BIG LEAGUE ABSTRACTION

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation / Art Resource, NY

FRANK STELLA DISCUSSES HIS TASTE FOR ABSTRACTION, his mixed feelings about the contemporary art scene, and how at 79 his upcoming retrospective at the Whitney Museum has his market on the upswing.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

Frank Stella's *Harran II*, from the exhibition *Painterly Abstraction, 1949–1969: Selections from the Guggenheim Collections*, which ran in 2011 at the Guggenheim Bilbao. The artist's next exhibit takes place from October 30, 2015–February 7, 2016, at the Whitney Museum and will be his largest yet.

Frank Stella has been a bold-faced name in the New York art world for half a century. He has explored abstract form in series of works including giant paintings of parallel striped patterns, shaped canvases containing geometric designs, polychrome reliefs, sculptural assemblage, and full-blown painted abstract sculptures. His search for new surfaces and structures has led him to work in materials from paint on canvas to cast aluminum, steel, and carbon fiber.

Born in Malden, Massachusetts, in 1936, he studied at Andover and Princeton, and by his early 20s had moved to New York, where he soon was showing with legendary dealer Leo Castelli and selling work to the Museum of Modern Art. He would become the youngest artist to have a retrospective at MoMA, as well as the first to have two (1970 and 1988). While thousands of his works are in museums around the world, his celebrity has dipped in recent years. Now, with a career retrospective opening in November at the Whitney Museum of American Art's new building in downtown New York, he appears to be on the verge of a late-life revival. ▷

You've had many retrospectives over the years, including two organized by MoMA and one in Germany in 2012. What's special about the big show opening at the Whitney?

According to the Whitney it's a big show! I have one floor. The MoMA shows were at a different time and were more work-in-progress covering a number of years. One was 1958 to 1970, and the second was from the '70s into the late '80s. I would have been much happier if the new show had been just the '90s until now, but they wanted more, the main reason being that there are young people who never saw the things I did in the '60s. So it's a kind of spotty retrospective. I'm still working, so it's a lot of work.

You must be excited.

I have to say I'm excited, but actually there's a lot to worry about and do. There's the inevitable back and forth about which pieces will be in it, mostly owing to who will lend. Almost nobody wants to lend for the whole tour. [The exhibit travels to Fort Worth and to San Francisco.] Everyone is suddenly very sensitive about the condition of the works. Before, when they were not of any particular value, nobody much cared.

When did you decide you were going to be an artist?

I didn't decide. It wasn't a career decision. When I was done with school at Princeton we still had the draft, and I thought before I have to report for my physical I would go to New York and paint. I took a place and thought I would paint for a couple of months and then go into the Army and see what happened after that. I went to Massachusetts to report and the last guy who stamped me asked about my hand, which I had injured as a child, and asked, "Do you want to go into the Army?" And I said, "No, sir." He said, "You went to Princeton, didn't you?" And I said, "Yes, sir." And he picked up the other stamp and banged it down, and said, "I don't think you'd make a very good soldier anyway." And I was out.

Were your parents on board with your decision to become an artist?

They really hoped that I would get a better idea. My father, an OB-GYN, thought that I could be an optometrist and paint at night. They wanted me to be gainfully employed and they were worried about my being an artist they would have to support. My teachers at Andover, like Patrick Morgan, never really criticized me much; and Maude, his wife, bought one of my paintings and was a little shocked when I asked for $35. I just named that price off the top of my head. You ask when did I know about my career? I don't think it works like that. I just had this idea that I kind of wanted to be like Patrick Morgan: smooth and suave and making art and taking care of yourself. That was a nice way to live, better than getting a job.

Opposite from left: Frank Stella in 1987; *La colomba ladra*, 1987.

This page clockwise from top left: Kapar, 2003, unpainted bent tubing, stainless, aluminum with fiberglass; *Flin Flon*, 1970, polymer and fluorescent polymer paint on canvas; *Felsztyn II*, 1971, acrylic, fabric, and collage on canvas; *La Scienza della Fiacca, 3.5 X*, 1984, mixed media on canvas, etched magnesium, aluminum and fiberglass.

You seem to have a retrospective here in your workshop. There must be more than 100 pieces from various periods—paintings, sculptures, wall reliefs in various styles and materials. Is there a thread that connects them?

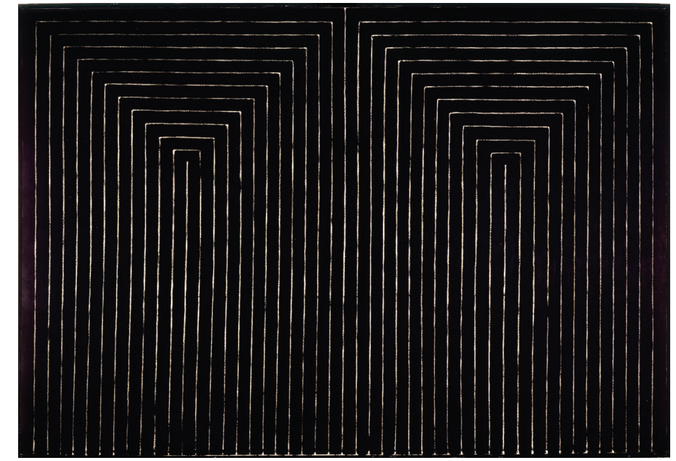
For me the black and striped paintings were about a kind of structure to give you confidence about the way you make paintings, about the way they look and what you can build on them. I feel they were the underpinnings, the structural support, and all I have done after that has built on what I did before.

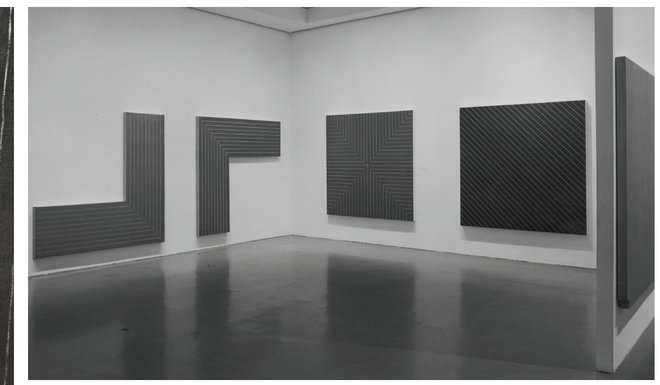
You were only 23 in 1959 when you were included in MoMA's group show *Sixteen Americans*. How did that happen?

I probably never would have shown at MoMA, but [founding director] Alfred Barr came to my studio and saw the Black Paintings in the summer of '59. Leo Castelli and Alfred came and I paraded all my paintings out in a 25-square-foot space. Alfred said hardly anything. He asked one or two questions—were they enamels or on raw canvas?—something like that, and then they left. ▷

An inside look at Stella's workshop in New York. He acknowledges that many of the pieces are geometric or seemingly contradictory shapes, but points out that each piece emphasizes structure and stability over form. "Sculptures need to have a kind of strength, a kind of identity and structure," he says. "That's what I rely on."

Images: (Opposite) Jason Edward Kaufman. (Top) Art Resourc, NY; (left) Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA / Art Resource, NY; (right) Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA / Art Resource, NY.





Clockwise from top: The Marriage of Reason and Squalor (second version), 1959. The 1970 exhibit at the MoMA New York. The artist painting *Getty Tomb*. Of his Black Paintings he says, "It was the idea of the repetition and the bands that was striking to me. In the end they were a kind of landscape painting, but they changed what you might call the conventional idea of the landscape as a horizon into the idea of the urban landscape."

Leo called me and told me that Alfred liked them. Then a couple of weeks later Alfred came again, but this time with [the show's curator] Dorothy Miller, and they looked at all of the things and that was that. They were among the first people to really look at my work.

Alfred went to dealers and brought the works to the Modern for exhibitions, and works were assigned to the trustees as to what they had to buy. The dealers exhibited works at the Museum of Modern Art knowing full well that they were going to be bought by the museum. When the Modern announced that they had bought [my Black Painting] *The Marriage of Reason and Squalor*, the wire services asked for the painting to reproduce it.

That's a wonderful title. It suggests the life of a bohemian artist, filled with ideas but on the edge financially.

I was sharing a space with [artists] Carl Andre and Hollis Frampton at the time and Carl made that title.

The notion of truth to materials reminds me of the often quoted statement you made on the radio in 1964: "All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion… What you see is what you see." What does that mean? Is it a declaration against illusionism in art?

That was pretty innocent actually. All I was saying was that what you make as an artist, you see it, but you don't have much real idea of what anybody else is going to see. You assume it looks roughly like that to them, but you can't get into what their feelings are. You have to get it to exist, to make it, and then after that you're kind of out of it. I already know what I see. I've seen it. I've done it. It's over. It seems so simple, but I don't know how it got to be so complicated. ▷

So the emphasis is on the "you"—"What YOU see is what YOU see." That's different from the typical interpretation, the idea that everything there is to see is there on the surface and contained in the work, and it's not an illusion referring to anything else. Did you ever paint representational images? Could you make a sketch of me?

No, I couldn't. But that wasn't a problem because my teachers never bothered me in art school. My teachers at Andover were abstract and the philosophy behind the teaching was totally German. The motivations were Joseph Albers on one hand and Hans Hoffmann on the other. You could say of my paintings, they are an amalgam of Albers and Hoffmann.

Andover was pretty defining for me because we had an art history course when I was very young, and part of the course was studio. So two days of the week you're looking at slides, then you go downstairs and you make art. The only requirement was that the first time you make a still life. I made an outline and it wasn't too interesting, then I remembered we had just seen Seurat, so I made a Seurat-like painting in about 20 minutes. That was my requirement and then I was allowed to do what I wanted.

That was my only experience with representational art. As far as I was concerned, I was born in 1936, and to me, in a simple-minded way, representation was over. You had [abstract artists] Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich, and the other side of the coin was semi-representation, Picasso, Miró, and Matisse. And they were all great, but that was it. There was no turning back. It wasn't going the other way.

The simple structure of those black and striped paintings that you made back in 1958 and 1959 led critics to associate you with minimalism. Do you identify with that? What about abstract expressionism?

I'm not a minimalist.

But isn't it amazing that someone can paint a monochrome canvas or parallel stripes and expect not only to be taken seriously but to be considered taking art a step forward? One critic at the time called your Black Paintings "unspeakably boring," but now that sort of formalism is totally accepted as fine art.

Painting the figure drove art for a long time. But if you think about Paleolithic painting there's only one little block that looks like a guy with an animal skin. That's the only so-called figurative element in miles of painting in caves. They weren't interested in the human figure. How do you account for that, that you can have 10,000 years of painting with nobody interested in the human figure?

The most common way of looking at it is that it wasn't about self-expression. It was about observation, and in a way, it was about nature. The most compelling thing to them was what they were going to eat, so you look at that very carefully. But the fact remains, they didn't bother painting pictures of each other.

Do you think about your audience?

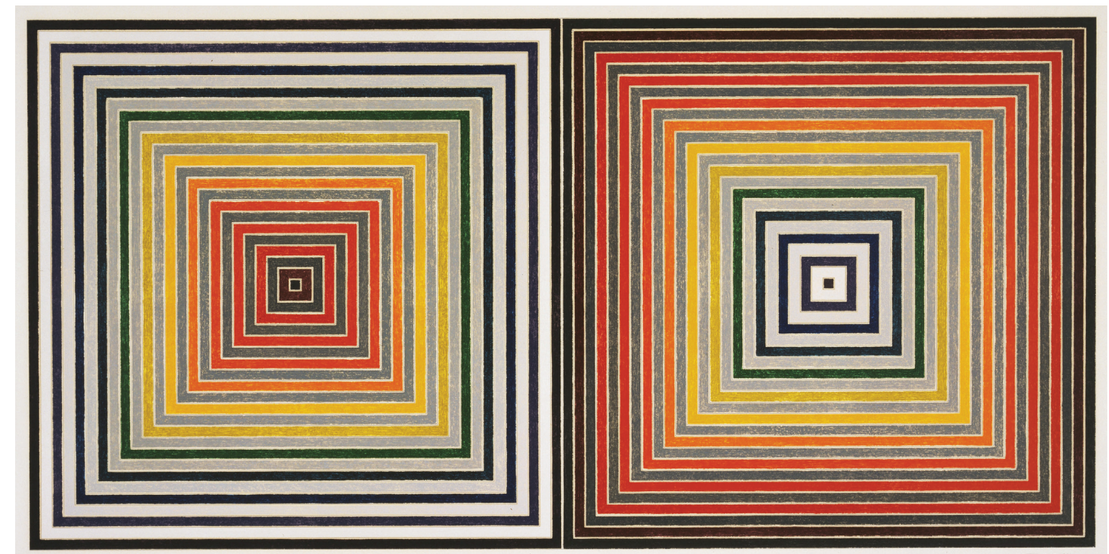
That's just not a problem, because if you're really an artist the audience comes afterward.

Do you think of art as socially ameliorative? Is there a philosophical lesson? Is it going to teach people to see the world differently and improve their situation in some way?

No, that's too deep. People haven't learned that much.

Your work evolved off the wall into reliefs, with wildly painted cones and cylinders and other shapes. It became almost Baroque in its exuberance. This is exactly the opposite of your monochrome striped paintings and rigid geometric patterns. What changed, and what was driving you in that direction?

I think it changed pretty much when it appeared that geometry and attention to surface was kind of limited. *Irregular Polygons* [1965–66] pretty much did it. The space became kind of warped and different things happen, and there was dynamism to the way the parts related to each other. It's a pretty simple idea. There's a very famous Malevich painting [1915] that is basically a black rectangle with a blue triangle inserted into its left side. That's a terrific painting. Once you see the relationship between the triangle and the rectangle you see the force of the penetration and the square's effort kind of repelling it. It was creating a different kind of pictorial tension, what we call with engineering "spring-loaded." That's when you bend something and hold it down, and if you cut one of the pieces—boom—it takes off. The Irregular Polygons had that feeling that the forms were spring-loaded. That seemed a little different from what was going on. ▷



Clockwise from top left: Empress of India, 1965. *Piaski II*, 1973. *Double Gray Scramble*, 1973.

"Once I got started on the idea of notching the canvas, it was a way of focusing on the perimeter, letting that dictate what happens on the interior. [Stella then moved on to geometric-shaped canvases like the ones on top that he called *Irregular Polygons*.] So the outside influences the inside, which gave a way to organize things," says Stella. "In the art of the past, there are a lot of altarpieces with quite dramatically shaped paintings or work shaped by the geometry of the architecture. Actually what they call easel painting and portable painting is a relatively late invention. There is no perimeter for Paleolithic painting. It's all about surface."

Your wall reliefs and painted sculptures operate between painting and sculpture. Is there a difference between how you make a painting and how you make a sculpture, and how people perceive the results?

They are really two different things, there's no arguing about that. But for the artist, be he a painter or a sculptor, one way or another, the surface is what counts. That's the thing that you work on.

With cubism, those are paintings pretty much of sculpture, when you get right down to it. Not that they weren't representational works, but they were distinctly about themselves, the boxiness of architecture and the planar quality of what's going on with the objects. So it becomes a question of how you deal with the surface, and you make a choice of what kind of surface you want to work on and how you want to work on it.

How has your studio practice evolved? When you began you made works totally by hand and by yourself. But you have since worked in many different materials, and worked with assistants and computer-aided design. Why?

You see something you like and you want to try it. You're always searching for things that are lighter and stronger. The advent of carbon fiber is a big deal because you can make and do things a lot easier. For fabrication I've been using digital probably since the mid-'80s. Everything now requires digital. No one will build anything for you unless it's digitized nowadays. We design on the computer, they make the object, and I bring it home and work on it and paint the surface. The newer work for the last five or six years has been about things we could do with rapid prototyping, which can quickly fabricate complicated three-dimensional models in various materials. I made even more complicated pieces casting in metal with Polich [Dick Polich's Tallix foundry, a leader in the field since the late 1960s, is located next door to Stella's studio], but now we can make them not so heavy. Part of the switch was trying to get away from the weight. As you get older you don't have the physical energy to engage in the process you were using, casting in aluminum and then painting it. That was a lot of heavy-duty work.

Do you make all of your works on spec?

Yes. I haven't had a commission that I can remember, except occasional paintings. And those commissions aren't really commissions either because they are based on paintings that are already in the studio. Companies commission them to go in their building.

Right: Cantahar, 1998. *Far right: The Pequod Meets the Albatross*, 1990.

Images: Art Resource, NY.

What's the most interesting or surprising installation you've seen of your work? Do you participate in how collectors install them?

Not too much. We used to go around to collectors and visit their homes, but we don't do that much anymore. You'd have to say the best was [architect] Philip Johnson's underground painting gallery at his Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. [Paintings were hung on walls that moved like pages of a book around a vertical spine.] When I first saw it I thought it was horrible, and now I really like it. Philip was a great patron. He was a kind of adjunct at the Museum of Modern Art, but he bought for himself and he bought everybody, all the generation of the '60s.

Which artists do you really love?

During some panel I was doing in London, someone in the audience asked, what are your three favorite paintings? And I said—it just popped out of my mouth—Roger van der Weyden's *Crucifixion Diptych* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, his *Deposition* in the Prado, and Zurbarán's *Saint Bonaventure* on his bier in the Louvre. There was a stunned silence.

I can see why you would love those works. *The Crucifixion* is abstract and geometric with the figure set against a square red cloth, and *Deposition* has curvilinear contours that are planar but also move in three dimensions.

And the *Bonaventure* is a big diagonal painting with an incredible gold cloth, a mitered hat on his head, and a black death mask. The power of the diagonal is just gorgeous. That was a level I would like to reach one way or another. Probably I would never get there, but at least I knew where I was going. ▷

Exterior view of the Princess of Wales Theater, Toronto, 1994.

Image: Art Resource, NY.

Why do you think your work has held such fascination for so many people in the art world?

It's a generational thing. Things change. Once the abstract expressionists achieved what they achieved and became universally everywhere, we were the next generation in effect. I don't think we were as good as they were, but we weren't boring. The problem is that our generation of abstraction, although some things are okay, didn't have the variety or intensity that you had in the '60s with color field, minimalism, pop art, earth art. It's really a lot for 10 years. The next 10 years were kind of low level, then it bounced back in the '80s with [Julian] Schnabel's generation and [Jean-Michel] Basquiat, [David] Salle, [Francesco] Clemente. They weren't that bad, but I don't think they were really earthshaking. I think Schnabel is the best one, the most physical and painterly.

So your generation is not up to the level of innovation and power of the abstract expressionists?

I think that is pretty clear. But we did pretty well.

How do you situate your work in the history of art, and how do you think about your legacy?

I'm not in the legacy business. I'm in the here and now business. It's the only business there is. I don't care how it fits into art history. I only care that I think it's worth doing, and I have to have some kind of satisfaction that it doesn't look so bad.

How do you think your work will be perceived 20 or 100 years from now?

I don't have a clue.

What would you tell students starting out in MFA programs who want to be artists?

I think it's a problem. I really do. I guess if you want to get an MFA it doesn't mean you want to be an artist. It means you want to be an art teacher or have some ability to support yourself, which I'm not against. But the idea that it's a route to making art, I don't think that's the case. ▷

> “I didn’t want any fantastic success or anything incredible. I WANTED TO BE A PLAYER. And the notion of a player is someone who plays every day.”

Do you like any contemporary artists working today? Do you go to the galleries in Chelsea?

Once in a while, and I browse the magazines. I do like some, but then it turns out they are 50 or 60 years old. Some things catch my eye, mostly sculpture. I think the people who make sculpture do slightly more interesting things. Most of the painting is kind of flat to me. It’s so photo-related or so Photoshop-esque.

What do you think about Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, artists who have created tremendous brands? Do you think their work will be regarded as significant in the long run?

As they say, they do their thing. They fit in and they’re there because that’s what people want. People can’t accept art that’s not successful, so someone has to make a market-satisfying product. Those artists seem to take care of that part of the art world. But it takes a certain amount of imagination to think that the consensus ultimately will be that that’s the high point of our time. It’s easy to say they are like [William-Adolphe] Bouguereau and academic artists whose reputations won’t last. But then again, it will always have value.

Are the astronomical prices today good for the art world?

I don’t think it matters. It happens because that’s what people want. A number of people with money feel the necessity to pay the highest price. Fortunately for a lot of people, they’re always there. There’s always somebody who wants to be the biggest spender!

Do you collect art?

I do. I have a kind of gallery in my living room. I have paintings by Jules Olitski, Frank Owen, and Natvar Bhavsar, an Indian artist who has been in America a long time. I bought a Hans Hoffmann, a pretty big one. I have a couple of Ron Davises. I have a Jack Youngerman and a couple of Walter Darby Bannards in my bedroom.

Any Old Masters?

I have a Jan Sanders van Hemessen, a Dutch painter around 1530. It’s a double portrait of a bride and groom playing backgammon. I saw it in a London auction catalogue and it really interested me because Barbara [Stella’s first wife, art historian Barbara Rose] was supposed to do her thesis on Jan Sanders van Hemessen but she never got around to it. I recognized the name and had seen some of the paintings in museums in Europe. So I bought it and had it restored. It’s a beautiful painting, and it is kind of thrilling to look at—a 16th-century painting in your bedroom.

Let’s talk about your commercial career. You were in your early 20s and already showing with the powerful dealer Leo Castelli.

I was with Leo from 1959 until 1968, and also showed with Larry Rubin, so I had two dealers starting toward the end of the ’60s into the ’80s. Larry started with his own gallery, then became director of Knoedler, so I was showing with Leo and Knoedler well into the ’80s. Once Larry left Knoedler it wasn’t working out, so I went my own way. Now I am with Marianne Boesky, but in between I probably had 20 dealers.

There must have been many dealers anxious to represent you.

That’s really not true. I was not a popular item. It was sort of over for me. And also I didn’t come free. I wouldn’t go with a dealer unless I could get an advance. Dealers are always undercapitalized and they don’t like to lay out a lot of money. I like an advance against sales, which is what I always had. When I was with Leo he used to give me money that helped me make the work. I owed him money for 10 years before our accounts balanced. The sums were not that high and eventually things got sold. You might be behind, but you could catch up.

You’ve kept a lot of your works. Have you held back things that are especially interesting to you?

No, believe me. I’d sell anything and as quickly as possible.

How much do your works sell for now? Your auction record tops $6 million.

Well, they don’t sell for that much. I’m not expensive like most artists. A really major piece, of which we can sell hardly any, would be $400,000 to $600,000. Some of the smaller reliefs would be $200,000 or so, which given the prices today is not that much. At auction they do about the same. The only thing that makes an impression at auction seem to be those striped concentric square paintings. They have a very rabid following.

In the decade from 2002 to 2012 you averaged around 30 group shows a year plus solo shows. How do you manage the logistics while making art?

That’s what I do. It doesn’t take that much brains. You just do it. You have some help … and you have some help you wish you didn’t have! A lot of that activity is people doing shows that I have nothing to do with. They get together shows they want to sell. The secondary market is very active in its own interest, which is not very beneficial for me.

Images: Art Resource, NY.

The Broken Jug, 1999.

Have dealers approached you to do shows in relation to the retrospective?

Yeah, there will be a lot of shows. [Chelsea dealer] Paul Kasmin plans to have a show. I used to show with him and now I don’t, and every 10 minutes he has a Frank Stella show or puts me in a group show. He’s planning a show to coincide with the Whitney. I don’t participate and I make nothing on the resales.

We don’t have the resale right here, what they call “droit de suite” in Europe, which would give artists a percentage of resales.

Don’t remind me. I think it’s a good idea. The usual argument that it only benefits the most successful artists is ridiculous. Because it’s really about respect for the work and not allowing market forces to be absolutely completely dominant and have everything their own way.

Artists still cannot claim the full market value as a tax deduction for gifts of their work to museums and libraries.

That’s Congress for you. They didn’t know what they were doing when they enacted that. Museums told them they were crazy, but they did it anyway, largely because real estate developers would have their cousins and friends make paintings they would put in their developments and charge off “market value” against the expenses for building the houses. In the old days, when artists didn’t make a lot of money even if they were successful, guys like Robert Motherwell would save their best work to give to the museums. That has just evaporated. ▷

The art world today can seem like a "scene," more about parties and prices than about aesthetics and ideas. Is that different from when you were starting out?

It was a smaller scene, but it was a scene nonetheless. I can remember going to an opening at Martha Jackson Gallery and somehow it was all about de Kooning having bought a hat for Ruth Kligman, about how success had overwhelmed the abstract expressionists and he was able to afford a mink hat for his girlfriend! The same thing was true when Bob Rauschenberg wasn't on Front Street anymore. He was up on Broadway and 12th Street and it was unbelievable that he was paying $300 a month in rent. People couldn't stop talking about that either. So there was always a scene, but it was more modest.

What do you think of the art fair phenomenon? Art Basel, Art Basel Miami Beach, the Art Dealers Association Art Show in New York?

I go once in a while owing to circumstance, but I am not a regular by any means. Those temporary setups look like crap, even if it's good art. Why would you want to do that when you could show your work in a gallery, where the idea is complete and respected? Who cares what's at the art fair?

But it's become a way of life. My dealer pays to be in the art fair and puts one of my pieces in it. She should pay me a percentage for allowing her to put my work in the art fair, and the art fair should give me a percentage of the take on admission and the sale of booths and the value they take from the artists. If I got a percentage both ways, like traders do in the stock market, I'd be happy and think fairs were the greatest things on earth. But I don't get anything. Now the art fair is for the benefit of the promoter (organizer), the dealer, and the collector. And it's the same story for the artists all the time. It's an "indirect" benefit for you.

After 55 years, are you still excited about making art?

I don't know how exciting it is, but it's always challenging. They're your ideas and you have to live with them, so if something doesn't seem so good you have to do something about it. That keeps you really busy. You make what you think you should be making, or have ideas that you're working on, but they don't always pan out. The result when you make them is sometimes not so thrilling either. So you have to figure out: How can I improve this or make it at least passable?

Has getting older deeply affected your art?

I don't notice it too much. You just do what you have to do. You have titanium knees and a titanium hip, and a couple of back operations, but that's pretty good. I'm kind of lucky. I used to play tennis, but now I just work on the elliptical machine.

Opposite: BMW painted by Stella in 1976. *This page: Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Ein Shauspiel, 3X,* 2001. *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Maquette,* 1996.

You're something of a car aficionado. Ferrari gave you a Formula 1 car body, and you got a ticket going 105 in upstate New York in 1982. What cars have you owned and what led to your passion for automobiles?

I wasn't into cars at all, but it all started because I designed a painted "art car" for BMW back in the late '70s, and then I got involved in going around to the races. It was more interesting than the art world. I went to Formula 1 and Formula 2. At one time I had a couple of Ferraris. Now I drive a Volkswagen turbo. It's kind of a little pocket rocket, but it doesn't attract too much attention.

You've had thousands of articles written about you. Do you follow the art press?

I go buy *The New York Times* and look to see what's going on. I kind of scan it. But I'm not as likely to keep track so closely. I don't read online and there are things I miss now.

What's the most surprising thing someone has written about you?

I never read anything that surprised me. But my favorite thing was by Robert Coates, who wrote for *The New Yorker.* It was early, it might have been a show at the Modern, and he said how sad it was to see Frank Stella right back where Mondrian was 25 years ago. I never felt so great, to be in the same sentence as Mondrian. I was happy to run back 25 years to get that! "Right back where Mondrian was."

What's something interesting that you have never revealed?

You'd be surprised to know there is nothing very interesting about making abstract painting. When I made a couple of the Black Paintings I knew they were good. It was just a question of how good they were. That was it. It's something like—I don't like to use those sports analogies—I knew I could hit the ball no matter how hard they threw it. So I was going to play the game. I didn't want any fantastic success or anything incredible. I wanted to be a player. And the notion of a player is someone who plays every day. I just wanted to be out there and playing the game, and that's all I cared about. And in that sense I guess I was lucky. I have a level of success, but in the end it doesn't matter very much. The privilege is to be able to play and have the ability. No one could tell me I couldn't play this game. ◆