

The Archive

Frank Stella Has Always Been a Star

A new exhibition calls to mind an article from a 1983 issue of *AD*

By Madeleine Luckel

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Jasper's Split Star, 2017 and *Frank's Wooden Star*, 2014. Photo: Frank Stella / Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery and The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art

On a recent day this fall, [the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#) in Ridgefield, Connecticut, unveiled a new exhibition. Centered on star-focused works by master American [artist Frank Stella](#), the show bursts with a sense of joy. And since the curatorial offering, which is formally titled “Frank Stella’s Stars, A Survey,” is scheduled to remain on view through early next May, there’s plenty of time to venture over to the constitutional state in order to see it.

But for the time being, we here at *AD* couldn’t help but be reminded of our own [100-year archive](#), which [brims with colorful Stella finds](#). A clear standout is a [September 1983](#) visit to Stella’s own studio.

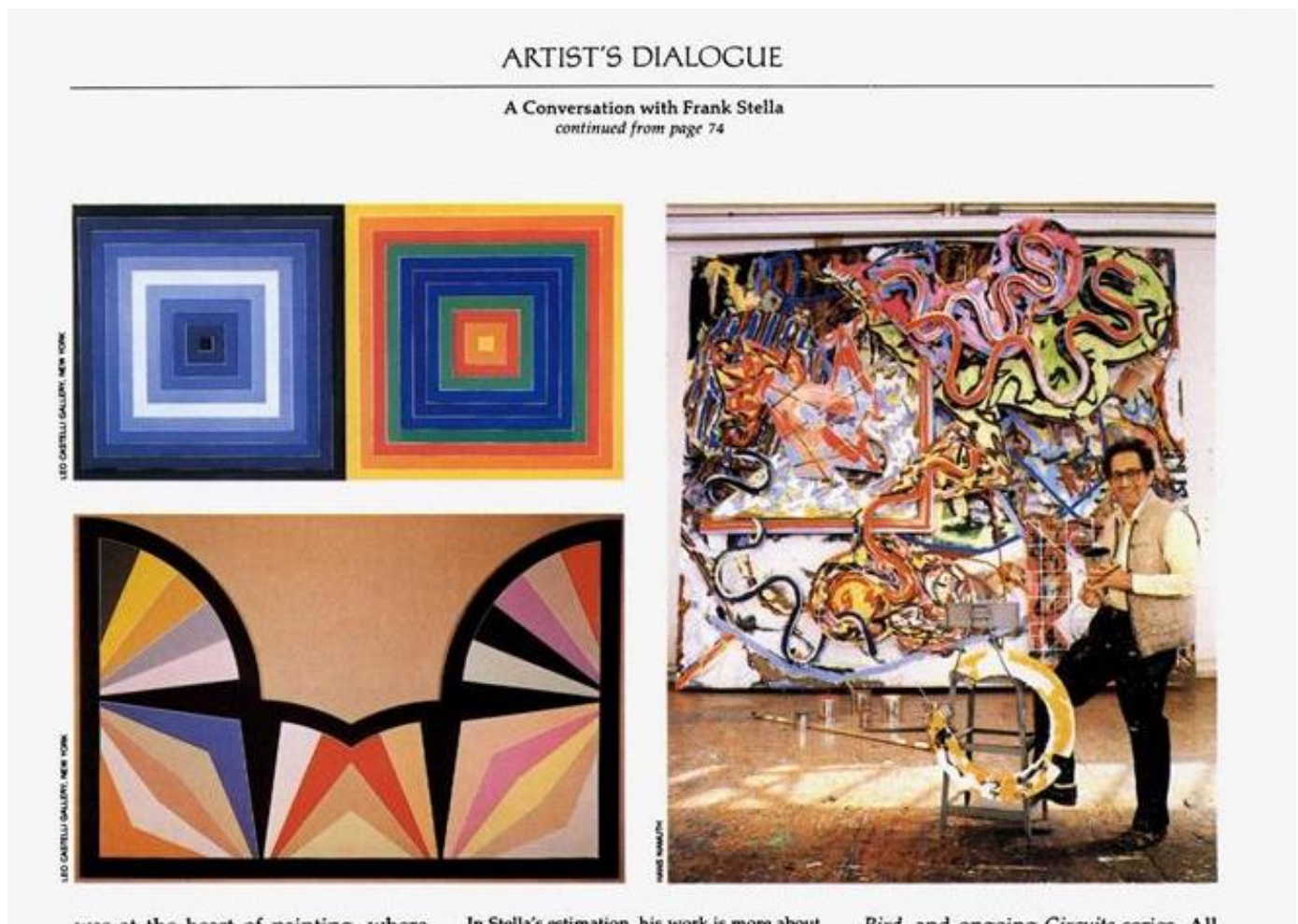
Comprised of pictures of the space and an illuminating interview with the artist himself, the feature is a stellar piece in its own right—thanks in part to its memorable quotes.

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“I’m driven by anxiety, but not by doubt,” Stella told writer Avis Berman at one point in his interview. “Anxiety on how to do something and how to do it well, but never doubt whether to do it in the first place. The answer is always yes.” Yes, it seems, was the answer when he began work on his lesser-known metal sculptures. Those pieces were a dominant area of interest for Stella in the year that the article was published, and could be glimpsed in the accompanying photo portfolio.

Some of the pieces, which were photographed by Hans Namuth for the magazine, share a clear through line with the works now on view at the Aldrich. While the scale of those sculptures ranges from pedestal perfect to down-right monumental, they are a united testament to Stella’s far-ranging prowess. It’s worth noting that the exhibit also features some two-dimensional canvases, which recall Stella’s famous paintings. Of those works, the artist reflected to *Architectural Digest*: “People thought my painting was narrow and focused, but it didn’t seem that way to me. I thought it was inclusive.”



...it all seems to count.”

After his initial popular impact—as opposed to financial success, the artist notes—Stella, in series after series, went on to stretch and break existing boundaries of contemporary art. In the sixties, the rectilinear patterns of the Black pictures gave way to shaped, colored canvases. These were followed by multicolor concentric squares and irregular polygons. Stella finished out the decade with the astonishing *Protractor* series, composed of curved shapes derived from the simple measuring tool, and executed in fluorescent bursts of color.

Stella was accorded a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970. In his superb catalogue for the exhibition, William Rubin pointed out that Islamic art, Orphic Cubism, and Matisse were important sources for the artist’s increasingly radiant compositions, and Stella himself predicted that his work would continue to move toward the French master.

“progress and modification” than radical shifts. TOP LEFT AND ABOVE LEFT: Two paintings from 1967, *WFUV (Double)* and *Hagmatana III*, explore geometric progressions and color patterning. ABOVE RIGHT: Elements of earlier works burst forth volcanically in Stella’s recent painted reliefs. Here, *Shards IV* is accompanied, he jokes, by “found sculpture number five”—a figure formed by the stool and circle.

Evaluating his remark today, Stella says, “I thought that for a while, but now I think the work is closer to Picasso. If I could have a combination of the two, I’d be happy. I’d like to have the lateral quickness of Matisse and the depth of Picasso.”

Despite Stella’s sixties absorption with curves, color, and suggestions of three-dimensional space—signaling a serious stylistic reappraisal—few observers were prepared for his next stage: metal reliefs with serpentine lines, richly textured surfaces, and hints of illusion and metaphor. These developments first surfaced in his *Brazilian* series of 1975 and were refined in the *Exotic Bird*, *Indian*

...seemingly repudiate Stella’s former preferences and his self-imposed prohibitions against illusionism. Was the artist afraid to break away from a system that had served him well? “I’ve never been driven by doubt,” he explains. “I’m driven by anxiety, but not by doubt. Anxiety on how to do something and how to do it well, but never doubt whether to do it in the first place. The answer is always yes.”

Frank Stella’s new vocabulary seems to have furnished him with the means for a greater evocative power. As never before, his sinuous, electrically charged constructions propel the viewer into new realms of energy and emotion. The public, Stella hopes, will continue to find a similar uproar of life when they gaze upon his paintings. “I’d like people to see something that they liked and thought was the art of their time,” he says. “I’d like them to think, ‘This is what it’s like, being alive in 1983.’” □

—Avis Berman

78

One page from the original article shows Stella and an assortment of his works. Photographed by Hans Namuth, AD, September 1983

Indeed. But at this point, Stella’s name likely feels like the elephant in the gallery. Since it translates to *star* in Latin and Italian, it would appear to be no huge wonder why the artist repeatedly returned to the motif as inspirational subject. Nonetheless, Stella has been consistently tight-lipped on the matter, never waxing poetic on all the ways in which his name may or may not have influenced him.

The Aldrich, however, has good reason to show the pieces off. About 50 years ago, the institution became one of the first museums to put Stella’s works on display, while MoMA’s first Stella was purchased with funds from namesake founder Larry Aldrich. “I think about all kinds of art all the time when I see things,” Stella told *AD* at one point in the article. “I think about art in terms of generalities and problems.” Perhaps then, his stars were one important part of that think-quest.

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