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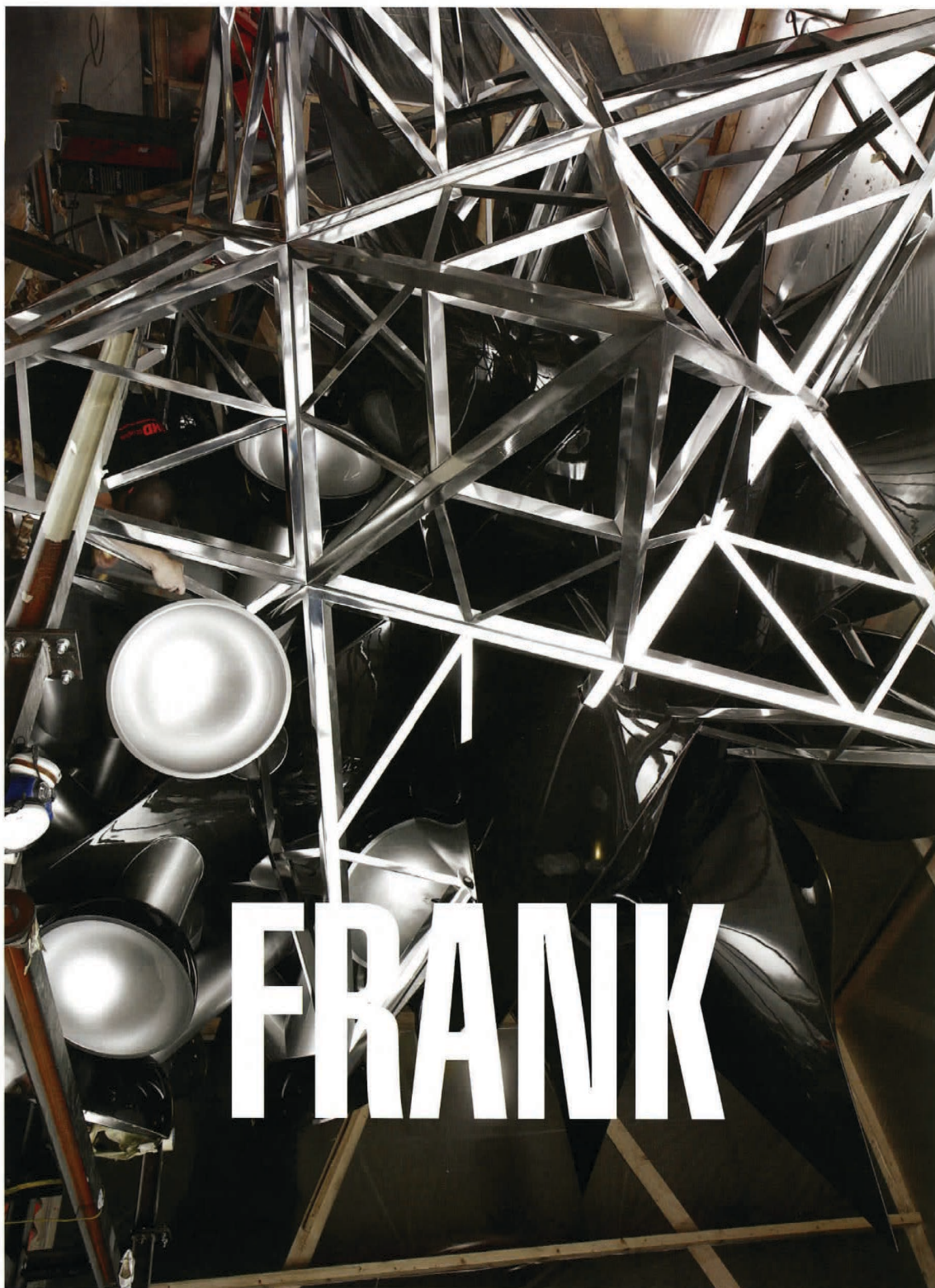
THE ART ISSUE

HIROSHI SUGIMOTO, AARON YOUNG, JEAN PIGOZZI, ADEL ABDESSEMED

Stopa. Jason. "Frank Stella," *Whitewall*. Spring 2013.

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BY JASON STOPA, PORTRAIT BY ERIK HESMERG

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Frank Stella is one of the foremost artists of our time. His career has spanned several generations of stylistic and formal investigations: He began by working in a flat, hard-edged Minimalist style, using a basic palette, and has evolved to create maximalist works — deep-relief paintings and formidable sculptures. His work has been at the forefront of the so-called death of Modernism. While many artists were turning to installation art, video, and performance, Stella continued to reinvent a formal language with surprising results. When Pop came around, he incorporated its color, with neo-Expressionism its pluralism — always reframing the conversation on his own terms. His legendary “Black Paintings” were the starting point for our discussion, which ranged from the problems of painting today to *Moby Dick* and his latest architectural sculptures. He is in his late seventies, but his work shows no signs of stopping as he integrates digital technology with physically challenging forms in a way that continues to breathe life back into painting and sculpture.



WHITEWALL: I always read your early work — the “Black Paintings,” the “Irregular Polygons” — as a major turn from metaphysics and a major turn for American painting. Was it a move away from European relational painting?

FRANK STELLA: You know, that’s not entirely true, though everyone made a big deal about it, I guess because on the surface there’s not much there. The surfaces are repellent; you’re stopped at the surface of the thing. The buck stops here. [Laughs] But knocking European painting in defense of American painting didn’t really make much sense to me. The idea that after World War II all of a sudden Europe wouldn’t flower or carry on was crazy. Many of those artists came here, much of the second-generation Ab-Ex painters were European.

When I moved to New York, my plan was to get a job and hopefully get a good gallery. It didn’t quite happen that way. I soon met Alfred Barr who saw the “Black Paintings” and offered me the show at MoMA. Barr liked my work, his wife didn’t. [Laughs] But when you’re young and have that kind of attention thrown at you, you don’t care. But the “Black Paintings” were really just a bit away from Barry Newman and Rothko. I took a hint from Pollock’s use of enamel paints — nontraditional mediums. I would go to the hardware store and get colors that were mis-tints, colors that had gone out of style, but you know they’re pretty good colors, just a lot of filler.

WW: I never thought of the enamel relationship to Pollock. I like that. I loved seeing how your “Irregular Polygon” series and “Protractor” works evolved into the organic, nearly sculptural paintings of the 1980s have now blossomed into these massive, architectural works. Can you talk about this transition?

FS: The geometry was rectilinear and then moved to curvilinear — after Ab-Ex there still wasn’t much there in terms of investigating geometry. Malevich, Mondrian, and Kandinsky got the geometry in rectilinear terms and realized that it would become kind of limiting. You could say that the best Ab-Ex painting was a form of painterly geometry. As abstraction for me is landscape derived, I eventually wanted the forms to have physicality to them versus the forms relating to one another in a rectangle.

I went from the stripes to the “Irregular Polygons” and then felt kind of stuck. I had a system, then it just closed down. So I moved on to the parallelograms and I made the *Ts* and *Ls*. One day a retrospective comes knocking, and I thought, “It’s all over.” [Laughs] So I said, “Take a chance.” I was interested in Malevich’s Constructivism. I felt a connection between destruction and abstraction. The work that came out of that was, at first, wildly unpopular.

WW: Why do you think?



"THERE'S ALWAYS A POINT WHERE YOU SHOULD BE WILLING TO FAIL AT SOMETHING. TO PUT SOMETHING IN, TAKE SOMETHING OUT, OR LET IT GO"

FS: Because nothing revealed the hand of the artist or because it didn't follow logical propositions. I remember that Clem never liked me. He told me that they only had presence and nothing else. But he liked a work called *Sunapee*. It was so weird — I couldn't make it quite work. I guess these had a similar quality.

WW: *Can you talk about your changes as an artist from painting to painting-sculpture hybrids to large-scale sculpture? Was this fluid and natural, or more difficult?*

FS: I never felt the change. I'm never finished with an idea, but I do reach a point when I have to let go of it to some extent. Otherwise, I start tightening up in every way. I just start looking for something else in whatever form it takes.

WW: *Can you tell me about your works at More Gallery?*

FS: The works from the nineties onward have become larger and more complicated. These new ones have been getting increasingly larger from what I've done in the past, in the 15-foot range, which is why it takes so long to get them ready. There's always a point where you should be willing to fail at something. To put something in, take something out, or let it go. I remember this time when John Chamberlain was in my studio and I was fussing over a sculpture. We were sitting down in front of it and he picks up a rag and just shoves it in there and all the sudden it came together. Sometimes I'm waiting for these new ones to do this.

WW: *Well, these new works have an enormous sense of weight, and yet simultaneously weightlessness as they hover in space. I read the graffiti seen on the sculptures as an overt reference to urbanity. I often think about how we live in a concrete city surrounded by graffiti, tags, signs, and billboards. In these new works the gray, concrete mash-ups in your work are contrasted*

by these wonderful highlights of vivid pattern. You have to seek them out, and they give the viewer a chance to breathe a bit. Are they the ultimate painting-sculpture?

FS: That's a very nice way of thinking about it. A lot of these new works since the nineties are made of poured steel from sheet metal pouring in sand — they are very painterly, providing a texture. It's like painting over a painting.

WW: *How do you feel about the state of painting from your generation to the present?*

FS: It was always a problem for painting after the second generation. Serra, Flavin, and the others absorbed Color Field painting in a way. But the competition was still about the work. There was still no money there. It wasn't until well into the eighties that people were getting rich in their lifetimes.

History blamed my generation for the end of painting. The biggest problem with the revivals in the eighties was not that the work was uninteresting. I felt that Salle, Schnabel, Haring, and Basquiat were gifted and made powerful images. But I didn't see where the work could go beyond where it already was. My generation was so influenced by Ab-Ex, we had to react to it. Still, I think we are living in an interesting time and I see new painting that I like all the time, though as I get older it's harder to see it all.

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