

FRANK STELLA, IN THE HEART OF MANHATTAN

n the occasion of his exhibition at the Whitney Museum, Frank Stella welcomed us into his studio in the West Village, the district where he has lived since 1967. In this space that also serves as his study and library, where he keeps a few works and presents his models, the artist born in 1936 retraces the golden age of American painting and his ties with Europe.

Interview by Marie Maertens

Die Fabne hoch! (1959)
Frank Stella

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American Art
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INTERVIEW • FRANK STELLA

At the moment your work is on show at the Whitney Museum in New York, a city where the MOMA already held a retrospective on you in 1986. Is it interesting for you to rediscover works that have been held for years by private collectors?

It's true that every time, the pieces come from different places, and here the Whitney called on numerous American collectors before I added some pieces from my own collection. But what I tend to think about more is what institutions would call a retrospective, namely at the MOMA, where it was more a matter of a selection from about fifteen years of work... But the truth is many people, including new generations, have not seen the other exhibitions, so in fact we sometimes need to go right back to the beginning...

On that note, to place your work in a historical perspective, if we take *Black Paintings*, produced in 1959, had you heard of painter Pierre Soulages at the time?

In fact I knew him because at Princeton University where I studied, there was already a debate on who, Pierre Soulages or Franz Kline, was the first... But to stay on the topic of French artists, I was less familiar with the work of François Morellet, that I discovered when I worked on ideas on diagrams even if this was different from his own research. But at that time, everyone wanted to be American! Because we were in the best period of great US post-war painting, beginning in 1935 when European artists arrived here. This period incidentally was a great challenge for my compatriots who struggled mentally against this omnipresent painting that was viewed in a very concentrated manner through Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, Kasimir Malevitch or Vassily Kandinsky... The level was such that it was discouraging, but these visual artists tried, not to go beyond as it was necessary to try to not look like copycats or imitators, but to see what they had to say by themselves. Later, American painting seemed to generally make a great impression, and European curators like

Willem Sandberg, Franz Meyer or Werner Schmalenbach very quickly wanted to show them. Some will say with the help of the CIA, or at least, with government support for these initiatives, but the result was that this art circulated widely. At the same time, in New York, we saw French painting by Vieira da Silva, Zao Wou-Ki or other members of the School of Paris who were shown abundantly.

So in the 1960s, did you want to go against Jackson Pollock and counter Abstract Expressionism as certain critics wrote?

This is indeed what can sometimes be read, but the idea was for my painting to be simple and minimalistic. I wanted it to cover the whole of the canvas in the manner of "pictorial painting", so it's too restrictive to declare: "It's not like Pollock!" Incidentally, it would have been difficult to paint like him or Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko or even Robert Motherwell... There was great variety in the New York School, that Clyfford Still was also part of, and my painting was included without it being in reaction against anything in particular. The idea was just to be as good as possible.

You also opened the door to Minimal Art. Were you conscious of this?

It wasn't really thought out because at the same time, there was a second generation of Abstract Expressionists, with artists such as Alfred Leslie and Michael Goldberg then Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis or Helen Frankenthaler and finally, at the top, Pop Art. So at the start of the 1960s, four or five movements - if you want to call them like that - mingled, but no one really worried about it. We were doing what we thought we had to do, and appreciated what the other artists were doing. History hadn't yet given its affirmation, even if God knows so many things happened because we were all in New York and we saw exhibitions every day! In our eyes, Pop Art was as good as Minimal Art, even if everyone had his own favourites in the previous generation. In my case, I really admired Hans Hofmann.

The Fountain (1992)
Frank Stella

Courtesy of Whitney Museum of
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It was also in 1961 that you came up with this phrase, that's become a famous saying: "What you see is what you see"...

Right... If you're polite, you can say that that's diplomatic, and if you're not, you can also judge that it's a bit simplistic... But what I probably wanted to say then was that I wasn't responsible for what the public saw. When I presented a painting, I had no idea of what someone else would end up seeing in it...

Was this a continuation of Marcel Duchamp's ideas on the role of the viewer who also constructs the work?

It's true, Marcel Duchamp's shadow hovered over New York, but he wasn't the only one because the integration of European artists was relatively homogenous. It's difficult to understand the enormous impact of the war and even of the years preceding it on American painting. Because before, it was... how can I put this without getting shot... not provincial, but much lesser than after the arrival of Europeans that made artists excited and ambitious. After, everyone sparked a wonderful energy! As far as I was concerned, I'd always admired Bauhaus, and already at school, the programme I was studying was infused with Josef Albers and Hans Hofmann which brought us, still from Europe, the influence of geometry on the one hand, and pictorialism on the other.

redjang (2009)
Frank Stella

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And then let's not forget that the MOMA presented great painting from the start of the 20th century very early on, far before European museums.

*The Whiteness of the Whale (IRS-1,
2X)* (1987)
Frank Stella

Courtesy of Whitney Museum of
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You have on your desk a book on Rome, a city where you went in residence at the American Academy, in 1982, and you namely studied the painting of Caravaggio. Did this allow you to continue your research on the construction of depth?

I don't think that this residence changed my work but it brought a certain combination of confidence and expertise. It was difficult for me to understand art of the past, in the same way as it is for everyone I think, but if you've already been working for 20 years, you can ask yourself: what's the difference between my paintings, whether good or bad, and those from before? It's a bit brutal, but at a certain moment you realise that whatever the quality of the admired works, their basic activity was to have been produced. That is to say, an artist did a painting of something, whatever the idea that he had or whatever was going on in society, in his experience or his education... In the end, he produced a work and some, like Caravaggio, did it with brio! But outside of the realism on his canvases, it's very interesting that the protagonists in his paintings convey the feeling of projecting themselves outside of the frame, into the spectator's space. He was one of the first to do what I've continued, more literally, with my sculptures.

Do you still look at old painting? Like these many photocopies on your desk suggest...

Yes, here you've got Rogier van der Weyden, who was also one of the first to use "shaped canvas", long before me... As I still like experimenting, for six years I've been working on a new type of sculpture, in thermoplastic polymer. I appreciate these new materials that are flexible and that allow me to be very precise, but the problem is that they're not at all resistant. While on a small scale I can make anything, I can't always enlarge them the way I'd like to.





Eskimo Curlew (1976)
Frank Stella

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So do you mainly interrogate your work from a formal standpoint? Before you used to say that you didn't want painting to be the representation of an illusion but that it was just an object ...

At first, painting for me was just lines, geometry, materiality and surface. But later, I imagined that the shapes were accompanied by a sort of narrative impulse that animated them and made them somehow run, and I named some maps with a few stories, namely in the *Moby Dick* series. This wasn't illustration, but came

Empress of India (1965)
Frank Stella

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Harran II (1967)
Frank Stella

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from the fact that abstraction can be relaxed, less strict, be dressed with a sort of social sentiment that could seem more spontaneous. In this sense I've also worked on maps of Eastern cities for the *Protractor Series*. These circular maps are initially as abstract as a painting, but perhaps they trigger more associations. In the way that generally, things always remind of other things and make you think of multiple references... ♦

