



## **Frank Stella: “I don’t see that the quality of art has expanded dramatically”**

By: Elena Cué  
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With a warm welcome, one of the most renowned painters of the American artistic scene opens the door of his house to us in New York’s West Village. Frank Stella (Massachusetts, USA, 1936), precursor of minimalism at the time when abstract expressionism led the artistic panorama, shows me the layout of the rooms in the museum where 300 of his works, dating from the end of the 50s until today, will comprise his next exhibition. Whilst holding dear the memory of the great retrospective through which the Whitney Museum of New York paid homage to him, today it is the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale in Florida that will inaugurate, this November 12th, the exhibition which covers 60 years of his career. The artist invites me to take the elevator to the second floor, where after preparing a coffee, we evoke his life and trajectory.

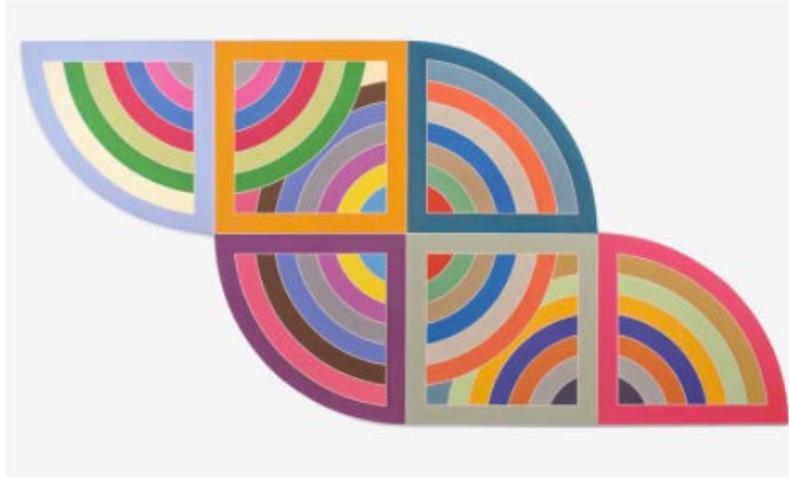
**You were born between two World Wars, to a family of Italian immigrants. What memories do you have from that time?**

I have some strong memories due to of the war but mainly I remember right after it, when it was all about the destruction and rebuilding of Europe and America. It was a very fast-moving and dynamic period. There was a lot of real growth and an incredible optimism that nobody has seen since; it was amazing. In a way it was a very happy time, everybody was so glad the war was over that it created a kind of momentum to go on.

**What was the start of your artistic life in the 50s when the scene was dominated by Jackson Pollock, Nauman, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschemberg...?**

It was very active but at the same time very relaxed. There was a big change, not just in the art world but in general. I was just one of many young artists. I think partly because of the war, a lot of the European artists came to the US in the late 30’s and the American artists who were here benefited from that but the abstract

expressionists were slightly older. Then there was a whole generation of younger artists who were supported, in a funny way, by the government because of the GI Bill. Americans could study in Europe funded by the government which created a bunch of artists. It led to a combination of European artists coming here and Americans going to Europe and then coming back. There was a lot of activity and a lot of it was quite relaxed because people just made do with what they had in terms of money. It was possible for almost anyone to get a working space and to have enough work on the side in order to keep creating art. Everybody was working and exhibiting. There were exhibition opportunities, which means showing your work, and that's what artists really care about. They like to get paid for their work but what really bothers them is to not have it seen.

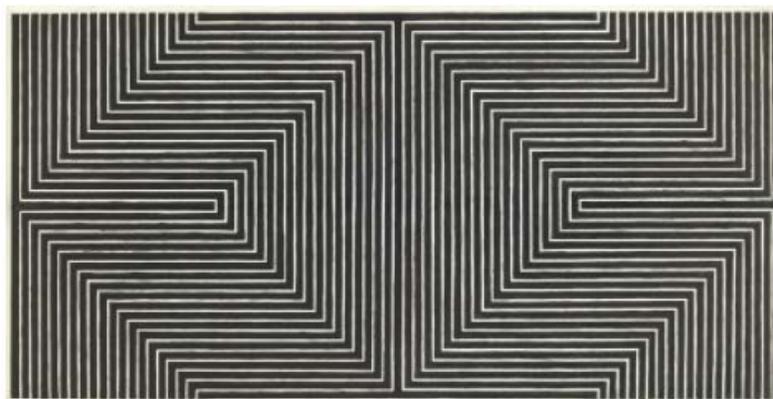


**In this decade, when abstract expressionism, which profoundly shows the emotional dominated the artistic sphere, you opted for a more formalist art...**

I think there is a slight misunderstanding. They said my paintings were less emotional but they were just trying to create a sense of organization, to build a structure that you feel you can work from, but I like the chaos. In a way, it was trying to find out what was under the chaos because the chaos of abstract expression is so powerful. I think to a certain extent it's easy to see that underneath the painting that seemed so wild in America, was the structure of painting in Europe up until the late 30s, which was basically Cubism and Surrealism.

**When you look back to where you began, to your Black Paintings from the 50s, what do you see?**

I see two things, two paintings. The paintings just before the black ones which are kind of black and a lot of different things. And then I see that something happened and I decided to make it a little bit more symmetrical and organized. There are basically two parts to it: the part that is very much a version of abstract expressionism and then the part that is firmer and more organized.



**You started making black paintings in the 50s and in the 60s you introduced color, even florescent color...**

I think it was inevitable. My father was the first one to say, "color sells". You can get the same advice from almost every art dealer in the world. The critics are sometimes even more childish than the artists with ideas like "there is nowhere to go now, it's all black". I maybe repeat this too often but I think if you played my career backwards, so if we started from now as the beginning, played it back and ended with the black paintings, I think people would be a lot happier.

**Your Irregular Polygons series (in the 60s) marked a turning point in your work. Can you explain why it was so important?**

Like everything, there is always a large part created by accident. In general, abstract painting, which is what I wanted to do, is largely expressed in terms of what started with Mondrian and Malevich which is basically a form of geometric painting. The basic idea was that you had a flat surface and you made a geometric pattern, but usually the geometric patterns were dividing the space. I was looking for something that would still be a kind of geometry, but a geometry that was more dynamic or fluid and then something happened by accident. I focused on a Malevich painting that caught my attention, a well-known painting. It was a white ground, a black rectangle and there was simply a blue triangle laying on top of that black rectangle. I was thinking about it and then suddenly it struck me that what was interesting was that what most geometric paintings did was put one thing on top of another. And what I was looking for was making the triangle penetrate the rectangle so that you went around it and made a shaped canvas. It was as though you took the background away from the Mondrian and let the triangle and the black rectangle exist on the same plane. So it was a slightly different way of looking at the geometry but to me it actually seemed more dynamic and exciting and offered a lot of possibilities. It's all Malevich's fault.



**In 1970, at 33 years old, the MoMA exhibited a retrospective of your work and your latest achievement was to receive *the National Medal of Arts* by President Barack Obama. How does this recognition affect your life and your work?**

We talk about age and I've been lucky to live a long time. I was young when that happened and, if I were to explain with metaphor from the sports world I'd say, when you're playing the game and you're in it, you don't really think much about it because you have to react to what's going on and you just do the best

you can. So in a way I didn't really think too much about it. It was very exciting but I was just one of many artists who were relatively young and were experiencing really successful and exciting careers. We were all working so much, there were a lot of ideas around, a lot of things happening. After all, at the same time I had that exhibition you had color field painting, pop art, second generation abstract expressionism and that's not to mention what was happening in sculpture with people like Michael Heizer, Richard Serra and Chamberlain. So there was so much going on that I never felt separated, I felt part of it. Before that retrospective, one of your black paintings was exhibited in the MoMA. There's an interesting story about how they bought it. The head curator Alfred Barr liked it but he knew that it wasn't going to be popular with the board of trustees or the other curators. But Alfred Barr had a fund and was allowed to buy anything he wanted for the museum that was under one thousand dollars. I remember that Leo Castelli called me up and said that he was going to sell the painting "Marriage of Reason and Squalor" and we had agreed at the time for one thousand two hundred dollars but he was going to sell it to the museum for nine hundred. I said "I don't want to do that, that's crazy. Why are we doing that?" To which he said "Frank, get it together, it's the Museum of Modern Art". There was no way it would have gone there for any price except for the price that Alfred was able to buy it under his own stipend. It didn't just happen because they loved it so much.

**Your Moby Dick series appears to be a obsession given that you dedicated, on and off, 10 years to it. What was it about Melville's book that impacted you so much?**

In some ways, I was reluctant to do it, but it had such an appeal to me for one main reason. Above and beyond the power and the beauty of the story and the incredible language of Melville, it is really a story of going around the world, about traveling and there was something about that, that to me, seemed to allow you an incredible kind of freedom. You can take plenty of time and it didn't all have to be the same. It allowed for the introduction of different ideas and different ways of thinking about things. It was really very open ended while at the same time it gave you a structure or outline to work with.

**"And may God hunt us all if we do not hunt Moby Dick to the death!". What do you consider to have been your impossible battle? Maybe with God...**

I don't think I've had one. In modern times, the artists see themselves as having an incredible struggle against the difficulty of making art but that wasn't always true. I grew up in a very straight forward way, in a Catholic American-Italian family and never worried about God. In fact, as I grew older I liked God because he had very good taste in art, at least in Italy. I found him to be a kindred figure.

**You have used painting as an object. What does continuing to paint mean to you? Why don't you do installations, performances, conceptual art...?**

I make objects and I like to paint on them, one way or another. Actually, the problem with the printer and 3D works is that they get so complicated that it's quite hard to paint them. I mean literally, in the sense that if you don't tangle your fingers, it's hard to get in there and paint them. They do have spray paint so in the end you can get in there one way or another. It's a different way of working which for me changed with the Polish village paintings. They became constructions, an enlargement of collage in 3D. When they were made, I realized I was going to start building my paintings and then paint them. That's how it changed and now I just think that way. It's not a new idea, a lot of people, such as Ron Davis, were doing things like that. I think in a way the shaped canvas lead to that. Once you gave up the regular rectangle, it was a little difficult to build the shape so there was more emphasis on the construction of what you were going to paint on.



**At one point in your career your interest in architecture and sculpture grew, was this to the detriment of painting?**

It's not exactly to the detriment of painting. Using the Renaissance as a reference point, almost everybody that made art (at least during the Renaissance, and maybe even at all time) could do architecture and sculpture as well. I mean you can write music and you can also play the piano or the saxophone. But I must say that architecture did have an effect on me when I was younger. Frank Lloyd Wright was a big influence, I went to see his work and it was great. We had a very good library in the town that I grew up in by a famous 19th century American architect H.H. Richardson who had evolved a kind of Romanesque style in America.



**Where did your baroque style come from over the last few years?**

I guess it is a change. For a while, it was minimalism and then maximalism. As the expression says, you throw in everything but the kitchen sink. It's easier to add the ingredients but it's not very programmatic. It's about how things relate to each other and what the idea suggests. Sometimes, it is a problem for me and I do better when I take things away than when I add more.

### **How has art changed since Chauvet, Lascaux, or Altamira?**

It has changed but I like the early art because it was very straight forward. The big idea was that you made what you saw, it was about observation. There is a lot of talk about the magic and the mystery but I think that is actually wrong. They didn't have an idea about the development of art, they were trying to picture and live with what they saw. They could have made a lot of pictures of plants or trees for example, but instead they made them of animals because that was a big part of their life.

### **How do you see the art world now?**

It's an interesting version of what happened in the 60's. It's a little bit tricky because there are more artists and opportunities now than ever before. If you take a not-so-positive view of it you can say it has expanded, but is there better art? I don't know if it's just loyalty to my generation or the way I grew up but I don't see that the quality of art has expanded dramatically.

