

(New York, The Museum of Modern Art FRANK STELLA 1970 - 1987

by April
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William S. Rubin ends his second MOMA retrospective monograph on Frank Stella by saying that no other painter has ever been more committed to trying to "make it better" -- but how can an artist who has already made "the best" (as Rubin has so often stated), the greatest paintings of his generation improve on perfection? Starting out on the genius level with the Black paintings when he was just out of college in 1958 may have seemed like every artist's dream come true, but it meant a lifetime of this kind of pressure on Stella. Many people still prefer the Black paintings that made him famous when they were shown at ~~the~~ Leo Castelli Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art in 1959. Art historian Robert Rosenblum spearheads the recent, post-formalist drive to read content in Stella's abstractions in his introduction to the first volume of the catalogue raisonne of Stella's 1958-1965 paintings by seeing in the Black paintings a "kind of sanctified mystery associated with a shrine or private revelation." Citing references made in the titles of these paintings to a Manhattan tenement (Arundel Castle), a funerary monument (Getty Tomb and to Nazism (Die Fahne Hoch and Arbeit Macht Frei), Rosenblum asserts:

Such elucidations helped to deny the usual early response to these paintings -- that they were thoroughly hermetic and cerebral -- and to confirm the growing revelation that they reflect an awareness of such universal gloom that they may even end up as younger-generation counterparts to the somber, life-denying mood of many of Rothko's own late series

paintings.²

Though obliged every once in a while to accept the potential import of Stella's titles, Rubin remains here -- as he was in his 1970 monograph of Stella's first MOMA retrospective -- ever the formalist, mainly concerned with how the paintings were made and which ones function better than others. Rubin is thus able to declare his preference for one painting over another in terms of its superiority, but he largely ignores the plethora of art historical associations, sources and references in Stella's work -- so numerous as to be positively staggering. Among the more relevant areas that remain to be explored are the general importance of Islamic art and architecture to a committed abstractionist involved with geometric illusionism and its particular relevance to the Mitered Mazes; the influence of Franz Kline, whose infusion of dynamism and muscular energy into Constructivism is a model for Stella's own; and the possible cross-fertilization among friends and other contemporaries, such as Ron Davis, John Chamberlain, Roy Lichtenstein, William T. Williams, and especially, Al Held. The parallels between Held's oeuvre and Stella's (the Cones and Columns paintings being a present tense example), have been as consistently ignored by most scholars as those that existed between Joseph Albers' nested squares and Stella's early work. ^{then too,} Stella's hyper-enlargement of Picasso's and Leger's Cubism ought not to blind us to its continuous basis in his work. Much also needs to be said about

the changes in Stella's color since it became interactive in the seventies when no longer separated by intertices of raw canvas.

But a Formalist does even less justice to his subject by slighting the biographical data that must at least bear heavily on the work at some points in the artist's life. For example, Stella's lifelong committment to banded imagery always bore some, however distant relationship to roads, among other things. One's eyes zipped along those colored bands of 1958-1965, jumping from one band to the next at the optical jogs where they crossed or switched to a different direction. The movement was swift, the illusions fleeting. Rosenblum points out in the catalogue raisonne that Stella's silvery 1960 painting, Marquis de Portago, was named for a ~~famed~~^g Spanish race car driver who had died in a crash, its four protruding corners being related in the artist's mind to the metal fenders of the Marquis's Ferrari. Given that, surely it is not too far fetched to make a connection between Stella's ~~his~~ life at a time when his involvement with race cars and their drivers was at its most intense and the collided, explosively fragmented, high-impacted look of Stella's work after the mid-seventies. He lost one close friend, racing driver Ronnie Peterson, to the aftereffects of a Grand Prix collision in 1978 and dedicated a series of graphics to him. The other racer with whom he often drove to various tracks or circuits in Europe was Peter Gregg who took his own life only a few months after he and Stella survived an auto crash on route to the races at Le

Mans.

The dizzying, parabolically curved grid that replaced the straight lines which had dominated Stella's thinking up until then was first employed in the Polar Co-ordinates prints dedicated to Peterson. Rubin points out the importance of these crisscrossing parallel curves etched into the aluminum surfaces of the Circuit reliefs -- Stella's largest and Rubin feels most successful series yet -- on which Stella worked "flat out" between 1981 and 1984 with almost "maniacal" concentration. The frenzied madness of these paintings is sometimes constrained between the rigid borders of a rectangle, at other times the wriggling free-curves burst out of the "frame" to spill a profusion of elements over the "ground" of the white wall. In the Circuits, all named for race tracks, Stella comes as close as he ever has to incoherence, though even here patient study rewards one with a semblance of visual order.

To imagine oneself hurtling along Stella's new curving bands just missing objects moving too fast to recognize feels like a simulated flight through debris-ridden outer space in a rocket ship during an asteroid storm. Zipping in and out of space on the flashing optical vectors of Stella's pre-1970 bands was nothing like this. Then one could stop the visual vibrations by mentally returning to the certainty that the painting was actually flat. The streamlined movements of the deceptively

deco-looking Polish Village series of the early seventies, like those of the Irregular Polygons of the late sixties to which they relate, seem sedate, even oppressively constrained in comparison to the Circuits. But what a far cry too from the joyously Matissean florals and cloverleaves, fans and rainbows of the late sixties Protractor series and their late seventies counterparts, the lyrical Exotic and Indian Birds with their varicolored tropical plummage. Straight line grids are curved here to support the cooing, preening forms of nested French curves and kissing protractors as Stella makes the "spherical" or "projective" space he so admires in Caravaggio's paintings literal. But these are not paintings about speed. Rather they concern sensuous physicality. Speed is optical, conceptual, and Stella seems to have alternated between the two kinds of energy, muscular and visual, throughout his career.

The Cones and Pillars can be seen as putting all the pieces of Stella together: His urge to build space out from the picture plane while painting on flat surfaces; his obsession with pure geometric forms and illusionism on the one hand, and with conquering loose paint handling on the other; his classicizing need for containment and respect for the pressure of the framing edge, but also for explosive images that crash through all the pictorial perimeters. In fact, the post-impact look of the series as a whole with broken columns falling over one another scattering cones and shards of matter in every direction makes a

compelling visual metaphor for Dionysian forces overwhelming Apollonian stability. But not everyone may read these paintings the same way. We have learned that Stella's passion for clarity was only equalled by his need for complexity and ambiguity. Perhaps then, when we quote Stella's well known line that "what you see is what you see," we ought to italicize the second "you" to de-literalize, its meaning and acknowledge our necessarily active role in his esthetic process. Certainly no previous paintings have so intensely engaged us in their pictorial, spatial, optical, physical and conceptual interplay as the Cones and Pillars. Could they be his very best work yet? Tune in for the report on his next retrospective in a decade or two and find out.

1. Frank Stella 1970-1987. Text by William S. Rubin. 172 pp. + 74 col. pls. + 52 b. & w. ill. (The Museum of Modern Art, 1987), \$45.00 HB; \$22.50 PB. ISBN 0-87070-593-8 (HB); ISBN 0-87070-599-7 (PB).

2. Frank Stella Paintings 1958 to 1965. A Catalogue Raisonne. Compiled by Lawrence Rubin; introduction by Robert Rosenblum. 230 pp. + 139 col. pls. (incl. 14 details) + 136 b. & w. ill. (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, Publishers, 1986), \$75.00. ISBN 0-941434-92-3 (v. 1).