

Beyond Paintbrush Boundaries: Imagining Structures in 3-D

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Librado Romero/The New York Times

Frank Stella's "Severinda" (1995), mixed media on Fiberglass, is part of "Frank Stella: Painting Into Architecture," at the Met.

Perhaps Frank Stella should have quit when he was ahead. For some people that was as far back as the mid-1970s, when he began making a succession of increasingly colorful and ornate aluminum reliefs. They were often considered artistic apostasy, blatant betrayals of his ascetic striped paintings of the 1960s, which established his reputation as a wunderkind and premier New York artist, and he became one of the cornerstones of Minimalism.

For others, myself included, the cutoff point is less about time than space. The more fully in the round Mr. Stella works, the weaker his art. Most of his painted aluminum reliefs are amazing for their brash beauty and the witty, worldly way they play with the protocols of painting and collage in three dimensions. But, however bulky, these pieces still need the wall as a visual and conceptual support. When Mr. Stella moves to free-standing sculpture and forms of Frank Gehry-esque architecture, his efforts tend to become conventional, frivolous and emotionally hollow.

This is all too apparent in "Frank Stella: Painting Into Architecture," a small, insufficient exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that spans a 43-year evolution with 25 paintings, reliefs, drawings, architectural models and sculptures enlarged from these models. The problems are further underscored by a display on the Met's open-air roof garden, where two more of Mr. Stella's architectural models are joined by two large sculptures that are little more than mildly Stella-esque plop art.

Crammed into a single large gallery downstairs, "Painting Into Architecture" forms a kind of obstacle course. It skips across Mr. Stella's progress from two to three dimensions, touching down here and there. The earliest work is "Marrakech," a flat, square Op Arty canvas in pink-and-yellow fluorescent stripes from 1964. "Jarmolince III" (1973), a shaped collage relief from Mr. Stella's Polish Village series, is one of his first departures from flatness. Inspired by the elaborately constructed Polish synagogues that were largely destroyed during World War II, the works in this series are made of wood, not canvas; their intermittent stripes are indented or popped forward, a device that Mr. Stella has applied liberally in his architectural designs, none of which have been built. In the case of "Jarmolince III" these tactile stripes converge along a central spine that, seen from a certain angle, suggests the looming corner of a building.

The show then leaps to 1990 and a beautiful white-and-black wall relief titled "The Dart (D-15) 1X" that echoes the severity of Mr. Stella's early stripe paintings but with flamboyant, splayed forms. Then comes the dreadful "Severinda" from 1995, a sinuous, curving two-sided Fiberglas wall printed and engraved with bright, densely layered computer-derived motifs. It looks like a graveyard for failed ideas. Working with the computer seems to have lured Mr. Stella back to relatively flat surfaces with consistently bad results.

From here it is on to the models and sculptures. "The Broken Jug" is a nearly 12-foot-high wood sculpture based on a model for a curvilinear metal band shell, 33 feet high, that when completed will be the first Stella project to be built. Even larger is "The Ship," a 20-foot-high Fiberglas and carbon-fiber elevated sculpture that is labeled as a "full-sized portion of a monumental structure." It and a similarly large form on the museum's roof, titled "Chinese Pavilion," might be sculptures from the 1960s by Tony Smith, another artist-architect and early Minimalist.

It is not clear how these perforated, latticelike structures would accommodate people, first of all because there is not much to walk on. A small model for a guest house using the complete structure of "The Ship" incorporates floor panels of varied angles and heights that might have been inspired by plate tectonics. Any budget to build it should include a lavish allotment for liability insurance.

These structures are not so much architecture, or potential architecture, as conservative forms of installation art or marginally habitable sculpture, as in the case of models for a chapel and another for a gatehouse dominated by big pinwheeling spirals. They feel blank and demure when compared with the frontal attack and visual overload frequent to Mr. Stella's wall pieces. The reliefs operate at busy intersections of pictorial, sculptural, industrial and digital ideas and processes. Mr. Stella's ideas about architecture seem lost in the middle of nowhere.

In the catalog's essay the critic Paul Goldberger acknowledges Mr. Stella's disinterest in architectural functionality or urban planning. Mr. Stella, Mr. Goldberger writes, wants to make "special structures" that function as "exclamation points within the urban fabric." Artists have been adding exclamation points to the tattered urban fabric for years, as several examples found within the comfy confines of Battery Park City and elsewhere attest. Some are more successful than others, but they are all decorative pleasantries that do little to improve urban life.

Mr. Stella began his career as an impassioned painter who was also a cerebral, driven problem solver. Solving his first problem — banishing spatial illusion from painting — has resulted in a career spent wandering in what might be called the wilderness of real space. He has done extraordinarily well there, but he remains in a profound sense a painter, an expatriate whose deepest thoughts concern his country of origin. This doesn't rule out a deep involvement with architecture, but it will require more than exclamation points.

"Frank Stella: Painting Into Architecture" runs through July 29 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street, (212) 535-7710, metmuseum.org. "Frank Stella on the Roof" runs through Oct. 28 at the same location.

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