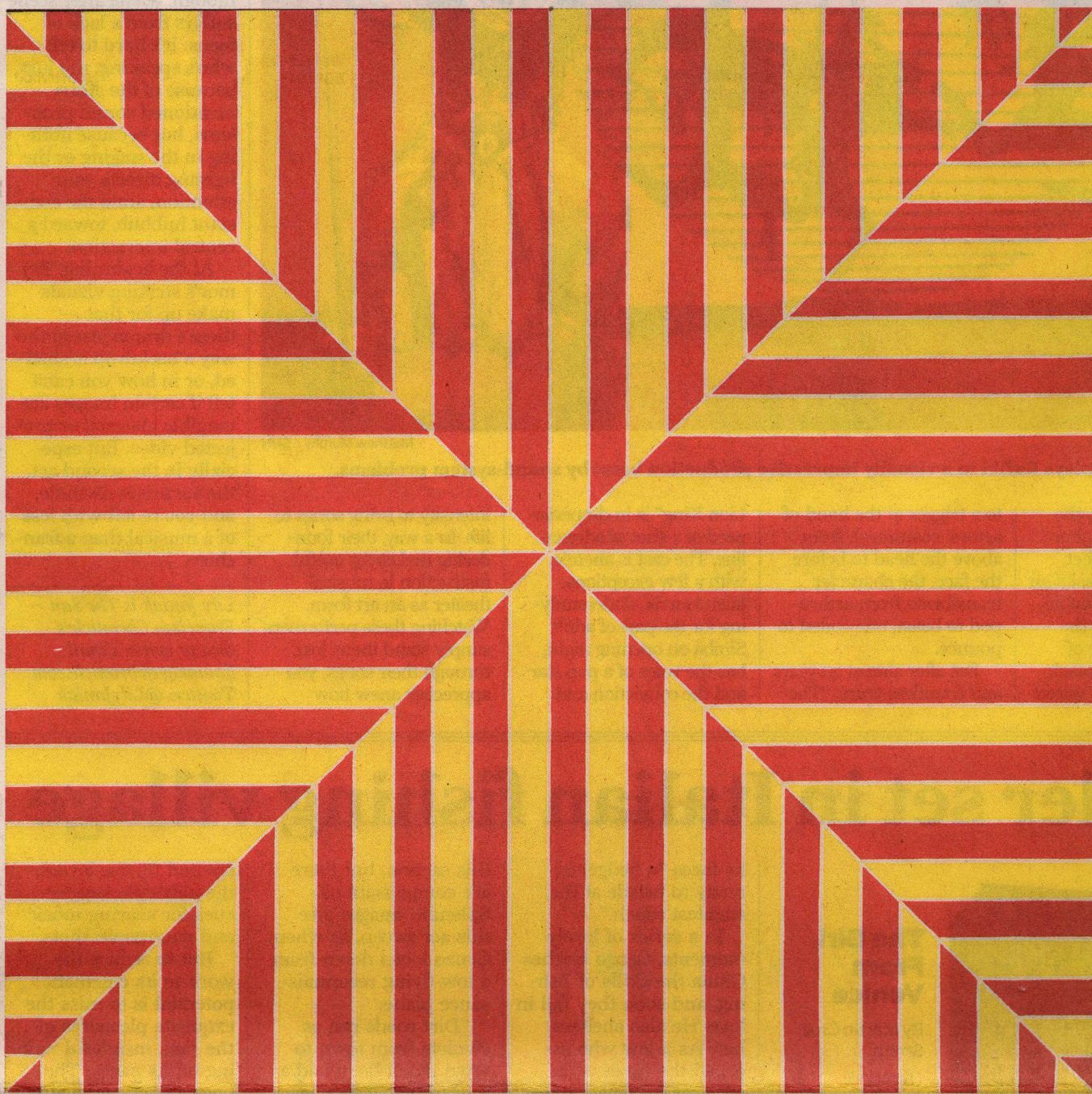


The only way to see this show is to put on mental blinders, restricting ourselves to look at singular works, blocking out the visual noise.



Artists Rights Society photos

"Marrakech" (1964) is an example of Frank Stella's work that creates an illusion of folding in upon itself but is optically flat. It is included in the retrospective at the de Young Museum.

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

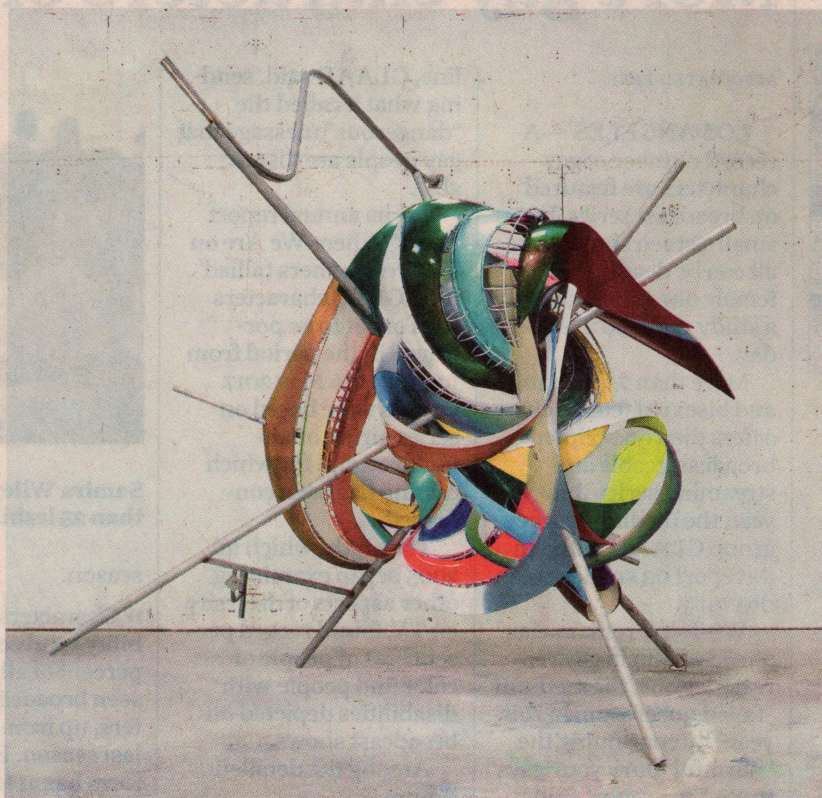
Glimpse of Stella at the de Young

Smaller retrospective offers insight into painter's work

Frank Stella is either a very difficult artist, or an easy one. Considered one of the great intellects among painters, he gives his works titles replete with literary, geographical and historical references. The objects he makes, though, while loosely linked to their titles and sources, are exuberantly independent and anything but bookish.

The exhibition "Frank Stella: A Retrospective" opens at the de Young Museum on Saturday, Nov. 5. It is an opportunity to engage with a good selection of Stella's paintings, and to trace their shifts, unfoldings and blossomings from obstinately minimal to the explosively sculptural reliefs they became. It is a rare opportunity — despite drawbacks in presentation — to dip into the career of an artist who has shaped our idea of what a painting can be.

One frustration is that the show, at about 50 works, has been truncated by roughly half from its recent presentation at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. (It is supplemented by a companion exhibition upstairs at the de Young of 40 prints from the museum's collection.)



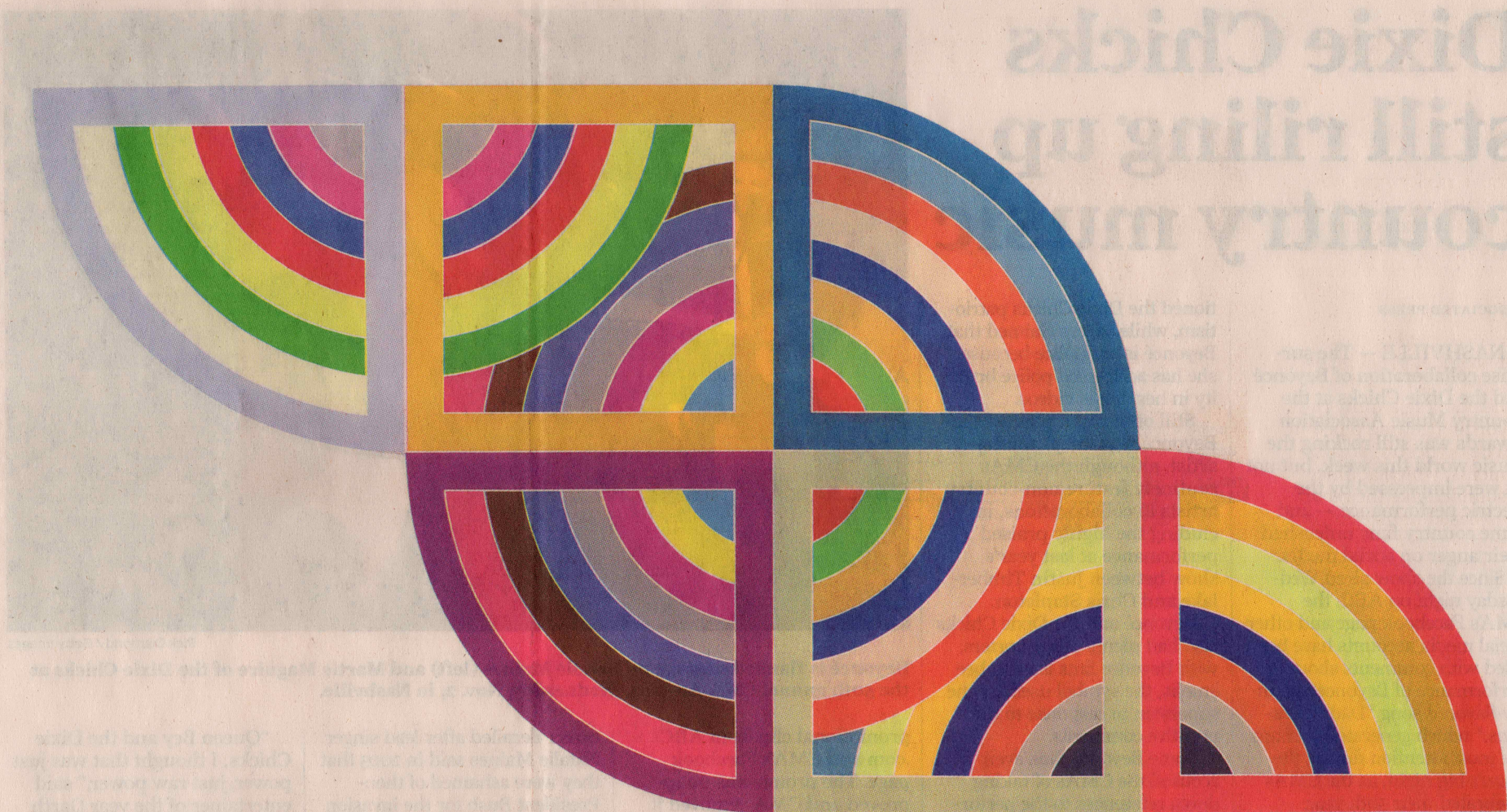
Artists Rights Society

Frank Stella: A Retrospective: 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Saturday, Nov. 5-Feb. 26. \$15-\$25. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

Desmarais continues on E3

Stella moved from painting to sculpture, like this one, "K.81 Combo (K.37 and K.43), Large Size" (2009). "A sculpture," he said, "is just a painting cut out and stood up somewhere."

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Artists Rights Society photos

“Harran II” (1967), polymer and fluorescent polymer paint on canvas, is 10 by 10 feet and a spectacular example of Frank Stella’s “protractor paintings.”

Brisk exhibit shows Stella’s evolution

Desmarais from page E1

That is a formidable hurdle to understanding the breadth of Stella’s art. Curator Michael Auping of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, who worked with Whitney director Adam Weinberg on the exhibition and its excellent catalog, points out that over 60 years, the artist has produced 57 series and sub-series. Each of them encompasses at least 50 works.

It is further constrained by the de Young’s decision to crowd much of it into long, rectangular galleries. These are works that need room. They annex into themselves the space around them. To see them lined up, like so many sconces adorning a corridor, is to seriously misunderstand them. The only way to see this show is to put on mental blinders, restricting ourselves to look at singular works, blocking out the visual noise that echoes through the hall.

Stella’s legendary series of 24 somber black paintings, the works he made in 1959 that brought him rapid fame, are reduced here to a pair of decorations flanking a doorway. They are almost shouted down by the brightly colored “Gran Cairo” (1962), which commands the two entry galleries from a central wall.

Stella was to become a flamboyant colorist, but the works that first stirred the interest of the art world were monochrome. They are key to understanding the artist and the arc of his career.

It is difficult to conceive today — after more than half a century of the extraordinary influence of his art in the world — how striking, even shocking, were those black-painted canvases. Abstract Expressionism was all the rage, with its broad physical gestures, symbolic colors and passionately psychological implications. Jackson Pollock was just three years dead. Then comes this kid, 24 years old, with a heretical idea: Forget passion. To hell with



The retrospective of Stella’s work at the de Young includes about 50 pieces, truncated by roughly half from its recent presentation at the Whitney Museum in New York.

content.

As the artist Carl Andre put it in the catalog for “Sixteen Americans,” the 1959 Museum of Modern Art exhibition that introduced Stella, “Art excludes the unnecessary. Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his painting. Frank Stella is not interested in expression or sensitivity.”

That MoMA catalog is available online (as are all the museum’s publications — a boon to researchers and to us all): <http://mo.ma/2esc8Ip>. It is instructive on several levels. The exhibition was prescient in its selection of the young turks of the time, who included Jasper Johns (whose flag paintings Stella has acknowledged as a source), Ellsworth Kelly, Louise Nevelson and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as two celebrated San Franciscans, Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick. Among the works reproduced, we see the dying flickerings of the flames

of Abstract Expressionism and the first stirrings of Pop.

And then there’s Stella. Even in digital versions of poor halftone reproductions, it is clear these are stubborn objects. In the exhibition, we confront the actuality. The black stripes are hand-painted enamel, the lines defining stripes are the raw canvas between stripe edges. So, stripe is a thing, not an image of a thing. That goes, as well, for the object itself: It is not an image, though it might suggest a condition. A fold, a stack, a puncture.

And this is a perverse mind we are dealing with. Titles are attached to even these obstinately minimalist objects. “Jill” is one we can fairly easily accept as a personal memory or tribute, but the other is “Die Fahne hoch!” (“Raise the Flag!” or something to that effect) — also the title of the Nazi Party anthem. It’s almost as if he discovered references once the paintings were com-

pleted. “The ‘Black Paintings’ were dark, very dark,” he said. “Some of them needed dark titles.”

That perversity has been an element of Stella’s work for decades. The black paintings gave way to shaped canvases, first striped with metallic paints used for boat parts, then barely containing bands of primary color. Shaped canvas in two dimensions expanded into the third, from low relief to deeper carving and expanding. Bands of color became interlaced geometric forms, confounding visual puzzles, exemplified by his “protractor paintings,” a spectacular example of which is “Harran II” (1967).

There are few artists whose development can be so logically followed, through such a broad range of purposeful shifts, zigs and zags. The exhibition moves briskly through Stella’s rethinkings, self-imposed challenges, resolutions of newly cropped problems.

The spectacular “Marrakech” (1964), relatively small for the artist at 6 feet, 5 inches, folds in upon itself optically but is physically flat. By the late 1970s, the visual conundrums on canvas became cut-out physical forms of painted aluminum, collaged and assembled into wall-hung sculpture. By the 1980s, things were virtually erupting off the walls.

And yet, Stella knows himself well. There’s a great quotation on one wall of the show to which we should pay careful attention. “A sculpture,” he says, “is just a painting cut out and stood up somewhere.”

For decades I have been dissatisfied that even the most elaborately tangled, elegantly interwoven of his knotted works just aren’t satisfyingly Gordian. There are few completely free-standing sculptures in his total oeuvre until recent years, and the only ones shown here are tiny, for him — they are displayed on large tables in the final gallery.

In general, the works are, as the artist says, painting cut out and stood up. They are meant to be seen head on. Walk too far to the side and peek behind and you may feel a bit cheated — what you see is a lot of props and braces holding up the important stuff.

Though you wouldn’t know it from this presentation, as time has gone on, the work has been more carefully considered “in the round.” Stella has received grand-scale public sculpture commissions and, as recorded in Paul Goldberger’s 2007 book “Frank Stella: Painting Into Architecture,” expanded ever further. Which leaves us to wonder why, in the de Young’s story of his trajectory, every major piece touches or is anchored to a wall, like a man with fading vision uncertainly feeling his way along.

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