



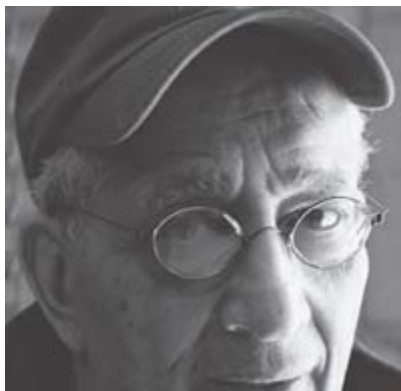
art complex

Fifty years ago he put the art world on notice. Now Frank Stella's latest sculptures are threatening to become buildings. By Ted Loos

Stella's first solo presentation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, [Frank Stella: Painting into Architecture](#), runs through July 29; there's also a Stella show at [Paul Kasmin Gallery](#) from May 11–July 6.

Frank Stella turns 71 this spring, and his latest work—a series of mammoth sculptures, some of which will need to be delivered by flatbed truck—demonstrates that he is more fearless than ever. Not that he'll tell you this himself. Stella is a wisecracking, unsentimental type, with a Massachusetts accent gone New York. Gripping an unlit cigar and wearing a red baseball cap, he's seated at a marble desk on the second floor of his Chelsea gallery, Paul Kasmin, talking about plans for three upcoming shows. Stella could pass for your impatient uncle, frequently beginning his sentences with "Look" or "Listen." It sounds as if he wants to set you straight before you embarrass yourself.

At an age when some artists would be thinking about how to make things smaller and easier for themselves, Stella has exploded the size and difficulty of his work. It means he has to drive an hour and a half from his comfortable West Village home—a loft building he's owned since 1967—up to a 30,000-square-foot studio near Newburgh, New York, several days a week. There he executes the Brobdingnagian sculptures that take a team of 10 to produce. "Look, I'm addicted," he says. "I can't help it."



The gray hair shouldn't fool anyone. Stella is a wiry five foot seven and moves quickly. At one point he has to get up and nervously circle the room. As he explains some of the engineering involved in the new work, he compulsively grabs at his right arm with his left hand, which is missing part of a finger from a childhood accident. This is an artist who itches to stop talking and start working.

Stella's not the only one making art on such a grand scale—Richard Serra's grave spiraling walls are taking over the Museum of Modern Art in June—but as he says, "It just comes out slightly more intense when I

do it." That's an understatement from a man who has never lacked ambition or recognition. Stella was instantly canonized for his Minimalist canvases of the fifties and sixties, and then, unlike so many artists, refused to repeat himself. Not everyone appreciated what followed, but Stella didn't really care. He quotes an old friend, the dealer Sidney Janis, on how to look at reviews: "He used to say he didn't read any art criticism, he only measured it."

Now more fodder for critics and fans is on the way with two concurrent shows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: "Frank Stella on the Roof" and "Frank Stella: Painting into Architecture." In addition to a decades-spanning selection of smaller models and drawings down in the galleries, the roof will include his recent 17-foot-tall *adjoeman*, a 3,100-pound stainless steel and carbon fiber sculpture whose flat black sheet and silver tubing could be a Russian Constructivist design for a ship's mast, and a new work about the size of a pile of 16 Humvees called *Chinese Pavilion*. (Though some of these bear Indonesian names he came across on a trip to Bali, he frequently borrows the titles for his pieces from Scarlatti keyboard sonatas—not because he's a musicologist; he just figures that with over 500 of them to work through, he'll never run out.)

Here in Chelsea, from May 11 to July 6, he's presenting a just-finished series of sculptures that either fasten to the wall or hang from the ceiling. For Stella, this most recent work is all about "the ability to go in behind things, to penetrate." In the 12-foot-tall chandelier-like *K.25*, white tubes turn in on one another in tightly knotted forms that resemble a nucleus swallowing a star. "You can still get in it and move around and through it as well as having the whole image," he says. And Stella conjures up an image of a room overpopulated with Hellenic art's greatest hits when he continues, "It happens a little bit in some of the great sculpture of the past. I mean, if you imagine a gaggle of statues and they get pushed together, in those kinds of situations you get something like what you have here."

It's startling to be reminded that all of this over-the-top work is from the same artist who rocketed to fame with his Black Paintings in 1959. The militaristic geometry of those works—just black stripes with raw canvas separating them—propelled Minimalism to a dominant art-world force in the sixties. As one critic put it, their severity "was like a shiv plunged into Abstract Expressionism's colorful, passionate heart." Stella's own off-the-cuff comments, like "What you see is what you see," reinforced his image as a brass-balled Zeitgeist leader.

Looking back, Stella is at pains to demystify some of those earlier diktats. "That has become, you know, sort of pointless," he says. "That was a really simple statement about the fact that the person who makes it, makes it for himself. Once it's out of your hands, you can't control the viewer's reaction. It was as simple as that."

Stella has a way of distilling these big concepts into plain language, which results from his having focused on them for so long. He grew up in Malden, Massachusetts, the son of first-generation Italian-Americans, and was sent off to board at Andover when he started to get in trouble around town. In its surprisingly strong studio art program he found himself committed to abstract art, and he met his future fellow Minimalist Carl Andre. Later strange portents arose: That partially missing finger—in an incidence of literally crushing beauty, a concrete vase full of flowers came down on it when he was a kid—kept him out of the peacetime draft after he graduated from Princeton.

His New York life started as it did for many other artists of his generation: He worked in a tiny studio in a Lower East Side storefront, with time served painting houses in Brooklyn. But it was a short chapter—

Stella was discovered simultaneously by Leo Castelli and MoMA's first curator, Dorothy Miller, sending his career into overdrive at age 23. Miller included him in the museum's groundbreaking "Sixteen Americans" exhibition of 1959 (which proved to be a roster of future icons: Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, Louise Nevelson), and Castelli staged his first one-man show shortly thereafter.

After the Black Paintings, Stella began to shape his canvases to suit his geometric explorations, and his work became steadily more sculptural, eventually creeping away from the wall to conquer the room. The current path was set in the eighties, when his high-relief wall sculptures began to take over the lobbies of Manhattan office buildings. They were covered with graffiti-like neon strokes, and their ubiquity made them a symbol of corporate Percent for Art—program taste. The nineties brought a series of twisting fiberglass murals covered in all manner of splashy motifs, which achieved a complication that was truly hard to take in.

Critics have been tough on the last 20 or so years of Stella's work. In December 2001, *The New Yorker's* Peter Schjeldahl said of his paintings, "Phooey. The toneless visual cacophony could wake the dead and make them want to be dead again." Even nonprofessional art lovers had to ask themselves what Stella was up to, especially when it came to the riotous co-opting of street art. Maybe it's not a surprise to hear him say, "I don't think that much about color, honestly."

Despite the reviews, Stella's sculptures go for up to \$1.5 million and he enjoys the fruits of some success. He has a farm in Dutchess County, New York, which he uses as a weekend place and where he breeds thoroughbred racehorses; he smokes Padron cigars from Nicaragua; and he zips up and down the Taconic in a new Audi wagon. He's happily married to the physician Harriet McGurk and has five children, including two with Barbara Rose, his first wife, who became the esteemed critic.

But Stella warns that he's only operating at a "semi-fancy" level. He doesn't travel for fun, only for work. Unlike his friend Brice Marden, another MoMA-sanctioned artist who lives just blocks away in the West Village, he doesn't collect houses and studios. His money goes into making the incredibly expensive sculptures that are on display this spring; they cost hundreds of thousands to fabricate. "I wish the work wasn't driving all of my economic considerations," he says, almost helplessly. "The work dictates everything."

The big yellow metal building in Newburgh is unremarkable from the rural road, though on a recent visit, it proves to house a full-blown Stella circus. Here the artist stores hundreds of artworks from every era. "Most of the things I still have resist being sold off easily," he says. The most intriguing items are small studies for bigger works. They're made using a process called rapid prototyping, in which Stella first sculpts a shape out of malleable white Sintra plastic—a corkscrew, say, or the recurring rainbow form he calls a "hat shape." A computer then scans it, combining it with other pieces according to Stella's whims, into complex forms with interlocking parts. Frequently he'll copy a piece of junk that catches his eye—a foam hat from a carnival, a child's rubber ball—and add that to the mix. Later some of these will be cast in aluminum.

Then comes the messy part. It takes three layers of difficult materials to make these sculptures: a foam core, a layer of fiberglass, and carbon fiber to top it all off. "To the people who make them, they're a nightmare," Stella says. "This heavy stuff is unforgiving—you make a mistake and people can get hurt." The pieces require endless hours from the employees, who wear respirators as they scurry around amid

clouds of fiberglass dust. As they sand and paint to get a piece ready for the Met show, a heat lamp suspended above them roasts the chemicals in the air. One worker tinkering inside a piece seems caught in a tangle of white tubing, and all you can see is a sweatshirt hood and a pair of goggles.

Though he's most animated when discussing his art, Stella is aware of his place in the art world. "I'm not popular. A lot of people want to be Andy Warhol, but you don't find kids that want to be Frank Stella," he says. Even if he never captured that kind of fame, Stella's achievements make him a fixed point on the compass of art history after World War II. You can't tell the story without him—he's that important.

"Painting is about illusion," he says, explaining how the triumphs of his early career fit together with the ambitious architecture on view at the Met. "To my mind, architecture is about building a habitable illusion. So it's not contrary to what I do." One current project, *The Ship*, stands 20 feet high and 30 feet wide, and a section will be featured indoors at the Met. Walking through it while it was under construction was eerie—its thick rectangular bones made it seem like some Brutalist carcass. It's black; after years of going for broke with primary colors and neon hues, Stella is getting back to his roots in exploring the impact that the lack of color can have. *The Ship* was born from part of a killed architectural proposal Stella did for a German cultural park. It's not clear whether he actually intends it as a practical structure—it's a honeycomb of holes and wouldn't be much use in the rain. "I'm a clientless architect," he jokes. "I would like to build one thing just to prove I could do it."

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