

Frank Stella

The Fountain

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Frank Stella left his first indelible mark on American art more than thirty years ago. His starkly minimal paintings marched in precise series formation. Their logic, even their necessity, seemed irrefutable. Later, he introduced full range phosphoring color, but there was still a sense of the artist strategically mapping out all meaningful variants. Then, when he started to fabricate popout paintings of honeycomb aluminum and glass glitter, the merchants of reason knew the artist's mind had shifted into a higher gear. Pictorial possibilities were no longer limited, apparently, by any objectifiable structure. Improvisation turned its back on restraint. The artist switched lanes, drove off the track, and, with *The Fountain*, off the map.

Wily, unpredictable, Stella today still has his comprehensible, if not exactly Cartesian reasons for doing work. But now his logic is more hidden. The motivation for each successive work no longer comes from any notion of finite series, but from a contrary way of working that sees images in continuous, if convoluted sequence. It goes something like this: a work generates several images; a couple of these are salvaged for another piece; a third work draws on the prior two and adds new material. Early in this century, Kandinsky worked this way, extracting vignettes from finished work, always with an urgency, a frenzied motion forward. Stella is an equally turbocharged mind, a fireborn muscle that won't quit because once off the track there is always somewhere to go.

The jumbled complexities of *The Fountain* coalesce into a spectral signpost past the longest run of images Stella has produced, now some one hundred thirty-five works dedicated to Melville's *Moby Dick*. This enormous print pulls together seven processes and sixty-one colors, all these dished out on three slabs of industrial strength Kozo paper handmade in Japan for the project. The assembled work measures seven feet seven high by twenty two feet eleven wide, a few feet longer than Pollock's 1943 *Mural*, and just a few feet shy of Picasso's *Guernica*. Every barrier of impossibility and inconvenience seems to have fallen by the wayside in this effort. Crucial at every stage of production have been the hands and heart of Kenneth Tyler, who proposed the project, then assumed a fierce position rather between intrusive Master Printer and patrician patron. The

project's eighteen-months-in-the-making odyssey have given us a world record that will probably stand on the books for some time.

The Fountain's myriad pieces derive not from drawings, but from a full size collage. To construct this preparatory monster, Stella retrieved components of previous etchings. These fragments were schematized, dissected, Xeroxed, enlarged. Since original plates for completed editions were long gone, Stella ordered up remakes of certain eccentrically shaped details, blown-up paraphrases from the *Dome* prints, from *The Symphony*, from earlier prints like the *Circuits* and the *Cones and Pillars*. All these resurface in *The Fountain*. Stella then worked shards of marbleized paper, scraps just laying about the studio, into open crevices, knees and elbows jostling to see what might go where.

As in Stella's recent relief work, a circuitous activity pulls us through every loophole, along every whiplash. This avoidance of central focus, or focus anywhere for that matter, is not crazy-quilt pattern-making; neither is it a revival of Abstract Expressionist all-over surface. What Stella gives us is something like constellations in the night sky: scatterings of large configurations first catch our attention, then a second rank of more faintly perceived marks appear. Both look random at first, but eventually fall into place. To keep complexity under control, Stella positions his intaglio plates to allow crevices of white to show between, a device that amplifies the rugged white lines within woodcut areas. Colored swatches scatter throughout, embracing, embellishing the great black slabs. These heavy black chunks are Stella's most potent image in the collage study. They maintain their dominance in the print.

Throughout *The Fountain* Stella slathers on graphic skeins that derive from, get this, cigar smoke. Stella worked with cinematographer Andrew Dunn and photographer Steven Sloman to make portraits of artist-propelled smoke dissipating in erratic loops and spirals. This in-house science project required six cameras mounted north, south, east, west, top and bottom, all within a black velvet-lined chamber. These gossamer, serpentine ghosts Tyler sent off to a Swedish designer/engraver of financial notes, who worked up computer driven plottings. With the resultant dippy-doodle guilloche patterns, Stella rounds out a

graphic vocabulary that to some Melville fans might suggest billowing fish nets, or flotsam tossed over waves. Now: Abstract artists like Stella might heat up when people tell them what this and that looks like in their compositions, I mean, can you find the windswept drapery of Venus Anadyomene in this print, but, even without a depth probe of *Moby Dick*, we can presume that something of the primal energies, if not the actual elements of a watery event, are before our eyes.

There is a peculiar irony in *The Fountain*: Individual lines lack arty distinction. Outlined shapes are, for all their swirling complexity, equally anonymous. Graphic details— Chinese lattice, common brickwork, computerized patterns don't seem especially revelatory, either. Stella himself refers to such fodder as "everyday material." Yet the constructed whole is as unique as the artist's genetic code. This has always been true of Stella's work. He has never attempted to formulate a signature stroke, finding it more imperative to construct signature compositions. Again, the action abides less in virtuosity than in the collision of competing devices: their tearing at each others' bellies and backsides, their staking out territory within a scene only Stella could have discovered.

Working with, working for, working against, working around the omniscient Kenneth Tyler and crew, the artist opted to print *The Fountain* collage as a woodcut. Tyler rigged up a modified router and dished out an assortment of handtools for carving three oversize blocks. These base units, actually sandwiches of honeycomb plastic, aluminum and mahogany, doubled as woodcut surface and receiving tray for one hundred eight shaped metal plates. Individual intaglio plates were inked following approved samples recorded on a storyboard of Polaroids. Most exotic were several plates inked in multicolor blotches, these to approximate marbled papers in the collage study. Just the meticulous inking, wiping and assembling of one of the three woodblocks made for a full work day. To strike an impression in one shot, the block, its plates and the paper blank were inserted under the five hundred ton power of a press ordinarily used to stamp out sheetmetal parts for cars. (A mechanical-metaphorical extension of a printer's arms and legs, the press's four hydraulic pistons are computer controlled to evenly disperse the requisite pressure.) If time, temperature and humidity conspired against luck, elements stuck to certain plates like dough

baked onto a waffle iron, so tracking every puzzle piece became a team sport.

We're not through yet. After assembling the three great sheets, several screenprinted patches on thin Washi paper were collaged, and diffuse watercolor was sprayed through masks. These sprayed areas softly glow, providing dramatic diversion around the aggressive blacks and whites. Stella's color virtuosity is here entirely in the service of the specially handmade Kozo fiber paper. Paper that takes surface ink as dense as shoe polish. Paper that takes embossing as deep as a license plate. Paper that takes watercolor like a sponge.

Stella's exploitation of retinal color, of layered collage, of tactile surface reminds me a little of Stuart Davis, say his 1938 *Swing Landscape* mural at Indiana University. Like Davis, Stella's colors tend to illicit objects, you know, asphalt black, sun yellow, blood red, Pepto Bismol pink. The effect is visceral, churning, a maelstrom of gritty particles breaking out all over the place. Like Davis, collage is energized into sprawling, brawling cartography, this with a taste for butting dead ends to runaway curves. Any other similarities fall off quickly, then, since Stella's freewheeling tricks are his own, more errant than the cubist-bred abstraction of Davis' generation.

Since WPA mural days, leading American artists have occasionally indulged in turbulence on a grand scale. Not everyone can handle it. One or two compositional clichés, and the ride is over. One of Stella's final moves in proofing *The Fountain*, for example, was to alter the lower left corner so it would not mirror a similar mottled color on the lower right. By jerking out what would have been a framing device, Stella now lets the performance flow right off the deckle edges. There is not a square inch of neutrality or neglect in this vibrant expanse. Stella has poured new meaning into the empty old museum catch-all, "mixed-media."

Philip Larson, 1992



The Fountain

1992

An original sixty-seven color hand-colored woodcut, etching, aquatint, relief, drypoint, printed on three sheets of natural Kozo fiber handmade paper with seven screenprinted natural Gampi fiber handmade paper collage elements. The left sheet is 91" x 125" (231.1 x 317.5 cm); the center sheet is 91" x 122" (231.1 x 309.9 cm); the right sheet is 91" x 45" (231.1 x 114.3 cm). The overlapping three sheets measure 91" x 275 1/4" (231.1 x 700.4 cm). Three woodblocks, each with inlaid intaglio and relief plates were printed separately. The left block (#1) was inlaid with forty-three irregularly shaped plates (seventeen magnesium and twenty-six copper); the center block (#2) was inlaid with fifty-four irregularly shaped plates (eleven magnesium and forty-three copper); and the right block (#3) was inlaid with eight irregularly shaped plates (two magnesium and six copper). Block #1 has three paper collages and one sprayed dye color; Block #2 has four paper collages and four sprayed dye colors; and Block #3 has one sprayed dye color.

Paper made by Fuji Paper Mills Cooperative; woodblock construction and preparation by Kenneth Tyler, Kevin Falco, Yasuyuki Shibata, and Paul Stillpass, assisted by Scott Lewis and Eric Ting; proofing by Falco, Shibata, Tyler, Lewis, Jed Marshall, Robert Meyer, Tom Strianese, and Stillpass; magnesium plate preparation by Tyler and processing by The Swan Engraving Co. and Anthony Kirk; copper plate preparation by Falco and Shibata; processing and proofing by Kirk; proofing of assembled printing plates by Kathy Cho, Falco, Susan Hover, Doug Humes, Kirk, Brian Maxwell, Marshall, Meyer, Shibata, Strianese, and Tyler; screen preparation, proofing, and edition printing by Michael Mueller; edition printing of woodblock and assembled plates by Cho, Falco, Hover, Kirk, Maxwell, Marshall, Meyer, Shibata, and Strianese; preparation and adhering of collage elements by Mueller and Shibata; paper coloring by Tyler.



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Right:
Frank Stella spraying color dye. (March 1992).



Below:
Stella working on collage studies. (October 1989).



Above:
Stella making changes on early proof with
Kenneth Tyler assisting. (January 1992).

Left:
Kevin Falco (left) and Yasuyuki Shibata
(right) positioning inked plates onto large
woodblock. (March 1992).



Above from left to right:
Susan Hover, Brian Maxwell, Kathy Cho, and
Tony Kirk inking intaglio plates (September 1992).

Right:
Impression being pulled. (Left to right:
Kenneth Tyler, Jed Marshall, Yasuyuki Shibata,
Kevin Falco, Tony Kirk, and Tom Strianese.
March 1992).

