

ART REVIEW

Laying the Tracks Others Followed

By Roberta Smith

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5 MIN READ

The handsome show of Frank Stella's early paintings at L&M Arts could not be better timed. Abstract art, especially of a Minimalist mien, is on the uptick right now, with a few too many young artists acting as if they have invented the wheel, especially where brushy or severely simplified monochromes are concerned.

Perhaps this is to be expected. Art is not a science; it does not proceed in a neat, linear progression. Artists often circle back, picking up ideas that their predecessors left undeveloped and trying to push them further. Still, a blast from the past never hurts: the artistic present can never know too much about what has come before.

The rare museum-quality exhibition that is "Frank Stella: Black, Aluminum, Copper Paintings" is just that kind of blast. It features 13 of the adamant, quietly pulsing, exceedingly frontal paintings that Mr. Stella made in New York in the three and a half years after he arrived here in the summer of 1958, fresh out of Princeton.

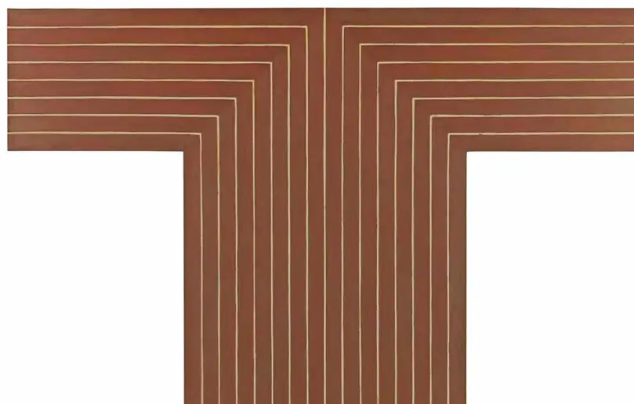
This amounts to more early Stellas than have been exhibited in New York since the survey of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1970. They provide a heady sense of the first few fastest-moving years of his development, when he helped bring the Abstract Expressionist chapter of New York School painting to a close and lay the foundation for Minimalism.

On view are examples of the Black Paintings series, with which he announced himself to the New York art world in the Museum of Modern Art's 1959 "Sixteen Americans" exhibition, as well as works from his Aluminum and Copper series, unveiled in his first and second solo shows at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1960 and 1962. All the paintings feature repeating bands or stripes of a single color applied to canvases that start out rectangular and end up emphatically shaped, resembling big letters. Also included is "Delta," a wonderfully shaggy, black-over-dark-red predecessor of these more classic stripe paintings.

These works represent the cornerstone of Mr. Stella's reputation, the Stellas whose historical importance, as with Picasso's Cubist paintings, is most widely, if somewhat predictably, accepted. And just as the decimated forms of Cubism introduce an integration between image and surface, the Stellas here progressively articulate a new agreement between painting as image and as object. They hark back to a time when flatness was abstract painting's primary goal, and the physical facts of the medium were starting to be endlessly parsed — beginning with shaped canvases — in a process that continues today. No artist's work embodied these pursuits as rigorously as Mr. Stella's; in the paintings at L&M he laid down the tracks that others followed.

But in this show you also see a young painter edging his way, with some setbacks, toward his first mature statements, making progress that is at times as much physical and technical as anything else. The unevenness and general handmade roughness of the Black Paintings is especially striking. Greatly influenced by Jasper Johns's flag paintings, Mr. Stella sought an even more rigorous logic between physical and visual by using parallel bands of black that either reiterate or run diagonally to the edges of the canvas.

But the Frank Stella of the Black Paintings was not yet the Frank Stella who famously said, in 1966, "What you see is what you see" — the epitome of a literal, nothing-but-the-facts approach to the medium. Beyond their apparent logic, these early works are also broodingly Romantic, their mood underscored by titles that flirt with darkness, chaos and otherness.





"Bethlehem's Hospital" takes it high") echoes a phrase from a Bible were splayed demonically above

the Fahne hoch!" ("The Flag on makes You Free"), the words that

Some of the Black Paintings are Their stripes, painted over black them a youthful awkwardness a

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In later works from the series, the black stripes are laid over raw canvas and the white glimmering between them is lively beyond doubt. This is the case with the cruciform patterns of the tall, heraldic "Die Fahne hoch!" (which also reads as a homage to Mr. Johns's work); the radiating diamond pattern of "Zambezi"; and the velvety cascade of "Point of Pines," in which parallel diagonal stripes slant downward from the vertical center line of the canvas.

"Point of Pines" has an especially resonant balance of motif and title, since the diagonals repeatedly meet at a point and suggest a pine tree in highly abstracted form. But the layered associations persist: The painting was named for a gay cruising beach north of Boston, while the inspiration for "Zambezi" was a Harlem nightclub that featured male and female impersonators.

In a sense the Black Paintings pay homage to Abstract Expressionism as they bid it farewell. But with the Aluminum series Mr. Stella is free and clear. There is nothing moody about their silvery, reflective surfaces or about the dazzling logic with which the bands of aluminum paint jog in and out in response to the discreetly shaped canvases, which have cutaway notches and squares at their corners, sides and centers.

The titles tend toward exotic if not downright flashy. "Averroes" and "Avicenna" are named for Arab philosophers (of the 11th and 12th centuries); "Marquis de Portago" commemorates a charismatic Spanish racecar driver who died in a fiery crash in 1957. The gaps between the stripes are much more definite than in the Black Paintings, since Mr. Stella outlined them in pencil, but a certain lack of neatness persists, especially when the stripes turn corners, contributing to ebullient play between figure and ground.

The ruddy Copper Paintings, named for mining towns in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado, torque this play toward the sculptural with emphatically shaped canvases. "Telluride" is a big T; "Pagosa Springs" is an immense, gate-like H; and "Creede I" and "Creede II" are identical L's, installed so close together here that they might seem incomplete without each other.

In these works Mr. Stella starts using tape, making the gaps between the stripes perfectly regular, which decreases some of the handmade quality. But the paintings are more adamant than ever, and their sheer bluntness and simplicity still impress, while the crucifixlike power of "Telluride," in particular, confirms that what you see is never all you see.

Their boldness hints at the punch and scale of the more colorful and decorative "Irregular Polygon and Protractor" series to which Mr. Stella would turn in the late 1960s, after several more years of stripe paintings. They also foreshadow his move into three-dimensional reliefs, which would begin with his "Polish Village" series in 1970. Since then, he has left the works at L&M far behind, producing increasingly bulky, increasingly baroque reliefs, and is frequently viewed as an artist in decline. But the underlying continuities of his art should not be underestimated, and his velocity and determination to keep changing are as evident now as they were when he started out.

"Frank Stella: Black, Aluminum, Copper Paintings" runs through June 2 at L&M Arts, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan; (212) 861-0020, imgallery.com.

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