

The Museum of Modern Art

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A selection of paintings and drawings by 33 year-old Frank Stella will be shown in a retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art March 26 through May 31. A number of these works have never been exhibited in the United States, and many more have never been shown in New York. Covering a period of slightly more than one decade, these 41 paintings and 19 drawings range from the controversial Black pictures of the late fifties to the brilliant and sensuous color images of his recent years. At a time when abstract painting is frequently characterized by narrowness of its stylistic range, Stella's exhibition reveals an extraordinary variety, not simply in the aesthetic structuring of the pictures but in their expressive character. Both his pioneering work in shaped canvas and his use of serial structures exerted a profound influence on the art of the 1960s -- even in areas like minimal sculpture, which Stella did not choose personally to explore. According to the show's organizer, William S. Rubin, Chief Curator of the Painting and Sculpture Collection and author of the Museum's forthcoming catalogue-monograph on the artist, Stella opened one of the few genuinely new paths for abstract art since the Abstract Expressionists. The exhibition will be shown later at the Hayward Gallery, London; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Pasadena Museum of Art, California; and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada, under the auspices of the Museum's International Council.

At 22, Stella, a Princeton graduate of the Class of 1958, was one of the first younger artists to react against the brushy, gestural style of the Abstract Expressionists and to propose an art that put emphasis on control, emphasizing a meditative and Classic rationalism as over and against the Romantic

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and improvisational character of Abstract Expressionism. Stella's early works were austere but enigmatic, and very different from precisionist, geometrical painting with which they were sometimes associated. When the Black pictures, deceptively simple configurations of black stripes separated by unpainted canvas, were first shown in 1959, they were greeted derisively by some as empty, meaningless "pin stripe" patterns but by others as monumental and almost mesmerizing statements of profound pictorial content.

The element of control and austerity was intensified in Stella's Aluminum series -- 1960 -- his first shaped canvases. These pictures were notched at the corners and along the sides in a manner that demonstrated Stella's desire to bring the outer boundaries of his paintings, that is, their framing shapes, into a direct and reciprocal relationship with the patterns that govern their surfaces. Shaped canvas in itself was not a novelty, but previously shaped canvases had all turned into a form of relief sculpture, Mr. Rubin notes. Stella's new principle of construction allowed his pictures to hold the wall as paintings. Once having established this principle, Stella increased the radicality of the shaping in his Copper paintings, 1960-61.

Stella's earlier canvases had been executed in monochromatic "anti-colors" -- black, aluminum and copper. The Benjamin Moore series of 1961, though still monochromatic, was realized in the primary and secondary hues. This led to a variety of paintings in which Stella developed sequences of light-dark values from white to black, and spectral sequences of the six primary and secondary hues, sometimes combining both in a single picture. As Stella began to liberate his color, he gradually set aside the metallic hues in favor of the Dayglo paints used in the optically brilliant Moroccan series of 1964-65.

Stella's main departure into color, however, occurred in the so-called Irregular Polygons of 1966. These were shaped canvases in a new sense, their outer silhouettes formed from the penetrating or abutting of two different and sometimes irregular geometrical forms. Here in place of the earlier narrow stripes, about

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2 1/2 inches wide, are 8 inch bands of high keyed color. But even these are subordinate to the large unbroken areas of pure color which characterize this series. In these works, Stella came as close as he has yet come to what has been called color-field painting.

Stella's work since 1966 has not involved simply a shift from the austere and more rigorously geometric structures of the earlier work to a more open and color-oriented pictorial language, but a change in scale to works of literally monumental size. Abstract Expressionist painters had occasionally made very large works, but these pictures remained private in their attitude and ultimately intimate in their character. Stella's earlier work had already seemed to suggest something more broadly collective and monumental in the spirit. His post-1966 pictures express an affinity with architecture not only in the consistently large size, but in the larger modules that establish their scale. The great interlaced vaulting patterns of the Protractor series of the last three years proposes a pictorial counterpart to the spirit of architecture, though this is not to say that the paintings are in any way dependent upon architecture or derived from it aesthetically. Their nature grows directly out of Stella's genius operating on the problems of recent abstract painting, according to Mr. Rubin.

In the past year, the interlaced, fan and rainbow patterned Protractor series have partly given way to paintings in which the protractor is used to create lyrical, almost floral patterns close in value and tender in their color -- the most decorative stage of Stella's painting. He sums up this recent development: "My main interest [in these pictures] has been to make what is popularly called decorative painting truly viable in unequivocal abstract terms. Decorative, that is, in a good sense in the sense that it is applied to Matisse....Maybe this is beyond abstract painting. I don't know, but that's where I'd like my painting to go."

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Checklist, catalog, color transparencies and black and white photographs available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, N.Y. 10019. (212) 956 - 7501.