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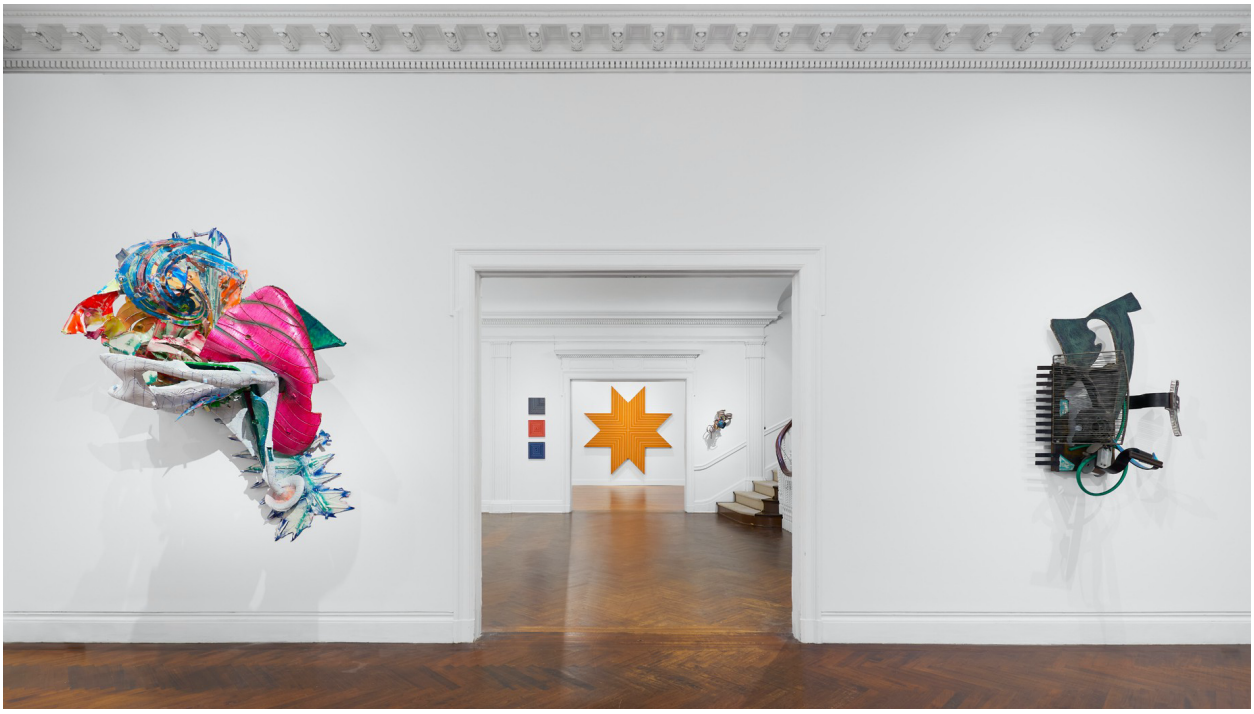
The New Criterion

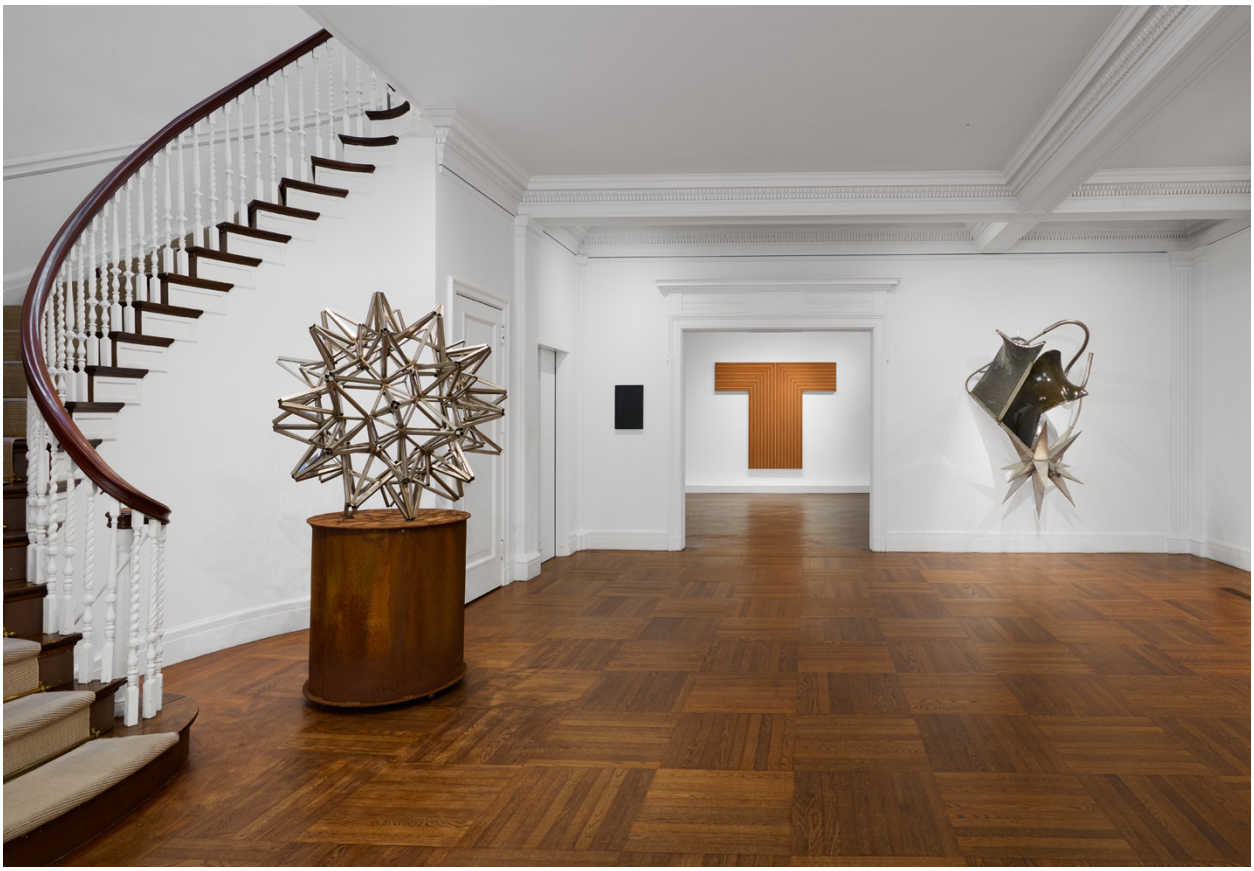


Installation view of “Homage to Frank Stella” at Mnuchin Gallery, New York. © Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

It is difficult to believe that Frank Stella (1936–2024) is no longer with us. For six and a half decades, beginning with the first exhibitions of his implacable Black Paintings in 1959, when he was twenty-three, he was a powerful presence, an unignorable, demanding artist who made us all—including other artists—question our most cherished assumptions about what a painting could be. Like his friend the British sculptor Anthony Caro, who said that repeating the same thing was “too boring,” Stella refused to settle for what he had already discovered. Instead, from the start he restlessly explored the implications of whatever he had done, shifting emphases and often destroying the expectations his previous work had raised. Over the years, Stella ignored the established separation between two and three dimensions, flouted the convention of the canvas as a flat rectangle, and even tested the limits of “taste.” He questioned his own early works’ assertion that a painting was a monochrome surface, substituting raucous, multilayered, violently polychrome constructions that project into the viewer’s space or come completely off the wall. And to complicate things, these formal and conceptual adventures were enhanced or perhaps even provoked by new technologies and materials.

The Stella retrospective that inaugurated the Whitney Museum’s new Renzo Piano building in 2015 gave us this protean master almost whole, presenting a full account of his wide-ranging responses, in varied media, to his famous announcement that “There are two problems in painting. One is to find out what painting is and the other is to find out how to make a painting.” Now, we can follow the complexities of those responses at “Homage to Frank Stella,” organized by Mnuchin Gallery to commemorate the artist’s death, at eighty-seven, in May of this year.[i] It’s an economical

but impressive and informative selection of works from private collections and the artist's estate. The earliest example is a work on paper made in 1958, the year Stella graduated from Princeton: a brushy, orange rectangle below horizontal stripes hints at things to come with its geometry, deadpan frontality, and restatement of the shape of the support. The most recent inclusion is a freestanding sculpture, *Split Star 2* (2023), a sliced, opened-out version of the spiky cages that preoccupied Stella for his last decade or so, three-dimensional iterations of a radiating shape that he first employed in paintings and drawings in the 1960s—such as the exhibition's multi-pronged, red-lead *Port Tampa City* (1963). The installation at Mnuchin also includes several slightly earlier Star sculptures, whose relentless three-dimensional symmetry is criticized by *Split Star 2*'s vital imbalance and the fresh interior colors revealed by the slicing.

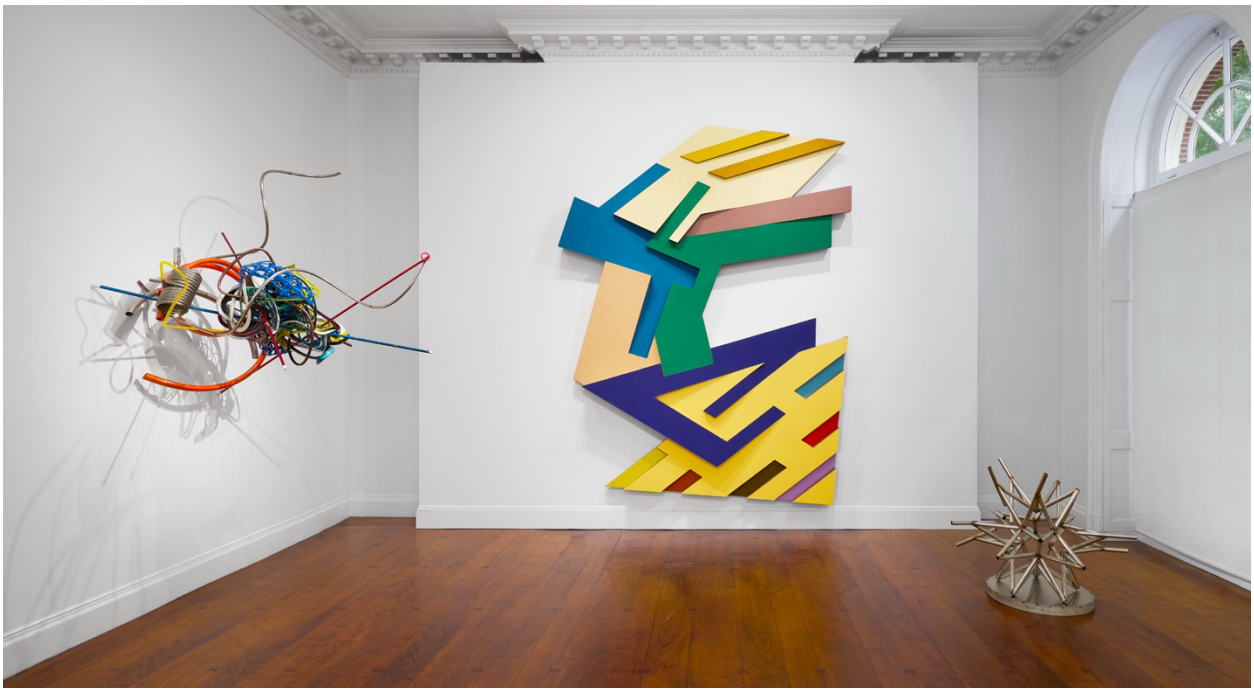


Installation view of "Homage to Frank Stella" at Mnuchin Gallery, New York. © Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

Between these extremes, more or less chronologically arranged on the two floors of the gallery, is a remarkably comprehensive selection of some of Stella's most compelling series, often represented by unfamiliar examples. If we pay attention, we can follow Stella's lifelong search to "find out what painting is" and his continuous probing of the nature of pictorial space, in its broadest possible sense. The early Black Paintings are accounted for by a small but textbook example made in 1959—an intimate, domesticated version of such insistent large iterations as the exhibition's ample, ominously titled *Arbeit Macht Frei* (1958), a deceptively simple work that becomes increasingly complex as we spend time with it. In contrast to the slender lines of bare canvas and steadily applied parallel bands of pigment in the best-known Black Paintings (and the Metallic

series that followed), the surface of *Arbeit Macht Frei* seems agitated, uneasy. The black paint appears to have been applied in two directions, in opposing layers. There are suggestions of narrow reserved spaces between the bands, in the lower part of the canvas, but in the upper regions, rough, dark lines emphasize the repetitive internal divisions of the composition. The proximity of several sleek Metallic Paintings makes *Arbeit Macht Frei* seem even shaggier and more discomfiting, underscoring the title's inseparable associations with the Holocaust. So much for Stella's famous explanation "What you see is what you see." The inflected expanse of the painting begins to read both as an embodiment of disquiet and as an update of the contingency and layering of the era's gestural Abstract Expressionism, an approach completely refuted by the crisp elegance of better-known Black Paintings, including the show's miniature version, and the Metallic Paintings. In addition, the audacious shaping of the exhibition's Metallic Paintings announces Stella's questioning of the time-honored conventions of Western art.

Stella was not only questioning conventions; he was also growing impatient with flatness itself—the irreducible quality of painting, according to Clement Greenberg. Stella's thoughts about this assertion are visible in the exhibition's inclusion from the Irregular Polygon series, the superb, full-throttle *Moultonville II* (1965), whose indescribable, irregular shape is generated by an illusion of three dimensions implied and then canceled by the internal divisions of the canvas. Yet the shape itself also reminds us that the painting is a flat expanse. That kind of contradiction and ambiguity is continued by the more static and confrontational *Double Scramble II* (1968), a pair of nested polychrome bands set side by side. The progression of colors and diminishing, interlocked shapes fleetingly suggests depth, while the near-mechanical paint application reminds us of the fact of the surface. *Double Scramble II* can read as a criticism of Stella's own Black Paintings and, perhaps, a comment on Kenneth Noland's looser, less disciplined Circles. A cheerful, intensely hued Protractor, also made in 1968, a semicircle of twined, overlapping curves, enlarges on the ideas announced by *Moultonville II* and *Double Scramble II* and helps to prepare us for what will come next.



Installation view of "Homage to Frank Stella" at Mnuchin Gallery, New York. © Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

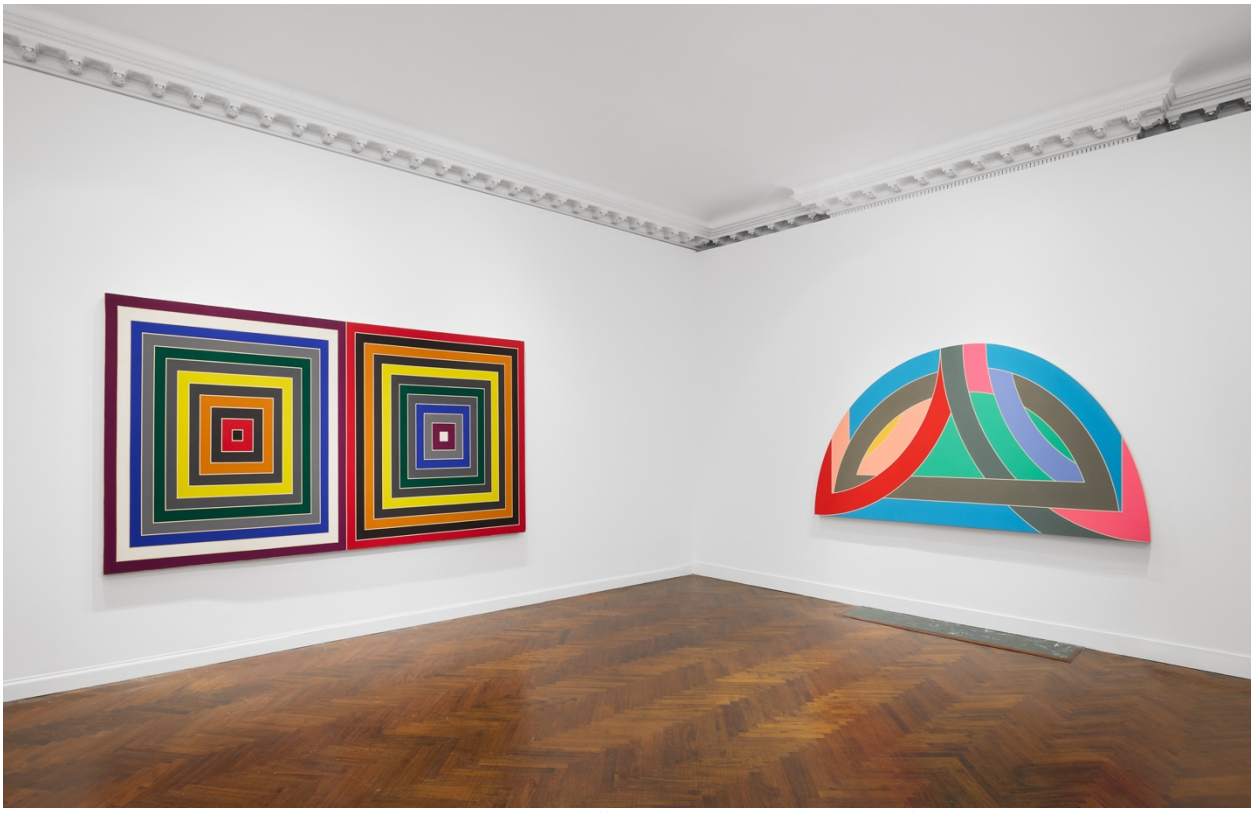
Stella's growing interest in increasingly forthright articulation of the surface is first signaled by the sizable mixed-media relief painting *Targowica III* (1973), one of the Polish Village series. Its subtle inflections and jagged shapes, constructed with paper, felt, cardboard, and canvas "wedges," make it as much an unruly descendant of a cubist collage as it is an expansion—literally, away from the wall—of the implications of the Irregular Polygons and Protractors. Yet, like most of Stella's forays away from two dimensions, *Targowica III* remains a *painting* and, in insisting on being read this way, tells us how to consider most of the subsequent wall-mounted works in the exhibition. The articulated, animated surface and unconventional materials of works like *Targowica III* have become commonplace in galleries and art schools alike, but when Stella's Polish Village series was first exhibited, it was startling. Now such once-transgressive works seem not only rather tame, but also to anticipate or even determine the collective aesthetic of the period, as Stella's work often does, by ignoring established material definitions and positing otherwise not-yet-realized possibilities.

The selection at Mnuchin celebrates the evolution of Stella's work as it moved away from the wall, from the mid-1970s (following the Polish Village series) on through a group of constructions that press more and more into our literal space, while still remaining unquestionably *paintings*. Stella himself brilliantly contextualized the trajectory of his work when he delivered the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University in 1984 (published in 1986 as *Working Space*). He compared what he saw as a crisis in abstraction at the time of the talks to a similar crisis in painting at the end of the sixteenth century. Only Caravaggio's audacious work, Stella felt, could stand up to the legacy of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Giorgione, and Titian. Caravaggio, Stella wrote, invented his own pictorial space. In contrast to the way mathematical linear perspective treated the canvas as a window through which we looked into a fictive distance, Caravaggio created "the sensation of real space within and outside of the action of the painting." Stella seems to have striven to invent an abstract equivalent for Caravaggio's mobile space, substituting modernist physicality for illusionism. "Abstraction," Stella wrote,

> must find a way to expand the boundaries willed by the pictorial past. It has to create a working space in which both the limits and the accomplishments of the past can be envisioned as expanding in a meaningful way under the pressure of our everyday efforts.

Among the strongest of the exhibition's works are those that fulfill this aspiration, including the explosive Indian Bird *Maha-lat, 5.5x* (1978–79), arching away from the wall, with deep layers and wild, urgently scrawled and scribbled color. When Stella first showed works of this type, at a time when minimalism was ascendant and refined Color Field painting was highly esteemed, the response was often one of outrage. There's little doubt that he was being deliberately contrarian, challenging received ideas about what was acceptable and even responding to the controversial example of the graffiti that obscured New York subway cars, a phenomenon decried by most at the time but hailed as significant vernacular art by others. Now, the Indian Birds and later iterations, such as the exhibition's ample, lacy *Norising* (1982), with its energetically worked surface, seem to have more in common with the gorgeousness of High Baroque painting than with urban reference. At the same time, the vigorous, near-monochrome mixed-media relief *Playskool Hose* (1983), angled sharply towards the viewer, continues Stella's flirtation with cubist-inflected construction at a more intimate scale; the Playskool series hasn't been seen often, so it's a special pleasure to come upon an example.

We've already been alerted to this aspect of Stella's evolution by a more severe, relatively subdued wall-hung piece, *boeta* (2004), installed on the first floor of the exhibition. It enters into an interesting conversation with the shaped Metallic Paintings of the 1960s nearby. Like the paintings, the sculpture depends on an elegant, slightly reflective surface and an open center, but it otherwise has nothing to do with their uncompromising geometry and single-mindedness. Quite the contrary, it incorporates such disparate elements as arcing stainless-steel tubing and a very pointy three-dimensional star.



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The sumptuousness and three-dimensional richness of works like *Maha-lat, 5.5x* and *Norising*, as well as the spatial ambition of *Playskool Hose*, are expressed in wholly contemporary materials by several examples, large and small, from the Scarlatti series, a group of wall-hung constructions provoked by the harpsichord virtuoso Ralph Kirkpatrick's recordings of the Italian composer's keyboard sonatas. Produced with three-dimensional printing, among other up-to-date methods, and incorporating such materials as stainless-steel tubing, nylon rpt, protogen rpt, titanium, and spray paint, the Scarlatti pieces are essentially cursive, three-dimensional, airborne drawings, greedy in their demands for space—even the small ones—but sensuous and delicate. The six-foot *K. 179* (2011) sends slender "tentacles" from a clenched center, the whole disciplined by an interrupted circle of red. A pair of small Scarlatti works cling more closely to the wall but share the fluidity and playfulness of the larger construction.

Not far away, the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum is occupied by the startling *"Her name was Marianne Congreve"* (1998), a snarl of what we are told is painted sand-cast aluminum that seems as if it were assembled from found detritus and scraps gathered from the studio floor, some

crushed together, others pushed towards us. (The work is one of sixteen reliefs named for characters in Heinrich von Kleist's novella *The Betrothal of Santo Domingo*.) The surface of the sand-cast metal and some repetitive grooving is contradicted by fierce, shiny polychromy, a slick coat of color that somehow emphasizes, rather than conceals, the many small irregularities and inelegant inclusions that bear witness to the previous function of the elements from which the work was initially constructed. I was unable to decide whether the surface of *"Her name was Marianne Congreve"* was repellent or engaging, but I found myself returning to the piece, almost in spite of myself.

Homage to Frank Stella" is, of necessity, far from an exhaustive account of the achievements of an extraordinarily inventive, fearless, and essentially unclassifiable artist. But the exhibition makes a brave stab at illuminating Stella's lifelong investigation of conceptions, materials, methods, and technologies. At Mnuchin, there's a single large, lively paper collage but none of his revealing drawings, and Stella's intense, prolific engagement with printmaking isn't even hinted at. Again of necessity, no doubt, there's no discussion of the important role of literature as a trigger for his work (see *"Her name was Marianne Congreve"*). Nonetheless, the works on view are mainly fine examples that represent significant aspects of Stella's long, constantly evolving, notably varied body of work—a fitting tribute to a towering figure. Let's hope for future exhibitions that fill in the gaps.

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[i] "Homage to Frank Stella" opened at Mnuchin Gallery, New York, on September 18 and remains on view through December 14, 202