

Transcending Boundaries: A Study on Frank Stella's Artistic Journey from Flatness to Three-Dimensionality

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Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the renowned artist Frank Stella's works with focus on his artistic trajectory from the 1950s to the 1980s. By providing a detailed analysis of his works and their theoretical underpinnings, the purpose of this study is to investigate how Stella's artistic practice disrupts traditional notions of painting and engages with the concept of space. Through Stella's artistic journey, the paper argues for his innovative role in redefining painting and highlights his journey from the limitations of flatness to the realm of three-dimensional space. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of Stella's artistic evolution during this critical period and its implications for the broader field of abstract art.

Keyword : Frank Stella, Minimalism, Modernism, Flatness, Objectivity

1. Introduction

Frank Stella, born in Massachusetts in 1936, embarked on a notable artistic journey that would establish him as a prominent figure in the art world. Following his studies at Princeton University, Stella settled in New York in 1958 where he dedicated himself to the creation of artworks. Initially influenced by abstract expressionism like many artists of his generation, Stella consistently explored the possibilities and limitations of abstract painting until the 1990s [1]. In his artistic pursuits, he grappled with essential issues raised by modernism including the plane, color and canvas which ultimately contributed to the emergence of minimalism [2].

While Stella has often been categorized as an American abstract painter or minimalist due to his significant contributions in those domains [3][4], this study adopts a distinct perspective. Winter et al. explores the visual impact of fluorescent colors on Frank Stella's concept of 'instantaneously capturable' paintings [5]. Another study investigates the illusion of color depth experienced in Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons paintings based on the interaction between their fluorescent and conventional colors [6]. However, this study reevaluate Stella's work within the context of abstraction and disruption to

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show that his works transcend the confines and regulations of abstract expressionism and minimalism. In other words, the focal point of this study lies in an examination of Stella's works from the 1950s and 1960s, wherein he challenges the boundaries of modernism and explores the concept of objectivity leading to dissolution. Then, the study investigates the impact of Stella's works on the development of minimalism through particularly those produced after the 1970s, where Stella introduced a three-dimensional screen structure that defied the constraints imposed by traditional modernist art [7]. Through an analysis of Stella's treatment of three-dimensionality and space through relief, the deeper meanings embedded within his works can be discovered. In particular, the analysis will focus on his black paintings prior to the 1980s, the aluminum and metal series executed on canvas as well as his relief paintings.

The purpose of this study is to establish a robust theoretical foundation through a comprehensive review of relevant literature and research. By curating and presenting a thoughtful selection of data, this paper expects to enhance the understanding and appreciation of Frank Stella's works and shed light on their significance within the broader artistic landscape.

2. The art world in New York in 1950-60

During the late 1950s, the art world in New York experienced a significant transformation and triggered a critical reevaluation of the prevailing abstract expressionism that had dominated the postwar era. This call for reassessment was a response to Clement Greenberg's critique of the rigid formalism inherent in modernist painting theory, which served as the theoretical underpinning of abstract expressionism. From its inception, modernism championed the belief that the use of representational imagery or the incorporation of narrative elements in art was regressive and deviated from the pursuit of artistic purity [8]. Greenberg, emphasizing the intrinsic two-dimensionality of the canvas, argued that the flatness of the painting surface was the defining characteristic that artworks should aspire to achieve [9]. In the midst of the modernist crisis, Greenberg disparaged the works of artists such as Jasper Jones as derivative instances of abstract expressionism's degenerate mannerisms. Furthermore, he contended that Pop Art though not representing a truly groundbreaking departure in the trajectory of art was merely a new trend that emerged within the historical continuum of artistic pursuits [10]. However, contrary to Greenberg's assertions, new artistic movements emerged that embraced the legacy of Neo-dadaism and Pop Art and embodied a critical stance toward the abstract paintings of modernism.

3. <Black Painting> 1959

Frank Stella embarked on the creation of his black painting series which prominently displays the repetitive stripe motifs characteristic of Johns' art. They were influenced by the works of Jasper Johns, particularly Target and Flag as shown in [Fig. 1] and [Fig. 2] [11].



[Fig. 1] Jasper Jones, Target with Four Faces, 1955.

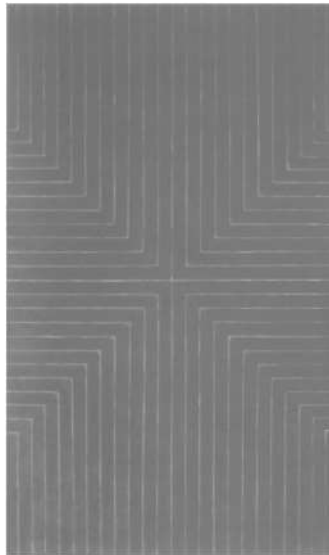


[Fig. 2] Jasper Jones, Flag, lead, rape, collage, 107.3 × 154 cm, 1954-55

The seminal moment for Stella's radical artistic approach occurred in December 1959 when he received an invitation to participate in the exhibition titled Sixteen Americans at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was within this exhibition that Stella unveiled his distinctive artistic vision. Among the showcased artworks were four sizable paintings executed on coarse cotton cloth with meticulously arranged patterns of black stripes meticulously created with enamel paint and a 2.75-inch brush. These

works garnered considerable attention due to their stark departure from the expressive tendencies exhibited by the other participating artists [12]. The overarching objective of the Black Painting series was to dismantle representational or illusory elements traditionally associated with painting. Stella directed his focus towards achieving flatness in his artwork while accentuating its inherent three-dimensional objectivity. This aspiration was realized through the deliberate inclusion of visually impactful symmetrical stripe patterns that not only emphasized the artwork's flatness but also eradicated any symbolic connotations.

As shown in [Fig. 3], the work is characterized by its use of basic geometric systems which many regard as a precursor to Minimalism. It was created by marking equal subdivisions along the sides, bottom and top edges of the canvas and using these intervals to generate simple, symmetrical patterns consisting of bands of black enamel paint separated by thin lines of unpainted canvas.



[Fig. 3] Die Fane Hoch, Enamel Paint, 1959

3.1 Donald Judd's perspectives on realistic properties

Donald Judd, an esteemed painter and critic closely associated with the minimalism movement, championed the notion that three-dimensional space possessed an exceptional power and significance surpassing that of the two-dimensional plane. According to Judd, the three-dimensional realm offered a transformative space capable of transcending the limitations imposed by traditional painting [13]. In stark

contrast to the humanistic tendencies prevalent in European painting which often insinuated the existence of something beyond the artwork itself both Frank Stella and Donald Judd embraced a viewpoint that emphasized the importance of symmetry as a means of removing any semblance of the human form from their creations [14]. Characterized by dehumanization, non-personalization and a focus on surface presentation, contemporary art and criticism displayed a distinct emphasis on the materiality of the artwork. In his seminal essay *Special Object*, Judd posited that more than half of the finest works made in the past few years are neither paintings nor sculptures [15]. This perspective exerted a profound influence on the early minimalists who became enamored with the three-dimensional objectivity exemplified by striped pattern paintings, ultimately forsaking traditional painting in favor of three-dimensional artistic pursuits.

3.2 A perspective from Fried's objectivity of painting

Renowned critic Michael Fried offered a unique perspective on Frank Stella's paintings, positioning them as exemplars of modernist art that charted a new course for abstract painting following the era of abstract expressionism [16]. Aligned with the principles espoused by Clement Greenberg, Fried identified objectivity as the defining characteristic distinguishing modernism from minimalism. Recognizing the potential threat that objectivity posed to the autonomy of art, Fried contended that reducing art to mere objects would precipitate the demise of art itself. Consequently, Fried vehemently asserted that works of art should never be regarded as mere objects [17].

According to Fried, Stella's work diverged from the emphasis on 'depicted shape' or 'literal shape' found in minimalism as well as from the opposing dynamics inherent in traditional paintings. Instead, Stella sought to establish a harmonious relationship between the two by conceiving the supporting structure as a 'shape as a medium' [18]. Fried perceived the rejection of theatricality in minimalism as a means to transcend objectivity and viewed it as the true purpose of art. In this context, Stella's paintings which achieved a flattened membrane within the realm of modernist painting represented a final bastion against the dilution of modernism into mere objects.

4. Special features of works by period

4.1 shaped canvas ; Aluminum&Copper&metal in 1960~1965

Following his exploration of black paintings, Frank Stella embarked on artistic experimentation in the

1960s that led him to delve into shaped canvas. This artistic approach involved modifying the physical form of the artwork to align with its internal imagery. In works like *Silver Gray Aluminum*, Stella removed edges and corners that hindered the expression of moving stripes to allow the inherent nature of the artwork to take center stage [19]. It is crucial to note that the term 'shaped canvas' is closely associated with Stella's practice and specifically relates to the concept of 'shape.' Here, shape does not refer to the silhouette of the support or the outline of elements within the composition. Instead, it signifies the distinction between 'literal shape' and 'depicted shape,' representing the form of the medium that enables the interplay and selection between the actual physical shape and the shape represented within the artwork [20].

As shown in [Fig. 4], one notable characteristic of the aluminum series is the use of metal paint [21]. While the paint itself becomes absorbed into the canvas, the presence of metallic particles imparts a unified luster that distinguishes it from ordinary paint. This effect accentuates the physical properties of the artwork, adding an additional layer of visual impact [22].



[Fig. 4] Marquis de Portaro, Aluminum Oil Paint, 237.5 × 181.6 cm

In 1966, Stella famously declared 'what you see is what you see' to suggest that there are no hidden meanings behind his later series of screens. When combined with substantial frames, viewers perceive these paintings as flat geometric forms as shown in [Fig. 5]. The incorporation of gold paints in these works further reinforces the inherent qualities of painting as they shimmer and reflect light.



[Fig. 5] Opir, copper paint on canvas, 1960-61.

4.2 Relievo Painting in 1970~1975

The artistic phase known as the Exotic Bird Series (1976-1980) constitutes the second period in the oeuvre of Frank Stella, deriving its name from extinct or rare avian species. During this period, Stella departed from linear and geometric forms to embrace impromptu and free curves as inspired by templates used in the construction of irregular ships or railways. Notably, Stella employed unaltered ready-made templates and reflected his inclination toward incorporating pre-existing structures. Within the Exotic Bird Series as shown in [Fig. 6], Stella employed a mixed media approach and utilized aluminum as the substrate instead of canvas. This departure from his earlier work resulted in the emergence of three-dimensional curves that coalesced to form the composition alongside vibrant and pictorial backgrounds. This departure from the initial concept of a flat plane engendered a multilayered quality in the overall composition.

The utilization of French curves aimed to facilitate extreme freedom within the artistic process while the background retained a traditional rectangular structure to impart a sense of control and establish a dynamic relationship with the imagery situated in the backdrop elements that Stella deliberately sought to avoid. To attenuate the role of the background, Stella employed techniques such as surface drilling, the creation of varied slopes on the top and bottom surfaces, or bending the background backward. In addition, he applied translucent paint or glass powder to achieve a 'dematerialization' of the background to introduce an ethereal quality to the overall composition. Asymmetric compositions, considered factors

that challenged the essence of preceding painting styles, were swiftly integrated along with the incorporation of perspective and real space.



[Fig. 6] The Inaccessible Island Rail, Exotic Bird Series, 1977.

Despite these innovative departures, the works of the Exotic Bird Series maintained a frontal orientation and relief-like forms, thus retaining the fundamental characteristics associated with the medium of painting. When viewed from the front, these works revealed a captivating interplay of colors to showcase a strong harmony within the visual composition. The exploration of the concept of dematerializing with the background reached its apex during the Indian Birds Series from 1977 to 1978, a period during which Stella embarked on travel and sojourned in India. It was during this time that Stella introduced wire nets and projected components into three-dimensional structures to extend up to a size of 1 meter. As a result, these works as shown in [Fig. 7] exist as both paintings and experiences in three dimensions to elicit bodily movements and engaging viewers in a manner reminiscent of encounters with sculptural works. The series comprises large-scale mixed media reliefs named after rare, exotic birds. The compositions are vibrant and dynamic to utilize an array of materials including etched magnesium, aluminum and fiberglass to add depth and texture to the works. Prior to the Indian Bird Series, Stella's Aluminum Series featured works that were largely two-dimensional, characterized by blocks of stripes of solid silver-grey tone with narrow white lines showing between the stripes. These prints were made at Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles, California and each is marked with the Gemini imprint at lower right corner. The images were printed lithograph and screen-print to achieve a particular solid effect in the color. Thus, the series were a major departure from his previous approach to take on a more sculptural form that marked a significant development in Stella's work

Stella's profound interest in redefining painting as a form of construction rather than solely a two-dimensional medium culminated in a shift toward space rather than planes. From the 1980s onward, his artistic output embraced the notion of 'sculptured' paintings. The early piece titled *Compare to Black Painting* exemplifies the coexistence of sculptures within Stella's relief paintings, thereby highlighting how his relief paintings served as a transitional phase and pushing the boundaries of abstract expressionism through painting and the deconstruction of spatial dimensions.



[Fig. 7] *Castura*, Aluminium, Metal Tube, Mixing Material on Steel Network, 292×233.5×76.2 cm, 1979

In this context, Stella's *Exotic Bird Series* exemplifies his innovative approach and employed mixed media on aluminum to create compositions that blend three-dimensional curves with vibrant backgrounds. By utilizing French curves and introducing asymmetric compositions, Stella defied conventional notions of painting and pushed the boundaries of the medium and embracing elements of perspective and real space. These works retain the characteristics of painting through their frontal orientation and relief-like forms while simultaneously evoking experiences in three dimensions akin to sculptures.

Stella's artistic trajectory demonstrates a profound interest in redefining painting as a form of construction to challenge the two-dimensional plane and embracing the spatial dimensions of the artwork. His relief paintings acted as a transitional phase to bridge the gap between abstract expressionism and the deconstruction of space. Through his relentless experimentation and willingness to push artistic boundaries, Stella's oeuvre serves as a testament to the continuous evolution and expansion of modern

art. Frank Stella's artistic journey encompasses a progressive exploration of form, materiality and spatial dimensions within the realm of painting. His works spanning from the Black Painting to the Exotic Bird Series challenge traditional notions of flatness while maintaining a dialogue with modernism. Stella's contributions not only shaped the trajectory of minimalism but also exemplify the ongoing transformation and redefinition of art itself.

5. Conclusion

Through a detailed exploration of Frank Stella's artistic career from the 1950s to the 1980s, this study illuminates Stella's critical role in challenging and transcending the boundaries of abstract expressionism and minimalism. His early works, notably the Black Paintings, highlighted his innovative approach of prioritizing flatness and objectivity that significantly impacted the progression of minimalism. As his work evolved, Stella began to disrupt the traditional confines of painting by exploring three-dimensional space and relief, evident in his Aluminum Series and Indian Bird Series. Stella's consistent experimentation and resistance to categorization not only pushed the limits of painting as a medium but also showcased the continual evolution inherent within modern art. In conclusion, Frank Stella's exploration of artistic forms that defy strict classification to oscillate between painting and sculpture, represents a pivotal contribution to modern art and reaffirms the constant transformative nature of artistic expression.

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