Betting the Farm on his Art: A Salute to Frank Stella by a Longtime Collaborator / artcritical
by Kenneth Tyler

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This article is adapted from remarks delivered at the Lifetime Achievement Award bestowed on Frank Stella by the International Sculpture Center at their New York gala in April 2011.

Frank Stella, The Fountain, 1992. Color woodcut, etching, aquatint, relief, drypoint, screenprint, collage, printed from three woodblocks, 7-1/2 x 23 feet. Collection of the National Gallery of Australia

As Plato said, “Because we are the playthings of the Gods, playing is our most serious activity.”

Frank Stella and I have certainly had our share of fun and excitement in our many projects together. Our collaborations have spanned 35 years and resulted in nearly 400 editions of prints, multiples, monotypes and monoprints, created in my California and New York workshops. Plus we made original tapestries in France and Australia, editions of silk scarves in Italy and Korea, editions of ceramic plates in Korea, experimental dress designs in Hong Kong, a transfer of his graph paper design to a model for BMW’s 1976 Le Mans race car, a prototype paper pop-up sculpture with a leading paper engineer in Chicago, engraving designs for his “smoke ring” images produced by Tumba Bruk in Sweden, and numerous paper maquettes and honeycomb metal panels for reliefs made in Arizona and Connecticut.

My observation from collaborating with Frank is that he is all about making his art and getting the creative task at hand completed as quickly as possible – his inspiration still in high-gear – and then spending countless hours revising and working on the details. Of course, in a workshop environment this can be difficult, since most processes and
techniques are labor intensive and time consuming. Over the years Frank got somewhat used to this and adapted less impetuous behavior, but not entirely without occasional colorful outbursts amid clouds of cigar smoke.

Frank could be keenly interested in new technology at times. Once introduced to new ideas, he could quickly single out what he wanted to use. Then, when he became impatient with the time it would take to select and use the parts of it that he liked, he would reach out for outside expertise. This ability to add new materials and techniques to his art is of great value for Frank, as well as an expensive one. I have always admired him for his willingness to invest—to bet the farm so to speak—on his art making.

Frank Stella, right, and Kenneth Tyler at work on a print. Courtesy of Kenneth Tyler

Frank has always been a generous collaborator, giving praise whenever a task was well done. He also shared his enthusiasm for techniques with other artists. An example is when Frank invited his friend, Anthony Caro (who at the time was working at my workshop) to the foundry where he was working, to show Tony the sand castings used in his large sculptures.
Frank’s focus is always on the form, not the process that makes it. He delegates the process part to you to engineer while he finds ways to proceed in making his art. Everyone therefore has a vested interest in the outcome. It’s a setup from the beginning and one you don’t want to fail at. The success rate for working with a diverse group of tradesmen in making large-scale sculpture can be slim, especially if you can’t motivate the workers and communicate your ideas. I have always marveled at Frank’s style of collaboration. It runs the gauntlet of saying very little, only some body language and occasional quips of humor, to giving a dissertation on the subject or task at hand.

Joan Mitchell commented to me in 1992, when Tyler Graphics was having a Mitchell/Stella print exhibition at our gallery, that I evidently enjoyed collaborating with Frank because he was a hands-on guy like me, a guy who likes “stuff.” “Stuff” for Joan was technology and machines, the very things she did not indulge in. And here we have part of the answer as to why some collaborations are more complicated than others—involvement with “stuff.”

Observing Frank working in various shops and studios, I saw him embracing new ways to make his sculptural work since the 70s: from aerospace honeycomb panels in metal and fiber, formed metal, poured metal and sand casting, to 3D additive technology for forming shapes from computer designs. He uses his handmade elements such as bent tubing and fiber sheets, along with new materials and techniques, to produce exciting abstract forms, painted and unpainted. The new forms always have the “Stella look,” no matter how many state-of-the-art materials or technologies are used. It is of no surprise that he is adding advanced three-dimensional printing from digital designs to create his new sculptures, since he has been adding new “stuff” to his sculptures for some time.

This is a typical Frank dichotomy: he says he has no interest in technology and yet he seeks out and uses new resources and often times futuristic know-how. He definitely shows a natural affinity for the cutting-edge.

He also has a keen eye and a gift for educating. For example, on the Colbert Report on TV last year, Frank made a brief guest appearance in an art skit involving a photo portrait of Colbert, worked on by his other guest artists. When Colbert asked if he thought the revised portrait was “art,” Frank succinctly said, “If you want to look for art, you can find it.” Then he disappeared, like Houdini.

This is, I think, the serendipitous and open-minded way Frank finds many of his images. With a Melville-like appreciation of high and low, squalid and pristine, silly and serious, it is no wonder why “stuff” from so many sources makes Stella’s studio a place for alchemy. A rusted hulk of steel, the left over armature of a foundry casting, or a touristic Brazilian twisty beach hat can all become sculpture with profound grace and impact.

We can only speculate, given more resources and materials to discover, how much further Frank will push his art. We are fortunate to have this titan, uninterrupted in his lifelong art-making endeavors, always surprising us with his intellect, dynamism and invention.