

IN *Retrospect*

A new career retrospective on New York-based **Frank Stella** at the **Whitney Museum** brings the iconoclastic artist's output—and its cultural impact—into full view.

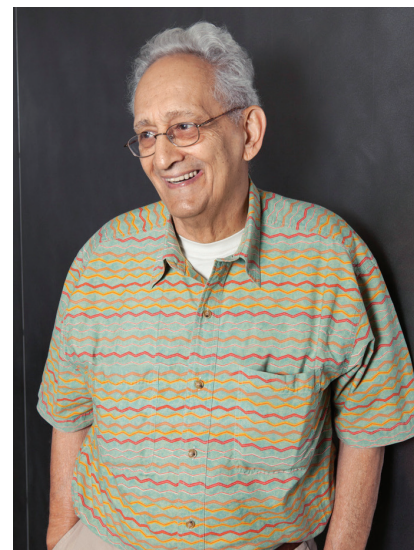
By Sahar Khan

Frank Stella is not one for introspection. The 79-year-old artist deflects questions about the significance of the Whitney Museum of American Art's presentation of his career to date with the disinterestedness of a teenage boy wishing to flee back to his video games, or in Stella's case, his art.

"There's really no time for reflection," he says. "I mean, I'm working. It's just the usual stuff." He's speaking by phone from his studio in Rock Tavern, N.Y., a 40,000-square-foot space where he crafts large-scale sculptures like the *Scarlati Kirkpatrick* series, a collection of industrial-esque works that combine 3-D printed, parti-colored resin twisted within steel tubing.

Not that his reticence should be interpreted as artistic opaqueness. He's the man whose quip "What you see is what you see" was a decree that painting be seen as a creation of materiality, not a gesture of symbolism. In 1958, a 23-year-old Stella moved to New York and went up against the popularity of abstract expressionism with his coolly distant *Black Paintings* series, an acclaimed collection of canvases topped with right-angled horizontal and vertical stripes. The style, anathema to abstract

GLOBAL REACH
From top left: "Grajau I," named after the town in Brazil, is one of several artworks that Stella christened after international cities; Frank Stella.



expressionism's gestural brushwork and existential angst, revealed Stella's thought process: linear, clean and, perhaps as a result, unsentimental.

What about opening-night expectations of the new exhibit? "I'm sure I'll be happy that it's over," says Stella, who lives in Greenwich Village, referring to the six

months he's spent working on the show. The exhibition is the Whitney's inaugural retrospective at its new digs in the Meatpacking District. More than 120 works represent the artist's lengthy career, spanning from 1965's trailblazing *Irregular Polygons* series to present-day sculptures. A show of this scale requires a space to match, and the museum's entire fifth floor, an 18,000-square-foot area, is allotted to Stella.

"I like the building," he says. "The whole thing is really kind of great, and it's very generous and it has a good feel. On the other hand, it's tough because it's a pretty big scale." Luckily, his friend—and director of the Whitney—Adam D. Weinberg took a departure from his regular role to co-curate Stella's show.

Stella's consistent reinvention lends a clue to his continued popularity. In the '70s, the leader of minimalism abandoned sparseness for more visual depth. Though he still worked within a linear framework, he incorporated softer shapes and fiery colors in his paintings and added printmaking to his oeuvre. From the '80s onward, Stella again deviated from prior styles and media, tackling sculpture and taking a maximalist approach with monumentally sized pieces.

"It's the interest that's interesting," says Stella on his enduring appeal. What keeps him going, he says with a laugh, is "paying the bills like everybody else." Since he gamely deploys self-deprecation to avoid reminiscing, perhaps he can share future goals?

"The goal is improvement, to make things better or realize it in a better way," says Stella. He continues with a thought that seems to hint at the key to his success: "The goal is just specific to whatever you're working on at the time." *Through Feb. 7, 99 Gansevoort St., whitney.org*