesting his work of that quality.

by-products generated by the incorrigible psychological habits of the viewer. By 1966, Stella had the wit to recognize this habitus and give illusion as much play as possible within compositions that, under another plausible description, remain resolutely a matter of flat pattern. This happens when the same band of color first limns an actual angle of the stretcher, then replicates that exact angle somewhere in the interior of the composition. The first instance lends the angle a physical reality, the second makes it a matter of

mimetic inference; yet the pattern of color is identical in each case. Sounds simple, but the result in practice is anything but. This interplay is so pervasive as to be the principal content and animating force within work assembled from an apparently limited collection of building blocks.

The intuitive rightness of Stella's color choices adds immeasurably to the interest of this shuttling between actuality and illusion. One says "intuitive" because there is not an evident system to which either artist or viewer can appeal in order to justify any particular hue or juxtaposition of hues. When it comes to the succeeding "Protractor" series, all hope of finding and following a system goes out the window. The seeming regularity of the half-round shapes and the uniform width of the circle segments permitted Stella freedom of choice among modern pigments, both subtle and vivid, unencumbered by any prior algorithms. By choosing the gargantuan *Damascus Gate (Stretch Variation III)*, 1970, as the virtual center and anchor of the installation, the Whitney organizers let no one mistake the degree to which sheer size can drive color home, making any given hue qualitatively different to the senses than it would have been in smaller doses.

Throughout these experiments, however, Stella kept to the absolute plane of the stretched canvas, so much so that he treated the fastening of fabric along the sides of his paintings, for all of their enhanced projection from the wall, with almost contemptuous indifference: "Nothing to see here," their frayed splits and roughly expedient stapling declare. Such insistence on two dimensions allowed all his subjective departures from predetermined systems to assume the reassuring unity that so many of his admirers felt had been definitively violated by the birds having exploded into three dimensions at multiple, incorrigible

angles to the forward plane—let alone their street-looking scrawls and glitter.

Stella was never afraid of prettiness in his art and so has presented a puzzle since the turn of this century by largely divesting his work of that quality in a welter of tangled arabesques made from common metal tubing. Weblike membranes in various plastics sometimes span intervals between the pipes, if anything augmenting rather than relieving their willful unloveliness. But the issue—reversing the lesson of the "Protractors"—may be one of large size working against these aggressive reliefs rather than in their favor. That understanding arrives in the Whitney installation at the far end, just in front of the great wall of glass overlooking the Hudson. *Circus of Pure Feeling for Malevich, 4 Square Circus, 16 Parts* is the unwieldy title for the 2009 ensemble of miniaturized pieces in the artist's new metallic mode. Presented on Gehry-like square plywood sheets resting on plain sawhorses, they seem nearly perfect. Their parts, when viewed close up, are mostly commonplace found components, recognition of which underscores their enormous charm, a quality without the least preciousness. Where their large cousins knock the viewer back, these draw the gaze in and hold it—there always seems more to see. Having for a moment removed himself from the bigger-is-better trajectory, Stella makes size immaterial, but scale entirely satisfying. □

"Frank Stella: A Retrospective," organized by Michael Auping, chief curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, in association with Whitney Museum of American Art director Adam D. Weinberg, is on view through Feb. 7; travels to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Apr. 17–Sep. 8; de Young, San Francisco, Nov. 5, 2016–Feb. 26, 2017.

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(SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)