Frank Stella

Frank Stella (b.1936) was born in Malden, Massachusetts. He lives in New York, where he moved in 1958, after graduating from Princeton University, where he majored in history. His artistic career is studded with academic accomplishments, with honorary doctorates from Princeton, Dartmouth and Brandeis University Massachusetts. In 2009, President Barack Obama granted him with the National Medal of Arts in Washington, D.C.

A major proponent in the fields of minimalism and post-painterly abstraction, the career of Frank Stella spans more than five decades. His famous 1964 maxim, “what you see is what you see” had led to a concise direction during artistic production; the picture must focus only on the basic elements of colour, composition and shape and not on what it represents.

Originally, Stella was influenced by abstract expressionists purely by being in reaction to them and their ideals (he lists Kline and Pollock as being particularly incendiary). Gradually, he became more attracted to the flatter surfaces of Barnett Newman and Jasper Johns, two artists who served as obvious catalysts for Stella’s Black Paintings (1958-60). Before he had turned twenty-five, his art was already recognised and several of his paintings were featured in the 1960 MoMA exhibition Sixteen Americans. His simple, uncomplicated ethos towards art is echoed through his techniques; a painting is a flat surface covered in paint, not a depiction of something else.

Constantly evolving to new territories, he persevered in his exploration, with a 1982 residency at the American Academy in Rome seeing him immersed by the dramatic legacy of Rubens, Velázquez and Caravaggio. It was the Baroque master of Italian art who appears to have had most influence on the latter half of Stella’s oeuvre, even becoming the main focus of Stella’s eponymous 1986 literary work, Caravaggio. The idealistic crux of the ambitious 135-work Moby Dick series is that Stella is a montage artist. Yet as he began producing pieces geared towards greater unity and wholeness through the depiction of multiple planes, the realisation came that the old masters were all montage artists as well. By drawing on the techniques of European painting, Stella demonstrates his ever-present desire to create a pictorial space which is mobile and three dimensional. This can only be an illusion; it’s not the actual space the viewer inhabits. Despite remaining non-figurative, the impressive environment which is generated through composition and colour is replete with narrative. It is this carefully and skilfully constructed abstract narrative of Stella’s which has engaged, and continues to engage, generations of audiences.

He has produced more than 55 series to date, each with approximately 50 pieces, totalling around 3,000 artworks. Michael Auping took this into account when considering the artist’s retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2015. “Frank is always looking forward,” he says. “He loves the ‘Black Paintings,’ but he’s over it. I keep saying, ‘Frank, it’s like the Rolling Stones having a concert and not playing ‘Satisfaction’. You can’t do that.’ ”
SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

➢ OPEN SOURCE: ART AT THE ECLIPSE OF CAPITALISM, Galerie Max Hetzer (Berlin and Paris), Lisa Schiff and ARTUNER, 2015
➢ INFLATED STAR AND WOOD STAR, Royal Academy, London, 2015
➢ FRANK STELLA: PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS, Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland, 2015
➢ FRANK STELLA SCULPTURE, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, 2014
➢ FRANK STELLA: PAINTING INTO ARCHITECTURE, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2007
➢ FRANK STELLA ON THE ROOF, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2007
➢ FRANK STELLA, The Nagoya City Art Museum, Nagoya, Japan, 2003
➢ FRANK STELLA, Reina Sofia, Madrid, 1995
➢ FRANK STELLA, Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art, Japan, 1991
➢ FRANK STELLA, The Jewish Museum, New York, 1983
➢ FRANK STELLA, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970
➢ FRANK STELLA, Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, 1962