

**Great Works: ...an den Ufern der Aar (Felder) (1998)
by Frank Stella**



Courtesy of FreedmanArt

Private collection
Michael Glover
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Is it a crooning junkyard angel of the kind that Bob Dylan once praised in "From a Buick 6"? The mood of this bruising sculpture by Frank Stella is one of explosive visual excess, from its bucking, roller-coasterish shapeliness to its blaring, fruity tones.

The whole thing looks like a dangerously unauthorised roadside device of colour and energetic motion, carefully primed to blow us away. Can there be such a thing as sweet and sensual fruitfulness fashioned, at least in part, from offcuts of metal? Well yes, take a look at this. You could call it organic in impulse – the way it slops and folds over itself seems to ape the uncontrollable effusiveness of nature to some degree.

What shocks us in part is the fact that it is a sculpture at all – it looks like an abstract painting created under the influence of, say, free-form jazz. Surely there is too much deft, in-and-out intricacy for it to be a sculpture. And yet it is a sculpture, hanging from a wall like some kind of terrible, nervy, indomitable excrescence. We wonder how much longer it will be happy to hold to that wall. Every last fold and arching fling seems to be itching to break free of its peskily restraining backboard.

This a kind of straitjacketing of anarchy, the bottling of a tremendous howl. We see it exactly as it is, but it seems to longing to be something else, equally gestural, but different. Its form feels restlessly, bit-champingly provisional, and it will come as no surprise at all for you to be told that the piece is one of an entire series of somewhat similar desperately outflinging gestural pieces.

Yes, Stella is a no-holds-barred man. His fingers are always snapping. He is always tapping his foot to some driving internal rhythm that he just must bring across before he dies in the attempt. He is forever testing the limits, making it new in the way that American writers made it new in the 1920s.

The beginnings felt much more mutedly cerebral though. In the early 1960s, for example, he seemed to be measuring himself up against the achievements of Abstract Expressionism and consciously wondering how he might beg to differ, and even testing the limits of our patience as spectators, asking us to consider how little might be required to make a painting which has clout and authenticity – overlay an entire surface with black paint, and then introduce across that surface some black chevrons edged with orange? Or make a painting that is hexagonal in shape, and paint on it regularly spaced lines, leaving a hexagonal hole at its centre? Then he took off into colour and irregularity of shape, and began to build out from the wall.

Finally, the sculptures got so big and exuberantly complicated – testicular, tentacular – that you began to wonder how any wall could ever hold them. And yet the yearning to go even bigger still does not abate. Is this hubris? It feels more like fun, derring-do, that wish to shout a little louder in order to prove that the man on the other side of the canyon will still wave back.

Stella believes in abstraction with a rare and all-consuming passion. In his view, it has near limitless potential. He thinks that figuration has ruled the roost for too long, that it simply does not allow enough scope for inventiveness. But there is abstraction and abstraction. This is a far cry from the pared-back, geometric severity and austerity of his earlier years. This kind of abstraction puts us in mind of the wildness of Kandinsky, the scatter-spray of Malevich.

With that comes another issue though. Has this kind of abstraction to do with ideas of the spiritual? Are we supposed to see behind what we have here some kind of evidence of superhuman energies at work in the universe? Is this some kind of manifestation of the force that through the green fuse drives the flower – to quote a line from Dylan Thomas? No. According to Stella, that would be so much guff.

Stella is a materialist – or perhaps, putting it slightly differently, and aligning him with the minimalist called Carl Andre, you might call him a matterist. He believes in the glory of the expressive potential of materials, and the capacity of mere humans to manipulate them. You need no more than that. Oh yes, and then there is the endless fight with those materials to prove who in the end is the master.

About the artist: Frank Stella

Frank Stella, born in 1936, is a second-generation Sicilian-American painter, sculptor and collagist, who was born in Malden, Massachusetts, studied at the Phillips Academy in Andover, and then at Princeton under William C Seitz and Stephen Greene. Since 1958, he has lived and worked in New York City. He maintains two studios, one in New York City, and a second – a huge, aircraft-hangar-like space upstate – that endeavours to keep pace with his sculptural ambitions.