The Dutch Savannah

Quality in art is always in jeopardy; often it is effectively neutralized. In its place, excitement becomes everything. No artist ever perceived quality without experiencing doubt, but all artists experience unattended, unqualified excitement (plates 25, 26). This is why and how art endures. The sparked realization of creative effort will always drive art. The most obvious and difficult truth the artist reveals to the viewer is that the latter is, in fact, after the fact. Although it is clear that the exclusion is only momentary, it is significant. The viewer is shut out for an instant in order to receive a surprise, the gift of participation without consequence.

The viewer of art becomes part of an audience for already existing pictorial drama. The modification and qualification of that pictorial drama by the experience of its audience, which its creator, or creators, are now part of, cannot affect it or account for its meaning with any certainty, in spite of what those who do not make it think. The collective experience of the audience is really limited to fantasizing, perhaps hoping to affect subsequent dramas; but whenever the audience pictures itself as an active, affecting participant, it risks unraveling itself. It induces a circumstance in which it has to abandon its privileged role as viewer to undertake an initiatory role as creator, one in which it must act rather than speculate, re-act rather than spectate.

This means that there is an inviolable autonomy to art which offers its creators a sensation so irresistible, so desirable, and so exciting that it assumes the character of instinct, as if it were something guaranteed by genetic imprint. The sensation is one that the artist experiences as the first and only necessary viewer; it occurs in the unrecoverable moment when the artist looks at what he has made and sees it as alive. This assertion will no doubt be dismissed as a delusion; but remember that it is the mechanism of art that is being described here, and this mechanism successfully accounts for what exists and what endures.

If the quality of art never threatens its existence, what are we worried about? If vitality is the only necessary ingredient for art, bad or even meretricious art will never imperil pictorial life. Where there's life, there's art. Furthermore, observation shows that ultimate issues do not engage us in the way that particular, essentially picayune issues do; for example, the mismanagement of the planet and the threat of a nuclear holocaust do not move us in the same way that the quality-of-life issues do. We want steak on the table and masterpieces in the museums. In these matters we believe that effort and care make a difference, and that their application can influence the outcome.

Faced with the present predicament in painting, we believe it is important to declare ourselves, to take a stand, to make an effort to do something about the situation. The only serious worry we entertain is not so much about the ultimate success of our efforts, but about the effects of our efforts on others. In effect, we worry that our success might preclude or mask other viable possibilities, that our successors might be confounded or intimidated. But this is probably as fatuous as it is unlikely. De Kooning's genius (fig. 42) did not discourage me from painting black enamel stripes (fig. 43), and my success as a minimalist did not deter Joseph Kosuth from painting with a typewriter on a billboard (fig. 44). Success perpetually skimmed from the top exerts in the end little influence on the sediment of invention that lies below, about to be loosened by the next generation's creative surge.

argues that the joy of creativity and that created excludes (invariably the after) interaction w/ audience . . . trick

Figure 42 WILLEM DE KOONING
Suburb in Havana (1958)
Oil on canvas, 80 × 70 in.
Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Lee V. Eastman

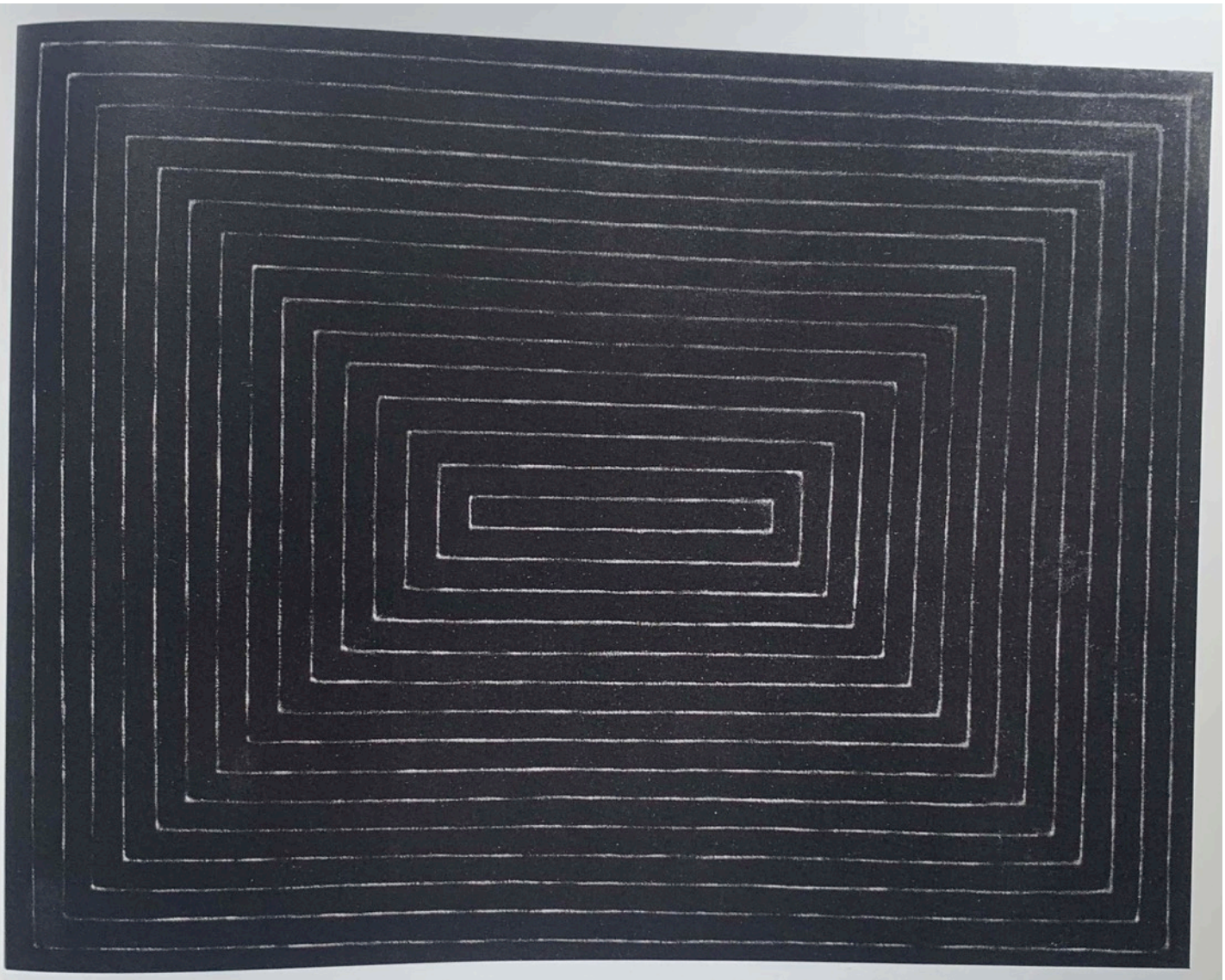


Figure 43 FRANK STELLA
Tomlinson Court Park II (1959)
Black enamel on canvas, 84 × 109 in.
Collection: Robert A. Rowan, Pasadena, California

Figure 44 JOSEPH KOSUTH
The Seventh Investigation (Art as Idea as Idea) Proposition One (Context), Part B (1970)
Billboard, Chinatown, New York
Photograph courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

My insistent defense of abstraction must seem by now to be somewhat less than disinterested. This may be true; but it is also true that the general, public perception of abstraction, even when it is sympathetic and informed, is a limited one, and part of my effort here is aimed at expanding that view, in the hope that the audience will relax and enjoy painting for something like what it really is for the people who make it. For me, speculating about abstraction serves the purpose of explaining contradictory feelings. It explains why I love and embrace abstraction on a practical, performing level, yet remain wary of it on a theoretical level. These contradictory feelings do not create a conflict for me; that is, I do not experience any special anxiety because I am trying to make abstract painting. I do not have a secret desire to put Donald Duck or naked women in my paintings, although I know they harbor a secret desire to be there. Evidently, part of the character-building quality of abstraction resides in holding the line.

Similarly, I have no difficulty appreciating (and, up to a point, understanding) the great abstract painting of modernism's past, the painting of Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, but I do have trouble with their dicta, their pleadings, their impassioned defense of abstraction. My feeling is that these reasons, these theoretical underpinnings of theosophy and antimaterialism, have done abstract painting a disservice which has contributed to its present-day plight.

There is nothing wrong with the antimaterialist ideal that abstraction was born with. In practice, the paintings it produced were strong. But there is a fear that the notions informing and supporting that ideal contribute on occasion to disheartening extremes which become hard to overcome, such as those manifested in Malevich's *Red Riders* (fig. 45) and Kandinsky's *Sky Blue* (fig. 46). When we see paintings such as these which are very peculiar and difficult to explain, there is a tendency to dismiss them as crackpot art, art made by artists with specialized, deservedly unfashionable beliefs. It becomes difficult to gauge who is leading whom. Is theosophy making abstraction trivial, or is the spiritual impulse being caricatured by abstraction?

It is hard to judge if my feelings about the origins of abstraction, nurtured by Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich, represent anything more than a prejudice against Northern spiritualism bound to a preference for what Moravia calls Mediterranean fatalism. When I think of what is wrong with painting, one painting, Paulus Potter's *Young Bull* (1647; plate 27), trots confidently into the ring. This is a wonderful, appealing painting, but it is too abstract, too thin; essentially it lacks a dimension, or even two. Compared to Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saint Paul* (1600–01; plate 28), the pictorial space of Potter's *Young Bull* ends at a horizon line backed up against the priming. This painting is always paint-film deep; the illusion is never deeper than the glazes.

To put it simply, as present as the bull may be, as much as we may want to touch him to see if he is as real as he looks, we never feel that we can walk around him, that we can get into the painting, the way we are sure we can move around St. Paul's horse and look into the eyes experiencing conversion. In the same way that he fails to project the spatial roundness and fullness of Caravaggio's pictorial world, Potter also fails to project an imaginative largeness, actually a kind of an imaginative inclusiveness. The viewer will always be an observer here, never an involved participant, so much so that this successful effort at establishing a barrier has the effect of reducing the depicted subjects to the status of laboratory animals—gilded rats in a glass cage—an image which implies that Potter's precision helped to create the distance abstraction now finds so hard to shorten. Furthermore, the viewer as observer rather than participant brings with him a new awareness of pictorial limits. Potter's way of seeing produces an inevitable emphasis on edge—the cropped

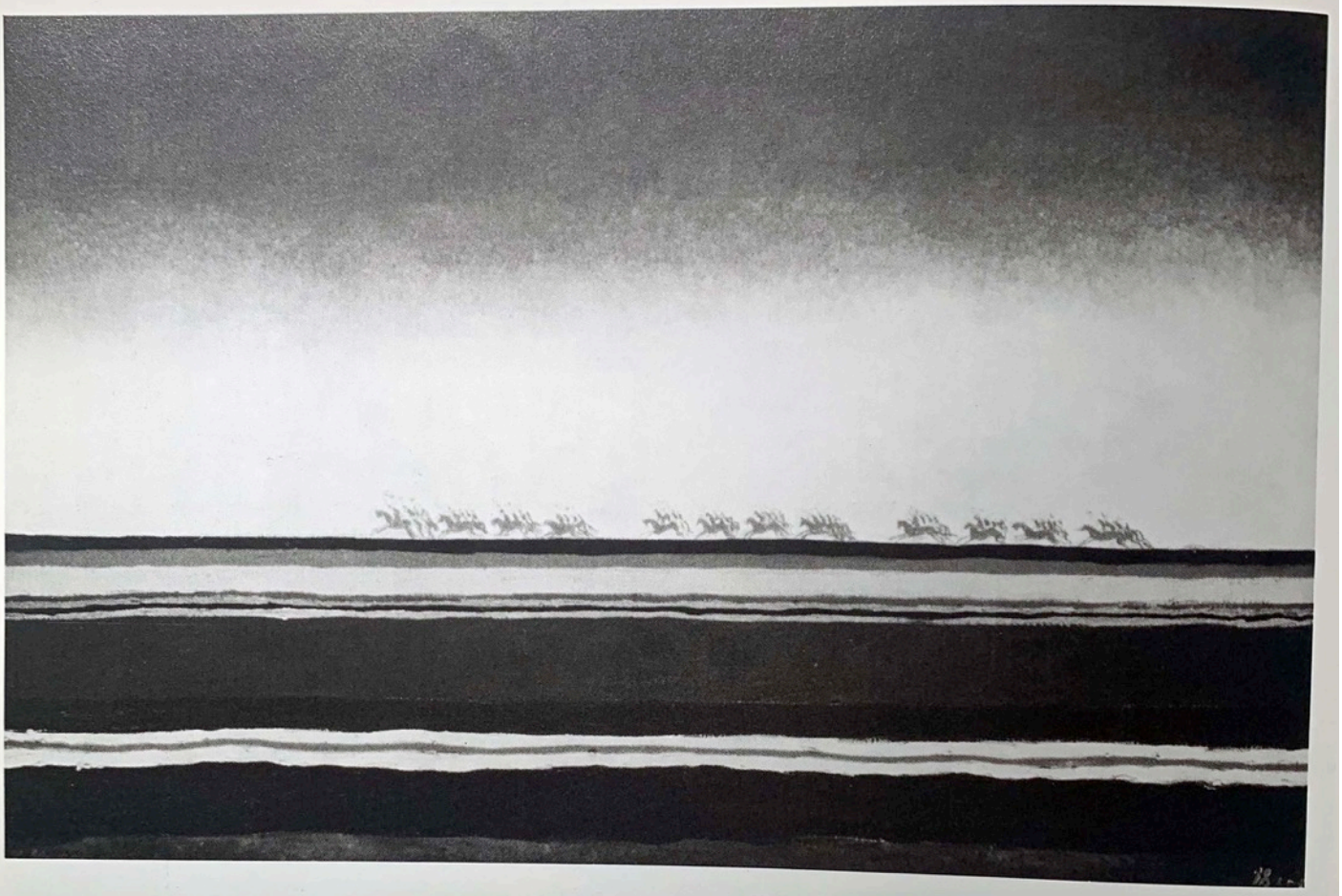


Figure 45 KASIMIR MALEVICH
Red Riders (1928)
Oil on canvas, 35 13/16 × 55 1/8 in.
Ministry of Culture, Moscow

Figure 46 WASSILY KANDINSKY
Sky Blue (1940)
Oil on canvas, 100 × 73 in.
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

edges of a piece or section of the real world, edges that are harmful to the development of an expansive pictorial sensibility, edges that are fortuitously missing from Caravaggio's theatrical, rounded space.

The power of the *Young Bull* is contained in his pictorial presence. There is no question in front of this painting of avoiding the issue of bullhood, as there is no hope of sidestepping the horseness in Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saint Paul*. Horse and bull make a strong visual impression. But only one of these paintings, Potter's *Young Bull,* has served as a model, as a kind of inspiration, for the development of abstract painting. The particularized, inclusive, and diversely focused realism of Potter became Mondrian's patrimony, and indirectly that of Kandinsky and Malevich as well. This realism appealed to them in a way that the generalized, exclusive, and singly focused naturalism of Caravaggio did not. Modernism's preference for Potter's realism represents something more than an inevitable prejudice for barbarian animism over Greco-Roman stability, for nascent, observational science over weary, antique pedantry.

At first it may seem odd to insist on realist painting as a model for abstraction, but as we look deeper it becomes easier. I suggest that abstraction has its roots mainly in the northern, realist, landscape tradition, and that the classical, Mediterranean, figurative antecedents of Western painting have not really taken hold in abstraction. Basically, the argument is that we have access to the dirt supporting Potter's bull, but we have lost touch with the man under Caravaggio's horse. It may be that this is not so much a loss as it is an opportunity, or even a mandate for increasing the breadth of sources and therefore the productivity of abstraction. In any event it is clear that Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich sensed the penetrating power of the new observation, the focused realism of the north. It was a model for an intensity they hoped to turn against realism, against materialism. The thin, sharp, clear presence of Potter's cropped panorama represents a material intensity which they hoped to subvert and turn to their own use, perhaps capitalizing on the abstract quality suggested by its magnified surfaces. The fathers of modern abstraction made an opportune choice: they saw a future for abstraction growing from the surface of observed realism rather than out of the invention of artificial naturalism. They preferred the illuminating gift of transparent glazes to the material revelations of chiaroscuro's high contrast.

By prizing Potter over Caravaggio, Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich finally put nineteenth-century French painting and its source, Italian Renaissance painting, to rest. In the process they created fundamental distinctions in composition and psychology which essentially define contemporary abstraction and clearly underscore its developmental problems. A straightforward way to see the consequences of abstraction's instinctive preference for seventeenth-century realism is to take a look at Potter's *Young Bull* between the extremes of the beginnings and what many now see as the end—between Lascaux and the Bronx, between the blow pipe and the spray can.

One thing that ties Paulus Potter's *Young Bull* to the animation of Lascaux (plate 29) and the graffiti of New York (plate 30) is a sense of forced interval, a sense of disjointed, awkward pictorial space surrounding the markings and figures. Basically, in order to sustain any aesthetic effect, all three of these examples of painting depend on a generous reading of the art of the childlike, the disturbed, and the naive. That is, they all favor an art with a primitive bias. Nonetheless, the spatial interval described here makes an aesthetic mark which is so strong that it raises itself far above the concerns about its origins. It makes us notice and marvel at the effect. It is this effect of unexpected spatial interval and displacement which allows Paulus Potter's *Young Bull* to compete so well with Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saint Paul*. On the face of it, Caravaggio's humanist drama should blow away Potter's contrived Polaroid. But this is not what has happened, and I submit that it is Potter's display of magical intervals rather than his creation of acute, realistic presence which

Plate 25 DOSSO DOSSI
Jupiter, Mercury, and Venus (c. 1530)
Oil on canvas, 44 1/16 × 59 1/16 in.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

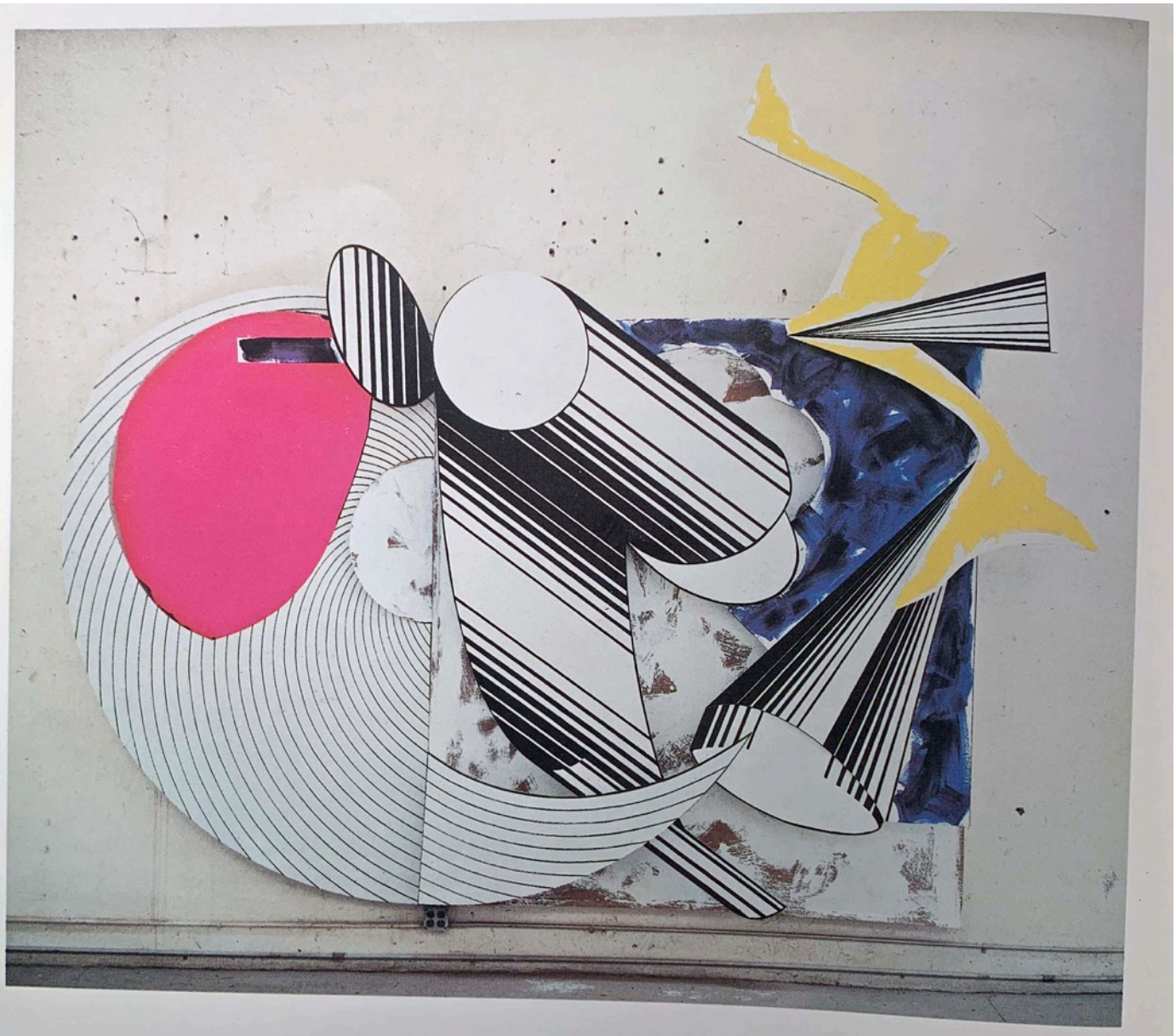


Plate 26 FRANK STELLA
Diavolozoppo (1984)
Oil, urethane enamel, fluorescent alkyd, acrylic, and printing ink on canvas, etched magnesium, aluminum, and fiberglass, 139⅛ × 169¾ × 16⅛ in.
Collection: Frank Stella

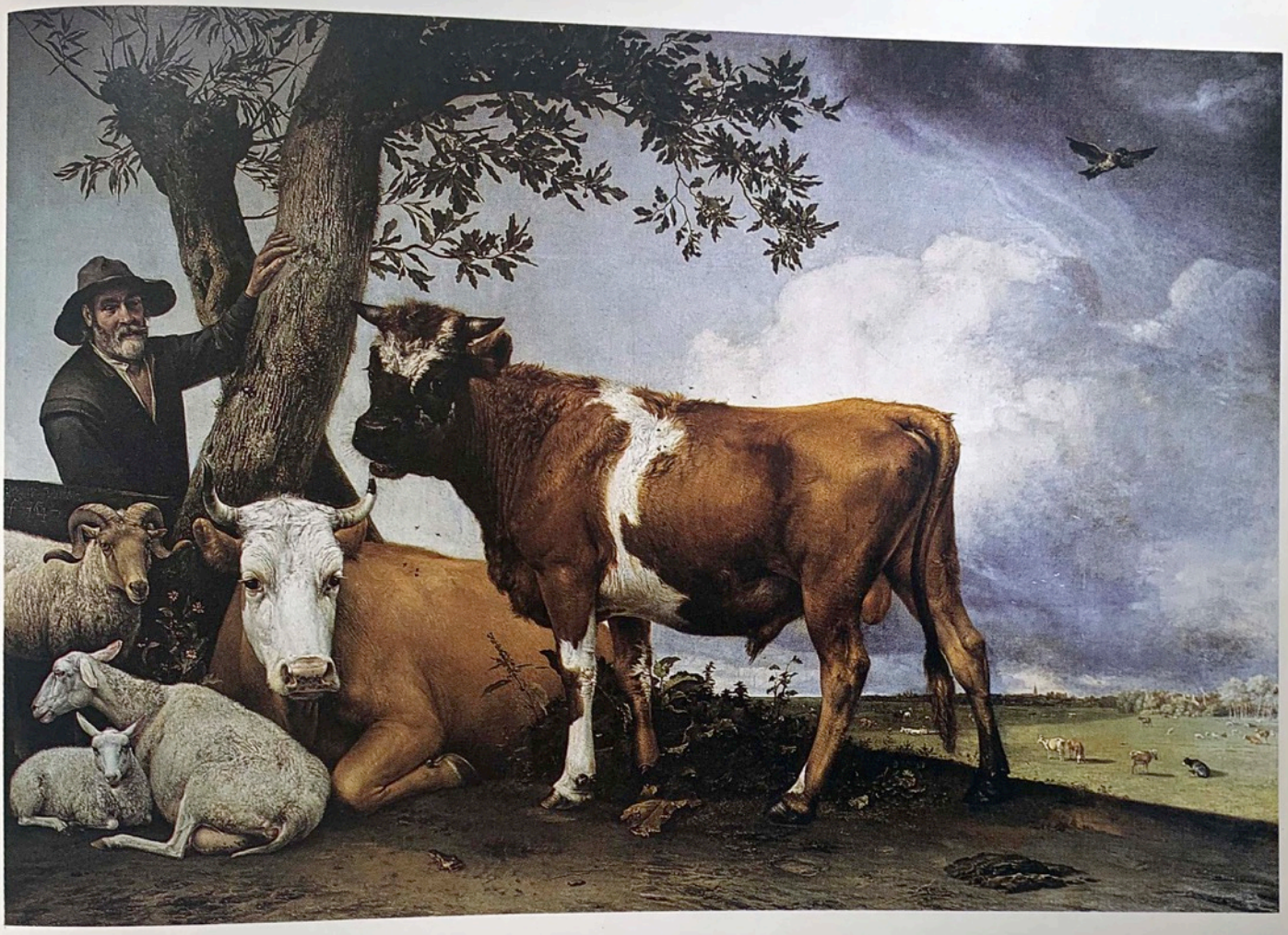


Plate 27 PAULUS POTTER
The Young Bull (1647)
Oil on canvas, 7 ft. 9 in. × 11 ft. 1 in.
Mauritshuis, The Hague

Plate 28 CARAVAGGIO
The Conversion of Saint Paul (1600–01)
Oil on canvas, 90½ × 70 in.
Church of S. Maria del Popolo, Rome

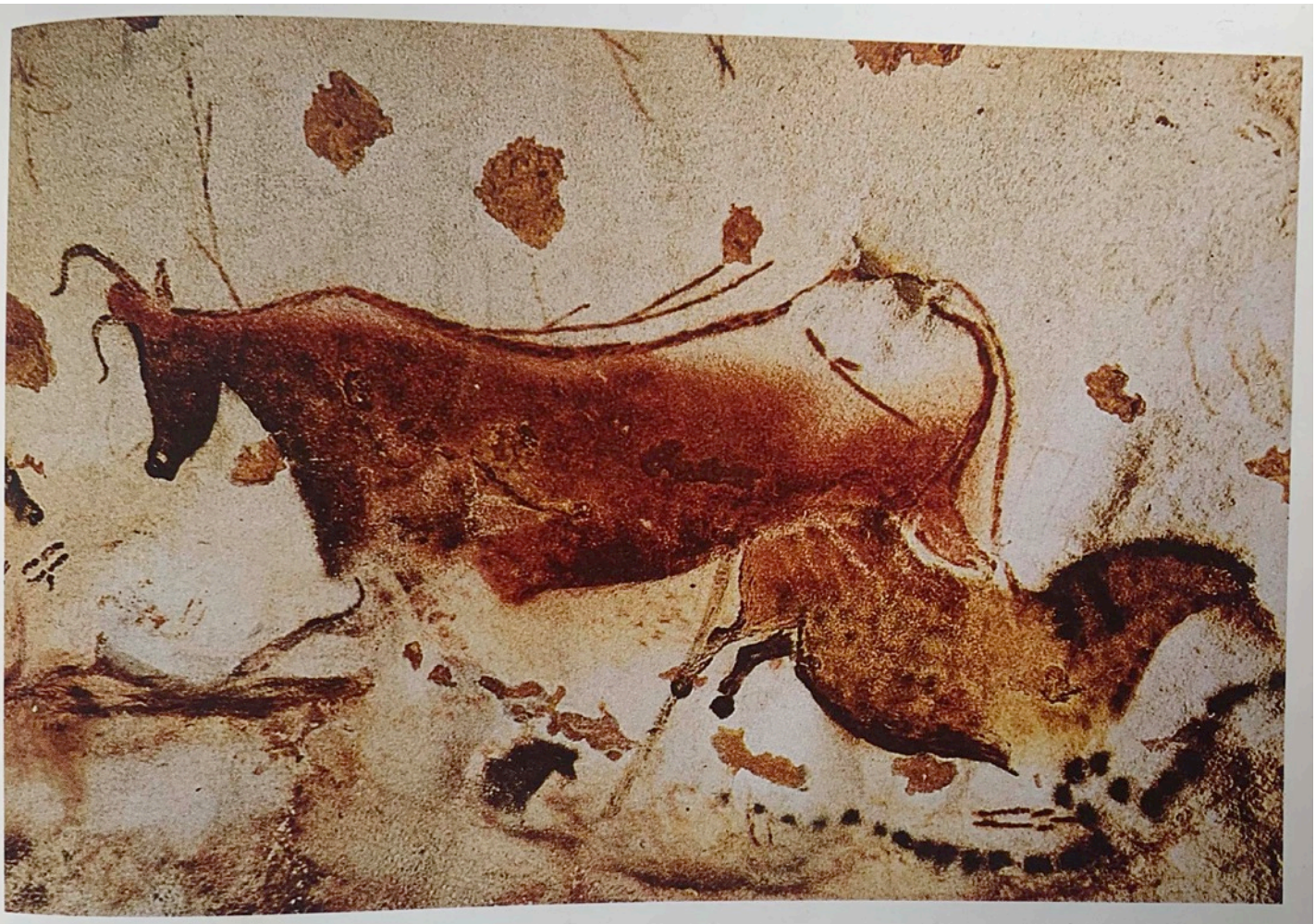


Plate 29
Red Cow and Chinese Horse (c. 15,000–10,000 B.C.)
Paleolithic mural
Axial gallery, caves at Lascaux, Dordogne, France

Plate 30 "Working Space"
Graffiti, New York City

has allowed the *Young Bull* to stand so proudly for so long. We love the discovered awkwardness of this painting when we compare it with Caravaggio's overwhelming, invented coherence.

Potter's painting endears itself to us by snapping flat at the edges, by keeping its illusionism thin. In Caravaggio's painting we are confronted with a rounded, spherical whole containing an enclosed, limited, definite activity; somehow it is a gift that abstraction cannot warm up to. There is something more here than a classical/anticlassical opposition. We like the surprise and freshness of the awkward intervals in Potter's pictorial space, but even more than this we appreciate its lightness, what in the 1960s would have been called its implicit declaration of flatness. This flatness assures us of aesthetic control even in the face of chaotic pictorial invention. Coherent as Caravaggio's world of pictorial space may be, it remains a threat; it may burst its bounds at any minute.

Not surprisingly, then, it is Potter's restrained kind of realism, tempered by modern abstraction, that serves as a model for recent painting. In spite of its outward, surface bravado, the most popular art produced today by younger painters still elicits a concern with interior boundaries. The assault on exterior boundaries, the possibility of dissolving conventional edging, particularly of the kind suggested by Caravaggio, seems slow in coming, largely, I suppose, because of the inherent limits of illusionism, expressed by abstraction's reticence to illustrate itself. Unrestrained in this way, recent representational painting seems to establish bold projective gestures in order to play them off against conventional illusionistic space. There is here, however, a sense in which the outward movement never becomes anything more than a foil for the conventions it was trying to elude, for it appears that most of what is called the best painting today dumbly accepts the static outline of traditional easel painting. Although he stood behind at least half of what easel painting was to become before the advent of Impressionism, Caravaggio had an illuminating idea about what it should be. I believe that Caravaggio meant painting to grow outside of itself. His illusionism overcame technique, mandating, in effect, that our technique should overcome illusionism.

Could this be the lesson so well hidden in a wall painting such as the "Miracle of the Lower East Side" (fig. 47) or in Pollock's *Out of the Web* (see plate 15)? Perhaps the lesson suggests that we are continuing to profit from Potter's genius but we have yet to capitalize on Caravaggio's potential—the potential of a pictorial illusionism whose dramatic abstraction makes it fuller than Potter's observed realism. Again it seems that creation can add to analysis even if the results of creation (as in Caravaggio's case) are patently artificial, and the results of analysis (as in Potter's case) are apparently reproducible triumphs.

The intervals that catch our attention on the stone walls of Lascaux and the aluminum siding of subway cars are interesting because they come about as the result of an art-making effort applied to vague and indefinite boundaries. This is what ultimately makes them more interesting than most art we see, but it does not explain the success of the loose, awkward, refreshing intervals created by such art at certain unpredictable moments. The arresting quality of these moments is their ability to resist our efforts to organize them. When we encircle any group of marks or shapes with a boundary, we divide them into parts that make up a new whole. In this way we guarantee the wholeness and completeness of art. We have a notion that naive or bad art breaks down into parts that are irrational, unable to add up to a sustainable whole. In fact, this is more of a feeling than an actuality. What this feeling expresses is our unwillingness to sort out and organize crudely arranged parts. Basically, bad art makes us do more than we want to do. In great art all the relationships sparkle, radiating coherence. The balance between positive and negative is always exquisite; the displacement and redeployment of space always constitute a marvel.

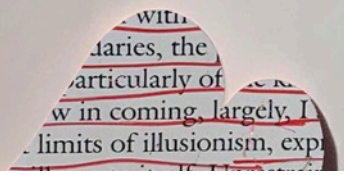


Figure 47 "Miracle of the Lower East Side"
Graffiti, New York City

This marvel occurs in the caves and in flashes on subway cars, but we are anxious in these circumstances because our faculties for containment and judgment are stretched beyond their capabilities. In both cases the gesture travels too far and too fast for the stationary critical process. However, this description of how we want to contain and qualify art does more than reveal the power of the ungaugeable pictorial intervals which seem to lie at the extremes of art history; it gives a good indication of what abstract art should do in order to overcome its present state of apathetic stagnation. Clearly, abstraction has to move; it has to extend itself.

It would seem normal to accept disconcerting, awkward, almost unartistic intervals in paleolithic art and in modern graffiti while questioning their value, if not their existence, in work such as Paulus Potter's *Young Bull*. In fact, it is tempting to say that Potter comes after Lascaux and before graffiti, and to leave it at that; as if to admit that in Potter these same warped, appealing qualities—spatial incongruities conversant with the deep past and the apparent present—beg explanation. Potter's painting is difficult to grasp, especially if we cannot register the disposition and flow of dimly perceived negative intervals which contribute so much to the pictorial whole. Perhaps the awkwardness and asymmetry that appear in Potter could be explained by compositional practices, instincts almost, common to the relentless Mannerist sensibility of the art of the lowlands that preceded his work from, say, Bloemaert and Spranger to Francken and David Teniers. However, I suspect that it would be easier to recognize the pictorial value of Potter's awkwardness by simply enlisting the aid offered by analogies from the past and the present. Here what might be called fanciful art history appears to be an appropriate tool. Whatever the approach, the *Young Bull* remains a painter's painting, difficult to analyze, difficult to understand.

Unlikely as it might seem, it is possible to see this painting as direct painting modeled from studio life rather than as a more indirect version built from elaborate preparatory drawings. Velásquez and Manet come to mind almost immediately. Imagine this arrangement for Potter's painting: a few tree stumps and a plank are nailed together and placed to the left of center under a skylight to await the bull. Before he is led in, a painted landscape drop is strung up across the back wall. Eventually the bull blossoms as the work progresses, but something remains unsatisfactory. In an effort to correct this, Potter enlarges the painting and its cast of characters. Now sheep, cow, goat, and the model for the cowherd take their places to the left of the bull.

If this seems far-fetched, we can imagine a less cumbersome variation: Potter sketches in a background from drawings made in the field and then does some firsthand work from the bull, perhaps in the paddock, perhaps in the studio. In any event, whatever we imagine, the painting becomes a composite, with numerous hidden faults threatening its glassy surface. Despite its convincing realism, this painting develops a huge diagonal split between foreground and background. The incorporation of this split by an arbitrary enframement of the scene dictates an unusual but successful rhythm, one that activitates elusively defined displacements, both positive and negative. At the same time this coupling enhances a quirky, projective quality of shape and scale, a quality that makes this painting inexplicably alive and plainly original.

In terms of displacement of pictorial volume, this painting is completely irrational. The triangle describing the foreground is equivalent in felt magnitude to a Mack truck, while the background triangle tucked in behind the diagonal ridge carries the weight of its matchbox cousin. This peculiar attitude toward spatial displacement is further acknowl-

edged by the unsubtle juxtaposition of a tiny foreground frog against the dominant bulk of the bull. The whole experience is a complete reversal of expectation, where the intelligent, measured reading of pictorial space is replaced by a more accurate emotional reading of that space. Once the basic architecture of pictorial space has been rent askew, all kinds of possibilities open up. We have to ask ourselves two things: Why is a painting devoted to intense, detailed observation so out of kilter? And why is this awkwardness so productive in terms of pictorial vitality?

The question about the painting's basic spatial distortion, the volumetric incongruity between foreground and background, can probably be explained by the intensity of Potter's youthful effort. In a sense he put so much into each part, foreground and background, that he hated to diminish any of their essential characteristics. As a result he made a painting with two fully realized halves, two competing identities. This creates a unity resembling marriage, one in which the closer we look, the more fragmented the whole appears. In a manner similar to marriage, the fragments rubbed together often become charged, and it may be this same charged quality that marshals the realignment of Potter's awkward elements into their final pose, one whose strange composition opens the way to what is finally an expansive and gracious survey of the Dutch savannah.

Our first reaction to this painting suggests an encounter with a bovine masterpiece. It is as though Potter has done with his bull what Caravaggio and Velásquez were getting at with the horses in the *Conversion of Saint Paul* and the *Surrender at Breda*. Potter uses the scale of animal bulk to express the scope and sweep of our vision—its definition in terms of its limits. Simultaneously he makes a pointed remark, reminding us of what Caravaggio and Velásquez both suggested: that we remain quite small, awkward physical realities compared with the posed grandeur of our organized vision—our vision of ourselves in the descriptive panorama around us. In Potter, as in Velásquez and Caravaggio, there is the implied sense that we the viewers, as well as the creator in that same position, are really larger than what we see, larger than life, and as such are supremely capable of controlling what we see, both our imaginative and our literal vision.

One always loves paintings that are like one's own. In this case Potter's *Young Bull* is a faithful image of a painting of mine from 1975, *Leblon II* (plate 31). The Potter painting leans to the left. The heads of the peasant, cow, and bull form a triangle within which the X shape of the crossed tree trunks are inscribed. This is a very formal focus for a seemingly casual—at best, eccentrically asymmetrical—composition. The real beauty of this shifted focus, though, is how it sends us spinning off in search of other visual foci, or perhaps the other way around: how the search for other foci helps us locate the real compositional center. From the crossed trunks we meet the bull's eyes, from his eyes we find the cow's head, and from the cow's head we travel to the peasant's face. This triangle is the compositional focus, the painting's organizational core. Once we have found it we feel secure, even though we are puzzled as to why we have drifted so far to the left; we feel that in order to keep our aesthetic balance we have to turn right to look out over the landscape's imaginary distant center.

For me the painting begins on the left edge, where the plank cutting off the cowherd's right arm hides the hand he relieves himself with. The plank and the arm begin a process of interweaving which sends the plank between the tree trunks and the peasant's left arm out over the forwardmost trunk. This interweaving anchors the painting's main structural armature. The plank continues through the crossed

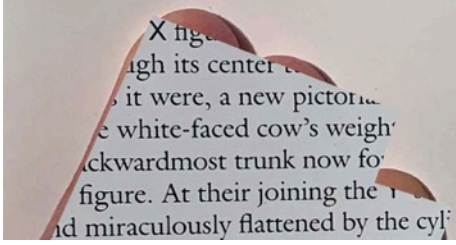
tree trunks as an imaginary line drawn along the ridge of the cow's back, a line further lengthened to include the darkened edge of the landscape's foreground rise, creating an extension that marks the painting's dominant diagonal division.

But compositional strength aside, what makes this painting in my eyes is the success of inexplicable, opportunistic juxtapositions, perhaps an unconscious transformation of the composure of its implied figures. For example, I delight in the reformation and restatement of the jack-like figuration on the left, where the X figure of the tree trunks pierced by the plank shaft through its center turns into a bent Y, into a new cattle-brand as it were, a new pictorial figure formed by the pressure of the white-faced cow's weight. As a result the plank and the backwardmost trunk now form the top V half of a new Y figure. At their joining the Y 's leg is pronated, bent and miraculously flattened by the cylindrical cow into both an edge and a plane indicated by the auspicious shadow cast on the center to right foreground. It is this kind of virtuosity, one of unexpected spatial manipulation rising above its diagrammatic expression, a virtuosity continued by the surprisingly tense figurative articulation keyed to the white cow's face, which I feel the Naples-yellow T in *Leblon II* echoes.

The final innovative effort of Potter's painting manifests itself in the convincing dispersal of daylight over the pictorial surface. Although the light of early northern painting was certainly jewel-like and clear, as was that of much of Renaissance painting to follow, neither of them had the fluidity and depth of field which Potter's brightness brings to this painting. The success of his landscape light did for daylight what Caravaggio did for artificial light: it solved the problem. After the example of Potter and Caravaggio, everyone knew how to light a painting; the technique was available to all. It became simply a question of being convincing, a question of degree of success.

Potter's light does not come easily to abstraction. It is natural and real, producing descriptive conditions that are at odds with abstraction's predilection for the studied and the artificial, conditions also at odds with abstraction's shallow roots in Impressionism. Compared with seventeenth-century Dutch painting, the light of Impressionism is murky and opaque. I know this assertion will provoke argument, but in fact Impressionism generates very little light or color through reflection; it relies on a necessarily blunted exterior illumination and optical mixing for most of its effects. The thin glaze technique of the north helps to build a glassy outdoor clarity which is to be prized. It depends on a translucent, "see-through" relationship which is the opposite of Impressionism's opaque "see-together" juxtapositions. The touch that ties *Leblon II* to Potter's landscape is bound to just this glassy, translucent, clear surface color, the color that builds the light of the outdoors. Enameled lacquers on a reflective, polished aluminum surface produce a bright, mechanical landscape. A landscape that gives all the appearances of being artificial and industrial turns out to be fresh and homemade, yet limpid and natural, as inevitable as the mountains rising behind Santa Anita on a sudden smogless morning.

Eugène Fromentin's 100-year-old account of Potter's painting (*The Old Masters of Belgium and Holland,* trans. Mary C. Robbins, New York, Schocken Books, 1963) strikes me as amazingly accurate. There is great comfort in the realization that one's own loose associations can sometimes be seen to echo insights of the past. In some ways Fromentin makes me feel almost tame; in other ways, though, we share the same pictorial vibrations. For example, the following account touches nearly everything I have tried to say about Potter and myself, about the past and the present of painting; but perhaps more important, it does these things by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sounding a common artistic, critical voice. In this extract we hear the voice of a painter talking about painting:

> The Bull is priceless . . . The reputation of the picture is at once very much exaggerated and very legitimate; it results from an ambiguity. It is considered as an exceptional page of painting which is an error. It is thought to be an example to be followed, a model to copy, in which ignorant generations can learn the technical secrets of their art. In that there is also a mistake, the greatest mistake of all. The work is ugly, and unconsidered; the painting is monotonous, thick, heavy, pale, and dry. The arrangement is of the utmost poverty. Unity is wanting in this picture which begins nobody knows where, has no end, receives the light without being illuminated, distributes it at random, escapes everywhere, and comes out of the frame, so entirely does it seem to be painted flat upon the canvas. It is too full without being entirely occupied. Neither lines, nor color, nor distribution of effect give it those first conditions of existence indispensable to every well-regulated work. The animals are ridiculous in form. The dun cow with a white head is built of some hard substance. The sheep and the ram are modelled in plaster. As to the shepherd, no one defends him. Two parts only of the picture seem made to be understood, the wide sky and the huge bull. (pp. 157–158)

Fromentin himself called this "rough" criticism, but it seems more accurate and generous than anything else. It has the same level of insightful attention that Don Judd brought to the criticism of the 1960s, a gift that often was not all that much appreciated, largely I think because it was founded on honestly felt principles which it hoped to advance rather than, as was suspected, on opportunities which it hoped to exploit. When Fromentin says: "The rest is an accompaniment that might be cut out without regret, greatly to the advantage of the picture" (p. 159), he sounds like the hard-nosed, literalist Judd of the late sixties; however, when he announces: "What amazes in Paul Potter is the imitation of objects pushed to an extreme. It is ignored or it is not noticed in such a case that the painter's soul is worth more than the work, and his manner of feeling infinitely superior to the result" (p. 159), he sounds like a sensible critic, much like the early Judd at his best, one who loves what he sees, what he hopes will be realized. Fromentin's "rough" criticism reminds us that no one appreciated the potential of the extremes available to abstraction better than Judd in the sixties; no one sensed the expanding souls of Malevich and Newman better than he.

Fromentin reminds us that "when he painted the Bull in 1647, Paul Potter was . . . a very young man, and according to what is common among men of twenty-three, he was a mere child" (p. 159). For some there are more echoes of the 1960s in these words than might meet the ear. Take, as an example, the first printed criticism of my work, which appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1960. There Robert Coates lamented "how sad it was to see the 23-year-old Frank Stella right back where Mondrian was twenty-five years ago." I realized that this remark was a polite put-down; nevertheless, the thrill it gave me was overpowering. It would have been an honor to be right back where Mondrian was twenty-five years ago, if that had been the case; but even without that possibility, the fact that my name appeared in print in the same sentence with Mondrian's seemed to be an incredible affirmation of personality and ability. It actually took me a while to get over the shock of publicity, the quick glare of history passing over me. Essentially, my psychic readjustment dampened youthful fantasies; the dream of achieving freedom through the establishment of an artistic identity faded.

To do what I was able to do, and what I am able to do now, I walk on roads built by others. It seems obvious that all that effort preceding me should have taken its toll, yet the image I held of successful artists (one mostly taken from magazines) always showed them poised and healthy. In some ways I am more amazed now by Mondrian's ability to project himself as a marvelous, autocratic, aesthetic technician

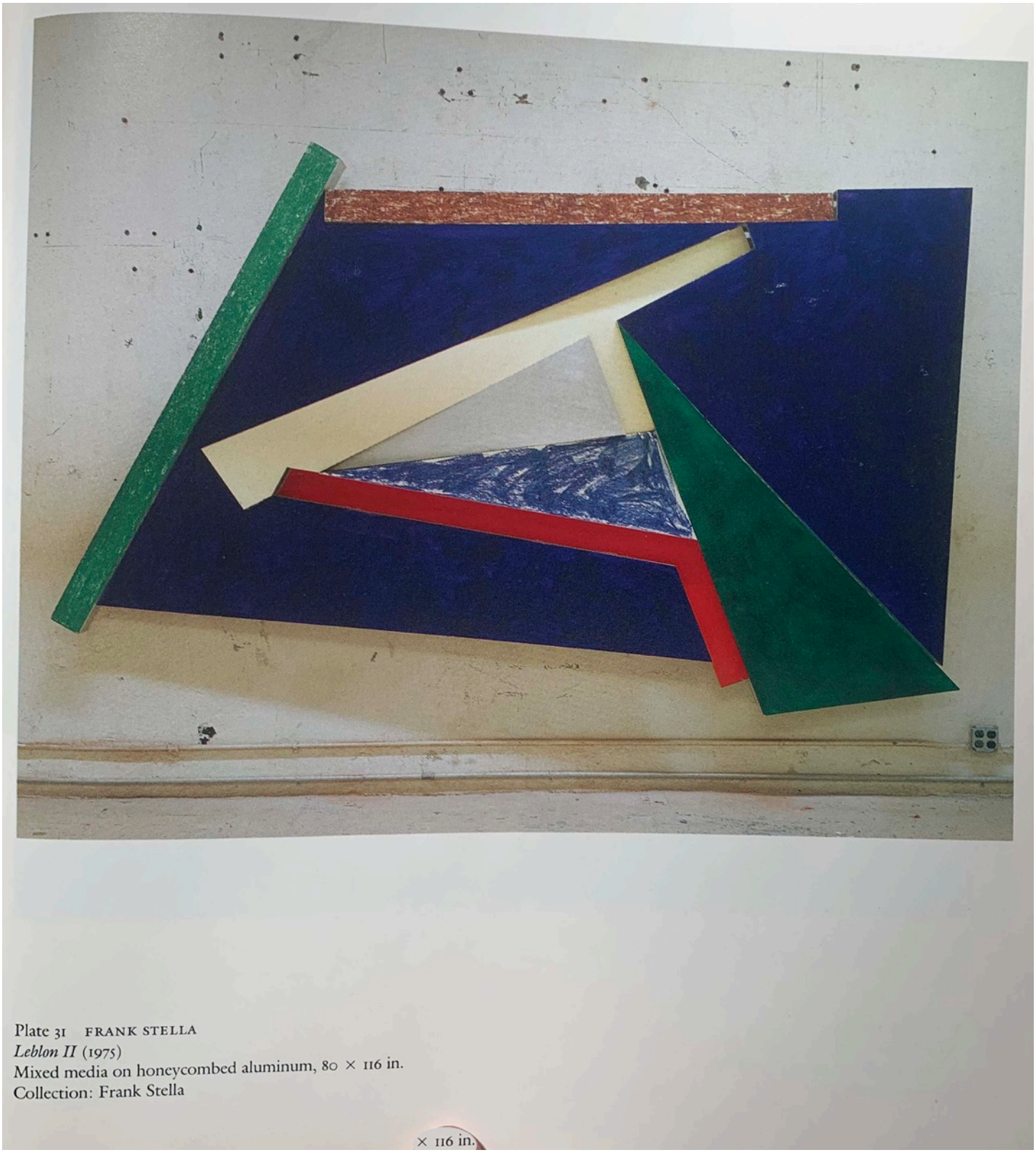


Plate 31 FRANK STELLA
Leblon II (1975)
Mixed media on honeycombed aluminum, 80 × 116 in.
Collection: Frank Stella

× 116 in.

Plate 32 FRANK STELLA
Chocorua III (1966)
Alkyd and epoxy paint on canvas, 120 × 128 in.
Collection: Frank Stella

Plate 33 FRANK STELLA
Gur III (1968)
Fluorescent alkyd on canvas, 120 × 180 in.
The Love Collection, Palm Beach, Florida

Plate 34 FRANK STELLA
Maha-lat (maquette for *Indian Bird Series;* 1977)
Printed metal alloy sheets, wire mesh, and soldered and welded metal scraps with crayon, 15½ × 20 in.
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Fractional gift of the artist

Plate 35 FRANK STELLA
Thruxton 3X (1982)
Mixed media on etched aluminum, 75 × 85 × 15 in.
The Shidler Collection, Honolulu, Hawaii

Plate 35 FRANK STELLA
Thruxton 3X (1982)
Mixed media on etched aluminum, 75 × 85
The Shidler Collection, Honolulu, Hawaii

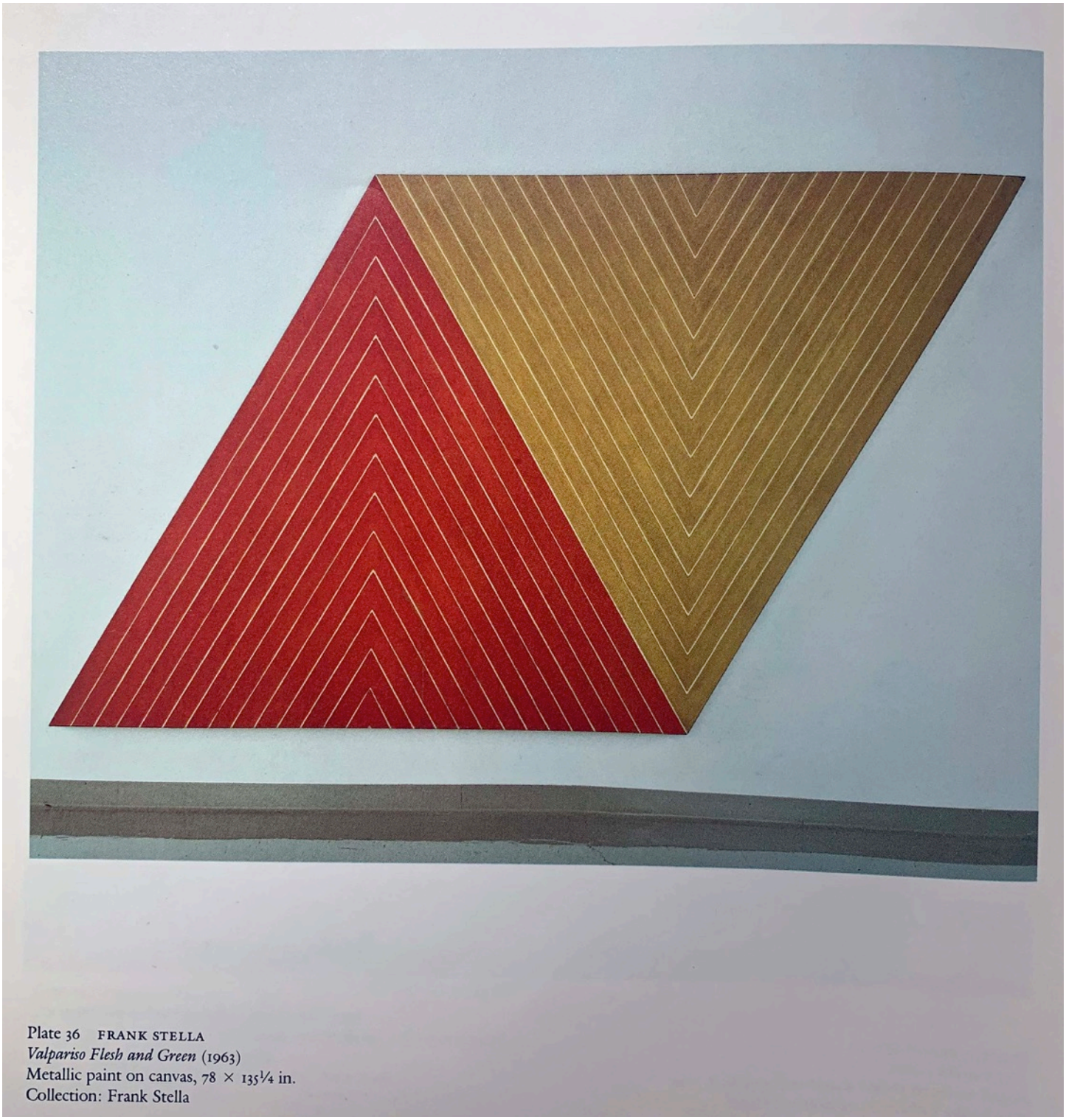


Plate 36 FRANK STELLA
Valpariso Flesh and Green (1963)
Metallic paint on canvas, 78 × 135¼ in.
Collection: Frank Stella

than I am by the beauty of his work. Similarly, I marvel at the success of Picasso's cavalier pose as a creator of horizon-filling monuments of pictorial genius. What I see now is a series of images of tired, gnarled, old, desperate men. Who else could have made what they made?

Still, life is more wonderful than the imagination and recall of the people who live it. What saves painting is that a totality of experience drives it, lifting it above the pettiness of encounters between creator and critic. When Fromentin tries to account for Potter's youthful success, he suggests in passing something that is as obvious as it is important. He remarks: "Till 1647 Paul Potter lived between Amsterdam and Haarlem, that is, between Franz Hals and Rembrandt, in the heart of the most active, the most stirring art, the richest in celebrated masters, that the world has ever known, except in Italy in the preceding century" (p. 160). Fromentin's statement describes exactly what I felt in New York in 1958 living between Pollock and de Kooning, in the heart of the most active, most stirring art, with the exception perhaps of Paris in the preceding century. I believed I was surrounded by great painting. Exciting abstract expressionist painting seemed to be everywhere. I went from gallery to gallery, museum to museum, opening to opening, and then back to my studio to look at my own painting. Sometimes, walking down Madison Avenue, I would look up and try to find the Empire State Building, hoping to orient myself, trying to get a grip on things; in the process I would find a piece of it, and build the rest of the image in my mind. Almost inevitably, as soon as the image of the Empire State Building was completed it would be shifted aside to accommodate the image of a painting. I remember holding Barnett Newman's *Ulysses* back (fig. 48), trying to keep its pushy blueness from toppling the Empire State Building. What seems to me now to be special about my experience in New York in the late fifties is this sense of literal pictorial support. The painting activity surrounding me held me up physically and emotionally. The painting that was flowering everywhere was very open and available; somehow the supposed aloofness of its creators was unable to sustain itself in the public work. I may have felt lonely in New York, but I never felt shut out.

I do not think it was a conscious effort on my part, but I came to New York in the summer of 1958 well-prepared even though I was convinced that it would only be a temporary stay. After graduation from Princeton in June, I was planning to paint in the city until the following September, at which time I expected to be drafted into the Army in Boston. When I failed the physical examination because of a faulty opposition between the thumb and fingers of my left hand resulting from a childhood accident, I was stunned. The only thing I could think to do was to get back to New York as quickly as possible before my parents could start grilling me on my plans for the future. When I got there, I suddenly had to look at my paintings and my ideas about painting with an urgency I had not experienced before. I looked at the enameled, dripping bands spreading across the cotton duck in front of me and tried to imagine how they were going to feed me. It seemed hopeless, so I began to think about working part-time at the only trade I knew—house painting.

Something started to happen that fall which surprised me. I was very good at being alone with nothing but my own painting and my own images of other people's painting. For the following eighteen months, I lived in a world dominated by painting. There was almost no distraction and no conflict. I stress this remark because the literature about the late fifties always emphasizes a reaction in my work against what was then a dominant mode of painting. There must be some truth to the descriptions, and certainly some of my own argumentative assertions seem to support that view, but the fact is that the paintings I made are completely acceptable as standard, normative abstract expressionist works, and the only significant difference between my work of the late fifties and early sixties and most of the work surrounding it was

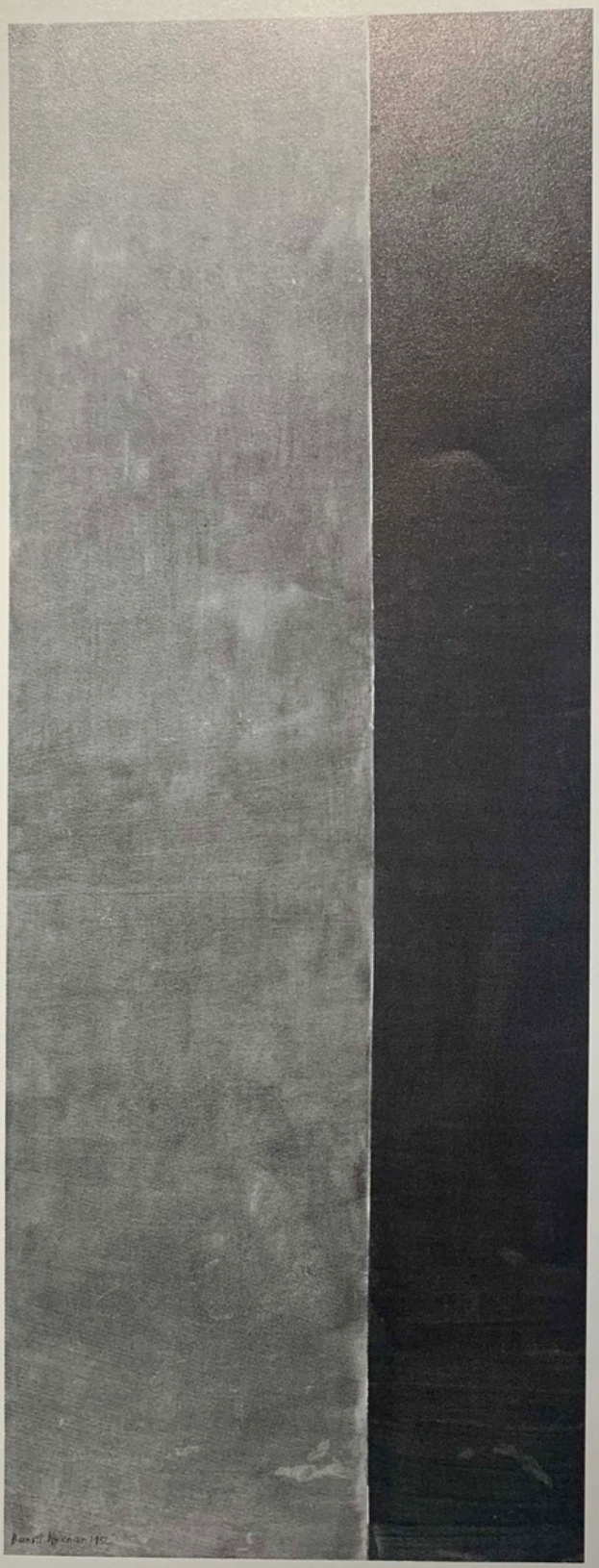


Figure 48 BARNETT NEWMAN
Ulysses (1952)
Oil on canvas, 11 ft. × 4 ft. 2 in.
Collection: Domenique de Menil, New York

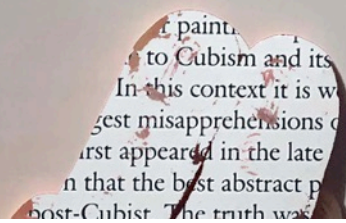
the way it looked to other people. True, it looked different, but the spirit and feeling were so close to everything going on around me that I was surprised by the hostility and ridicule it evoked. I had expected to be criticized for not being different enough, for not having developed enough. I thought I had found a way to make pigment and the space described by its manipulative gesture a bit more definite, a bit more discreet, and finally, quite a bit more concrete. Essentially I did something which I could not understand that well in terms of the reactions of others.

I remember being infuriated by a friend's account of Leo Steinberg's description of the space in my black stripe paintings when he cited the similarity of their spatial organization to the recessional character of perspectival Italian Renaissance space. This was exactly the opposite of what I intended; I wanted everything to be on the surface. Furthermore, I saw a tremendous threat in any comparison with Italian Renaissance painting. A paranoid instinct told me that if the humanism of the past was not used successfully as a club to beat abstraction to death, it would be used as a sponge to absorb and smother it to death. Now, although I would disagree with Steinberg's spatial reading, I cannot deny that the link to Italian painting in my work is obvious. Here we have, I think, come close to the core, both physical and psychological, of my attitude toward the dilemma of abstraction. It is my artistic will and destiny, for better or worse, to be a pragmatic classicist. My work will be half acquired New England experience, half unconsciously held Mediterranean gift.

This means that on an intellectual level, the thin, planar, stingy, practical abstraction of antimaterialism is readily available. In a sense the Protestant sensibility of New England reminds one that Protestant painting in the north of Europe was only too willing to be abstract. However, on an emotional level there is no resonance from the efficacy of this bias; in fact there are the beginnings of a conflict. What I want to do, and what I believe abstract painting itself wants to do today, is to bring some of the solidity of Italian painting into the foreground of our painting experience. We need to establish a productive tie to Cubism and its forefather, Renaissance classicism. In this context it is worth reconsidering one of the biggest misapprehensions of current art criticism, one that first appeared in the late sixties or early seventies—the notion that the best abstract painting defined itself by being post-Cubist. The truth was that abstract painting defined its fundamental inviability by its inability to gain access to Cubism's material strength.

The attraction of Potter's bull is the attraction of innocence. The way his bull trots between Hals and Rembrandt toward the future seems similar to the way my early stripe paintings moved between Pollock and de Kooning relatively uninfluenced, undeflected by their powerful presence. While Pollock and de Kooning struggled with the stubborn armatures of Cubism, the stripe paintings, largely unconsciously, turned those twisted armatures into flattened, surprisingly substantial presences. Their ability to bring a weighted flatness, a dimensionally coherent presence to the new surface of painting, the cotton duck field, combined with the ability to spread that symmetrical coherence across and into that same field with a convincing pictorial tension, made them unique. It was hard to see at that time where they came from.

I took it for granted that the stripe paintings came from a fairly natural adaptation of overall post–World War II painting to a landscape instinct tempered toward abstract rendering. In fact, that is the way the paintings actually developed—for example, from *Coney Island* (fig. 49) to *Astoria* to *Delta* (fig. 50; all 1958). However, when I superimposed a simple idea of banded organizational symmetry on top of landscape gestures, the resulting development changed everything. It completely changed the way I understood what I thought I knew about the painting of the past, in



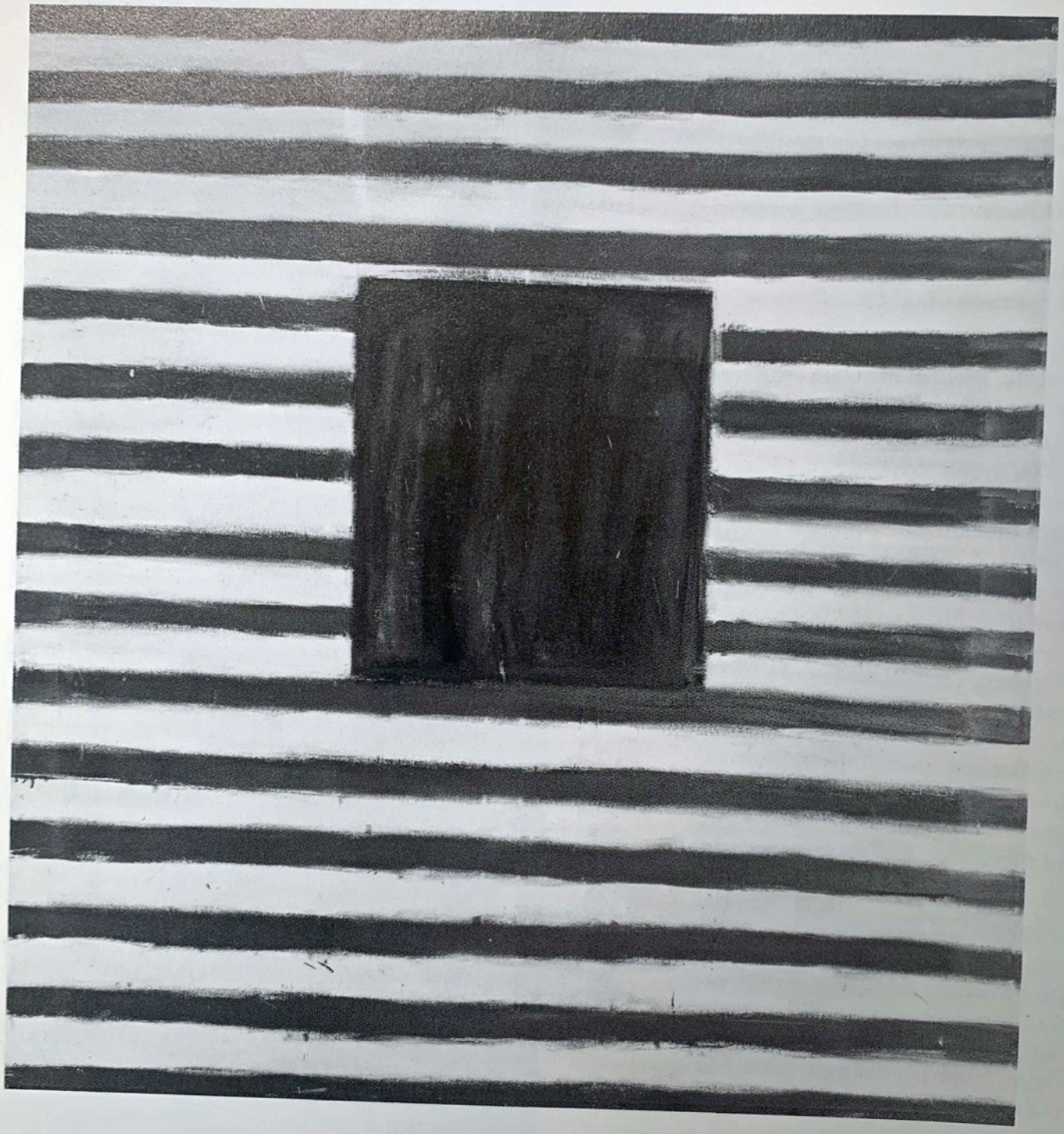


Figure 49 FRANK STELLA
Coney Island (1958)
Oil on canvas, 85¼ × 78¾ in.
Yale University Art Gallery
Gift of Larom B. Munson, B.A. 1951

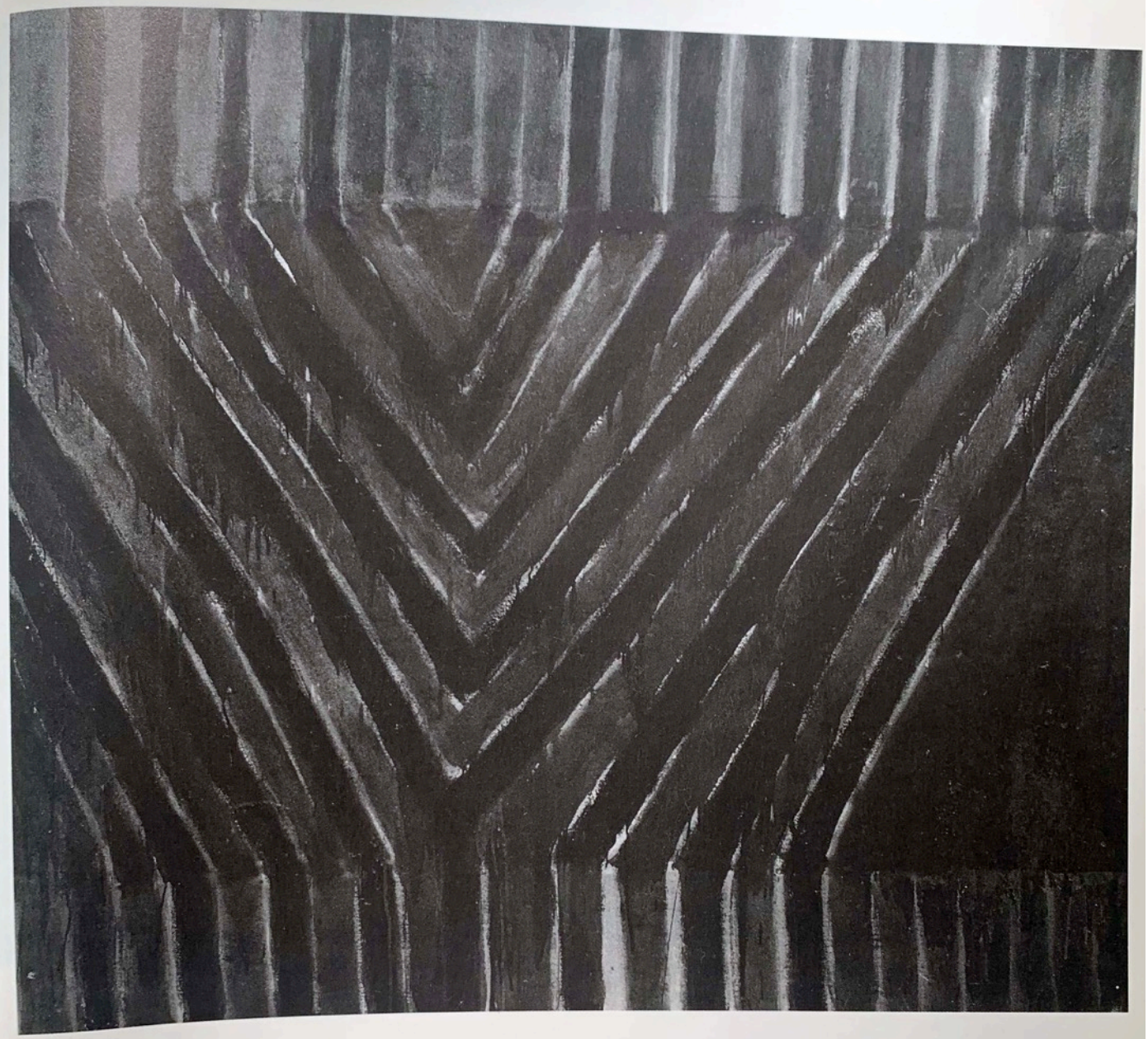


Figure 50 FRANK STELLA
Delta (1958)
Enamel on canvas, 85 × 96 in.
Collection: Frank Stella

two significant ways: first, it gave me a very clear sense of how the making of painting was sucked into the continuum of painting; how painting, especially for those who were making it, had become an amazing, coherent, growing organism, much more independent of history and perhaps even of psychology than one would have thought possible. It hit me that there was an "art history" alive and well, with which the artist must make his peace. Second—and this was something that as a young man one could not say in public because it was certain to invite ridicule—once one had become part of this organism, one had the power to influence it. This was pretty heady business, but the access to power was tempered by a sense of responsibility which introduced the possibility of a new kind of failure. It was not enough to worry that in the pursuit of art one might fail to catch up to it; in addition, one had to worry about doing part of the job to keep it running.

The change from student to participant changed my position as an observer of art making and art history. I adapted pretty well. I was deficient in amount of experience but not in intensity of experience, which turned out to be not so much a handicap as it was simply a definition of circumstance—in this case, youth. I had a goal: to paint abstract paintings. By that I meant to make paintings which were faithful to the visual culture of the past, but which were still free from their dependence on conventional representational models. I really believed that the cord to normal vision could be cut, and that painting could live in a world of its own. I wanted an independence expressed in painting which obviously on another level reflected my desire to be independent from my family, from the strictures of responsibility and authority.

My dream, or perhaps my desire, as far as painting went, had already been realized to a certain extent by postwar abstract expressionism, especially by Pollock and de Kooning, but I sensed something in their work which worried me more than the stunning level of their accomplishment impressed me. I sensed a hesitancy, a doubt of some vague dimension which made their work touching, but to me somehow too vulnerable. It did not seem right or fair that work such as Pollock's or de Kooning's should be subjected to threats from the representational painting of the past. Although I knew it did not make any strict sense, I was convinced that a completely independent abstract art, one that had really severed its roots from a representational bias for pictorial depiction, would be an improvement, and would preserve and defend the accomplishment of abstract expressionist painting. Even now, writing twenty-five years after the fact, it is hard to know whether describing this ambition sounds simple or naive. All I can say is that the ambition was born in the paintings made in 1958 from June to November in New York City.

When I painted over landscape-derived abstract painting with a rigid symmetrical pattern (fig. 51), I made paintings that successfully canceled out their origins. Others had done what I had done, but they were not able to hold the line. I saw in front of me a system that would guarantee the exclusion of painterly gestures which in seemingly abstract painting always brought the ghost of figuration with them. But I was so eager for freedom and independence that I had no sense of consequence. If anyone had hinted to me that a real establishment of abstraction on truly independent footing would be the beginnings of its problems, I would have dismissed the warning as clever, wishful drivel. Unfortunately, this hypothetical warning anticipated a real danger. My greatest fear at the time was that abstract art would be weakened in its stance against representational art—that somehow abstract art would never get to be the main current, that it would simply be a tributary absorbed casually into the flow of Western visual culture, that by itself it would never be the surging, flooding crest of Western art.

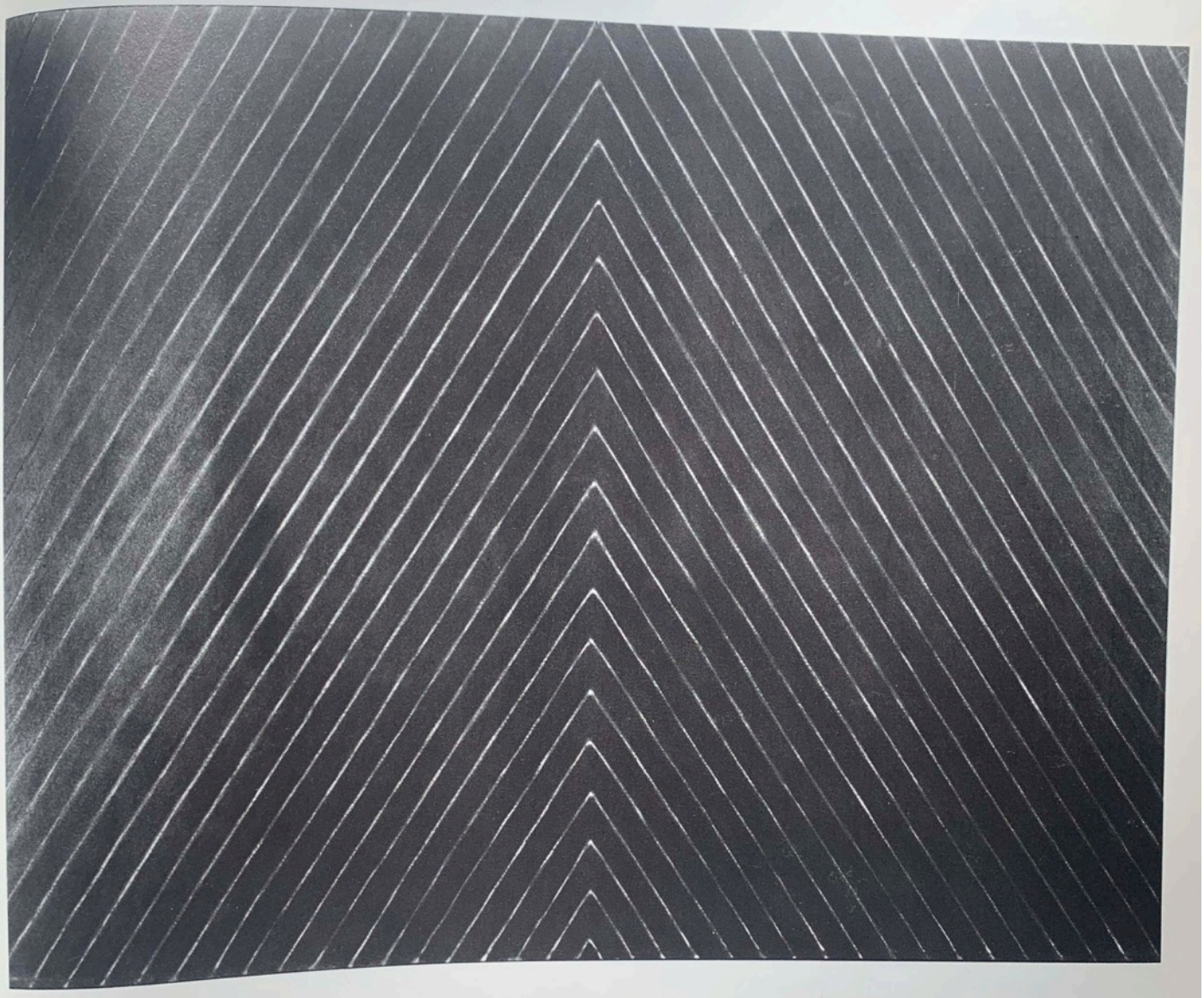


Figure 51 FRANK STELLA
Point of Pines (1959)
Black enamel on canvas, 83¾ × 109⅛ in.
Collection: Frank Stella

My optimism for the future is based on a feeling that what in the late fifties helped my paintings attain—if it is possible to say such a thing—a greater, more coherent, more understandable, and more clearly felt level of pictorial abstraction is the same thing that will help them meet the present crisis in abstract painting with a positive solution. The success of abstract painting of the sixties (plates 32, 33) was based on a collective effort which took off from the immediately preceding successes of the giants of abstract expressionism. It sustained its success as well as it did because it was able to reach a little deeper, to be a little less self-conscious about its debt to Cubism and a European past. In effect, 1960s abstraction was able to avoid the struggle which Pollock and de Kooning could not, the struggle with Picasso.

Abstract expressionism shielded the generation succeeding it from the heavy arm of European modernism, a solid Mediterranean limb wielding the hammer of material presence. This protection allowed 1960s painting direct access to the founders of abstraction—to Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich. The free, unfettered access to abstraction's early roots had a wonderful and powerful effect: close attention to the early masters coupled with a natural, relaxed attitude toward enlarged pictorial scale and gesture made exciting painting. Jack Youngerman, Ellsworth Kelly, and Sam Francis took off in what seemed like a marvelous, yet familiar, vector. Helen Frankenthaler and Friedel Dzubas were reaching new, relaxed, lyrical heights. Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski undertook an exotic trip in search of firstness, while Donald Judd, Larry (now Lawrence) Poons, and I laid the track to literalism. At the same time what Phil Leider called "the other kind of art" was quite powerful too—Jasper Johns, Jim Rosenquist, and Roy Lichtenstein, for example. Whether the strength of these last three came from similar sources is hard to say for certain, but to me it seems likely enough, especially if we look at the painting.

At issue, though, is not the beauty and success of 1960s American painting but its apparent decline in the 1970s (fig. 52). It is hard to tell if abstract painting actually got worse, if it merely stagnated, or if it simply looked bad in comparison to the hopes its own accomplishments had raised. It is possible that all three observations are true, but for me the last description is the most telling. What bothers me is not so much that efforts might have been bad but that the hopes have been tarnished, essentially enervated by the failure to maintain the momentum of the sixties.

Although I have a pretty good idea of what I have done and what I am going to do about the situation confronting abstraction, I offer, for what it is worth, what I think painting as our collective endeavor has to do to right itself. It has to understand its successes better, and it has to understand its sources better. With a better understanding of its accomplishments and its past, painting has to build in order to flower again. The authentic, innovative brightness and expansiveness of the sixties can support structures of even greater light and reach. The roots of 1960s abstraction, so thoroughly grounded in the abstraction of the north, in the encouraging antimaterialism of Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich, must be reinforced with energy drawn from the realism of the south—the tough, stubborn materialism of Cézanne, Monet, and Picasso. It seems obvious that the future of abstraction depends on its ability to wrest nourishment from the reluctant, unwilling sources of twentieth-century abstraction: Cézanne, Monet, and Picasso, who insist that if abstraction is to drive the endeavor of painting it must make painting real—real like the painting that flourished in sixteenth-century Italy.

Figure 52 FRANK STELLA
Warka III (1973)
Mixed media, tilted relief, 93 × 100 in.
Collection: Frank Stella

At the time when I was painting black enamel stripes into cotton duck, I remember hearing a lot about Caravaggio. As the praise mounted for his importance and inventiveness, I thought to myself: "I hate Caravaggio; that's representational painting. It's ordinary. That's what they love; that's what they will never give up—its ordinariness. I want painting to be special, not ordinary. Abstraction is special; they're never going to like it." I was wrong on a lot of counts. Caravaggio was ordinary, but he invented an ordinariness that has carried painting farther than any such single effort; and although abstraction is special, its specialness can be defined by its ordinariness.

It is hard to gauge the significance of first experiences with endeavors that later become the working, effortful focus of one's life. At Andover I was already interested in art, but the opportunities there seemed to thrust themselves at me. The idea that in the midst of a grinding mechanism of elite education, Andover offered an oasis of self-indulgence and pleasure—a major course in studio art, eight hours a week in which one could smear free Cadmium red around on shellacked cardboard rather than face the chemistry lab—seemed unbelievable. When I signed up for a preliminary prerequisite course, half art history and half studio, I was very anxious. I wanted to qualify for the major course.

The first problem we were given in the studio was a still-life setup. We were told to make a painting from it. The studio was in the basement of the Addison Gallery, where upstairs on the walls one could look at a small, concise, up-to-date history of American painting. I had been through the gallery quite a few times, and I knew what I liked. I remember Winslow Homer's *West Wind* and a Frederic Remington painting of a wolf howling in a night of wild acid green.

Another early picture that stood out for me was an Eakins portrait whose painted gold frame had inscriptions drawn over it. These paintings represented the past for me as I looked at the still-life objects I was supposed to deal with on the table in front of me. I started to look around the studio at some of the other students' paintings and at the paintings our teacher, Patrick Morgan, was making in the corner by the window, by the north light, which I guessed was his prerogative as an artist. I couldn't help thinking how much nicer it was down at my end by the southern exposure—much warmer with much more light. I liked what Pat was doing, the naturalness of his commitment to abstraction (fig. 53), and I liked the precocious intensity of the work of some of the advanced students, hipsters like Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre. I wanted to make abstract paintings, paintings with just paint.

When I looked up at the table I saw some sickly ivy coming out of a pot and thought, "I don't want to learn how to paint that; it's too dreary. I want to paint like the recent American abstract painting upstairs, like some of the paintings I've seen at Pat's house." I thought of these and remembered some of Maud Morgan's paintings (fig. 54) and a votive lights painting by Loren McIver. Something about their size and intensity seemed to relate to the ivy and the cast-iron angle brace on the table.

Then my mind began to wander; I started dreaming of a big black and white Franz Kline, and I started to imagine my hands on the house-painting brushes I had used with my father that summer. With the brush in hand, I remembered mixing the paint, pouring it from gallon can to gallon can after stirring in the gooey tinting pigment. That made me think of the Pollock upstairs. It was hard to take my hand away from the mixing sticks, hard to stop fantasizing about swirling the dripping skeins over the floor. I remembered my parents talking about the floor-spattering techniques

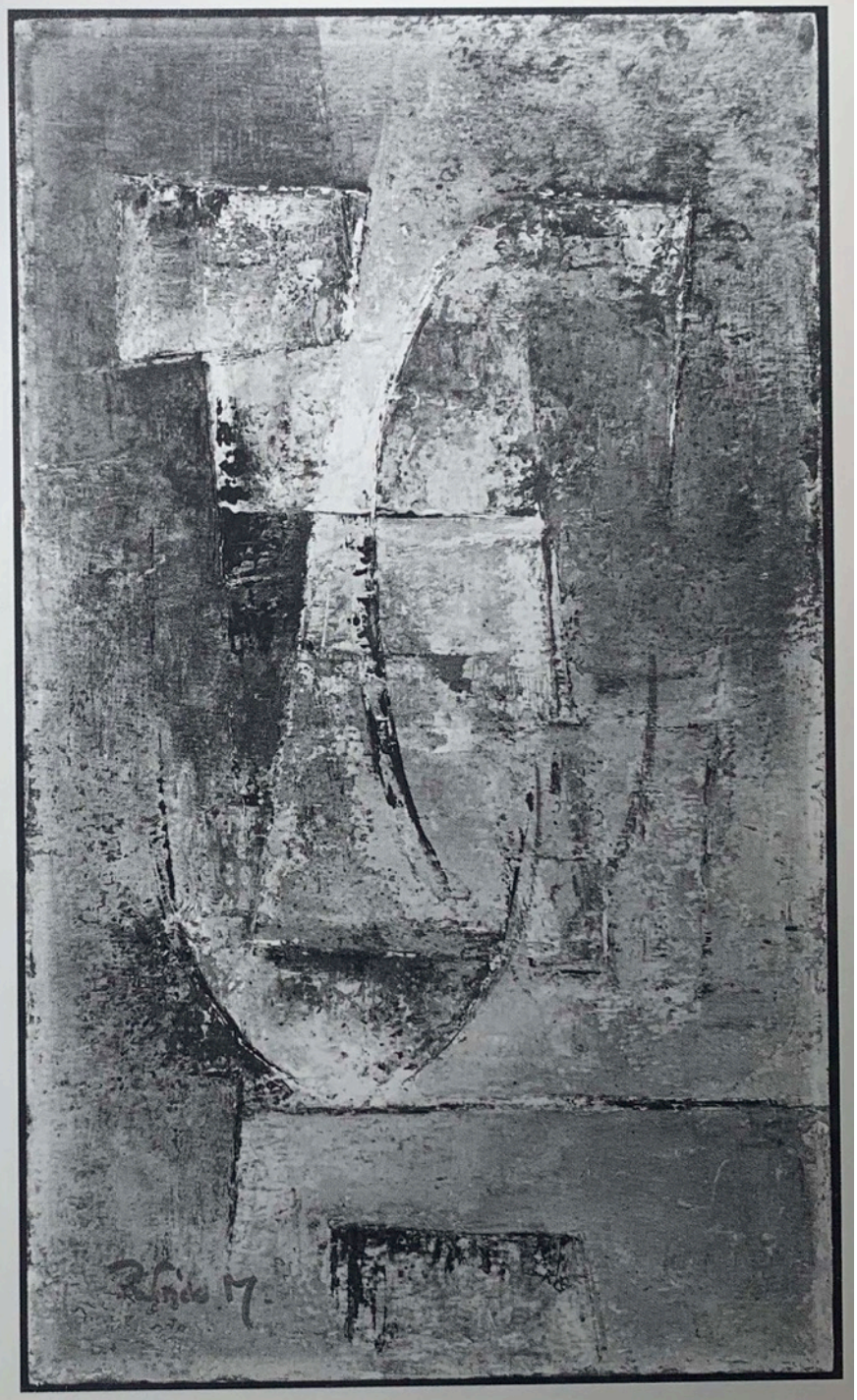


Figure 53 PATRICK MORGAN
Untitled (1951)
Oil on board, 16 × 9 7/16 in.
Collection: Frank Stella

used to simulate linoleum patterns. But this seemed too messy, and I pushed the dripped line aside in favor of the fabulous brush line in a Hans Hofmann painting I had seen at the Morgans' house. That line seemed to represent an almost incomprehensible gesture. What did the brush look like that had such a flexible, slender tip, a tip that could move so far, so fast and still carry such a load of pigment, such an intense red?

Then I woke up. The Hofmann triggered something; it must have been the image of the load of pigment. A lecture about Seurat and neo-Impressionism started to replay itself in my mind—daubs of pigment on top of each other and next to each other, mixing optically to create the complementary colors observed in nature. Then I looked at the vine on the table, at the shadows and the play of light. I did not see anything that reminded me of Seurat, just as the slides of Seurat paintings that I had seen had not reminded me of anything other than a reductive static scheme of things I might have seen. That was it. My fingers tapped the equation on the counter top: static scheme plus daubs of pigment equal a still-life painting. Problem solved.

The elation carried me pretty high; I was sure that I would qualify, and I was sure that I would never have to look back, that I would never have to account for anything more than what my hand made. I knew that my hand was not going to make any more renditions, no matter how schematic, of potted ivy and table tops. I finished my painting (fig. 55) in thirty minutes. It received mixed reviews; but all that really mattered was that I was free to make the kind of paintings I really wanted to make. In that small moment of confrontation when I felt I had to do it or forget it, I formed my basic feeling about abstract painting, although I did not know it at the time. In the thirty or so years since that date, nothing in my experience of looking at and making painting has given me cause to doubt what I believed then and what I believe now.

First, I believe that access to abstraction to anyone born after 1936 is direct and unencumbered. One wants to do it and one does; it is that simple. If a young person walks through a gallery of American painting in 1950 and confronts the work of Copley, Inness, Sargent, Eakins, Remington, Homer, Dove, Hartley, Hofmann, Pollock, and Kline, he will want to paint like Hofmann, Pollock, and Kline, admiring Hartley and Dove for their proximity to the former, and acknowledging the rest for their accomplishment and effort in facing the task of art. Looking at what happened and what is happening, one has to want to do what is happening. Immediate sources count for a lot.

Second, I feel that abstraction became superior to representationalism as a mode of painting after 1945. This is obvious on the level of physical and visual excitement, on the level of pictorial substance and vitality. It also established its superiority on a theoretical level: abstraction has the best chance of any pictorial attitude to be inclusive about the expanding sum of our culture's knowledge. It is flexible and expansive. It has no need to be exclusive, even perhaps of representationalism itself.

Finally, in terms of my own pictorial experience (plates 34–36) I believe that abstraction faces no limits to expansion and extension, either in the direction of magnification or of reduction. It is innately well suited for growth. It avoids, for example, some of the obvious problems of realism, in which billboard technique often reduces representationalism to a form of abstraction by magnification. In practice, if not in theory, a face ceases to be much of a face if it gets big enough. With abstraction the problem is more one of sustaining pictorial energy than of keeping an image intact. The size of an abstract painting never has to account to our everyday sense of scale; there is no point in comparing an

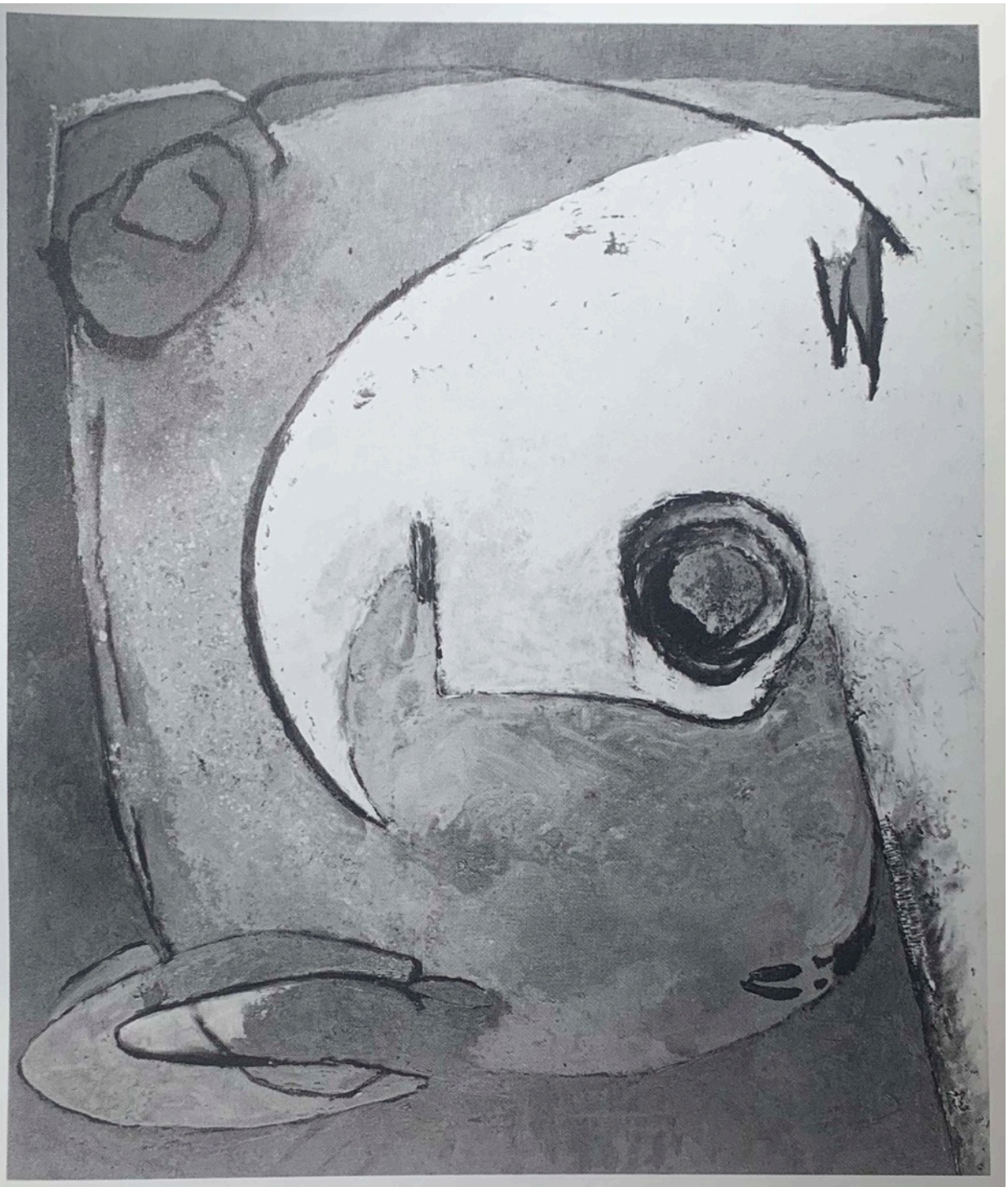


Figure 54 MAUD MORGAN
Minatory (1951)
Oil on board, 29 × 24 in.
Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Gift: Boston Society of Independent Artists, Inc.

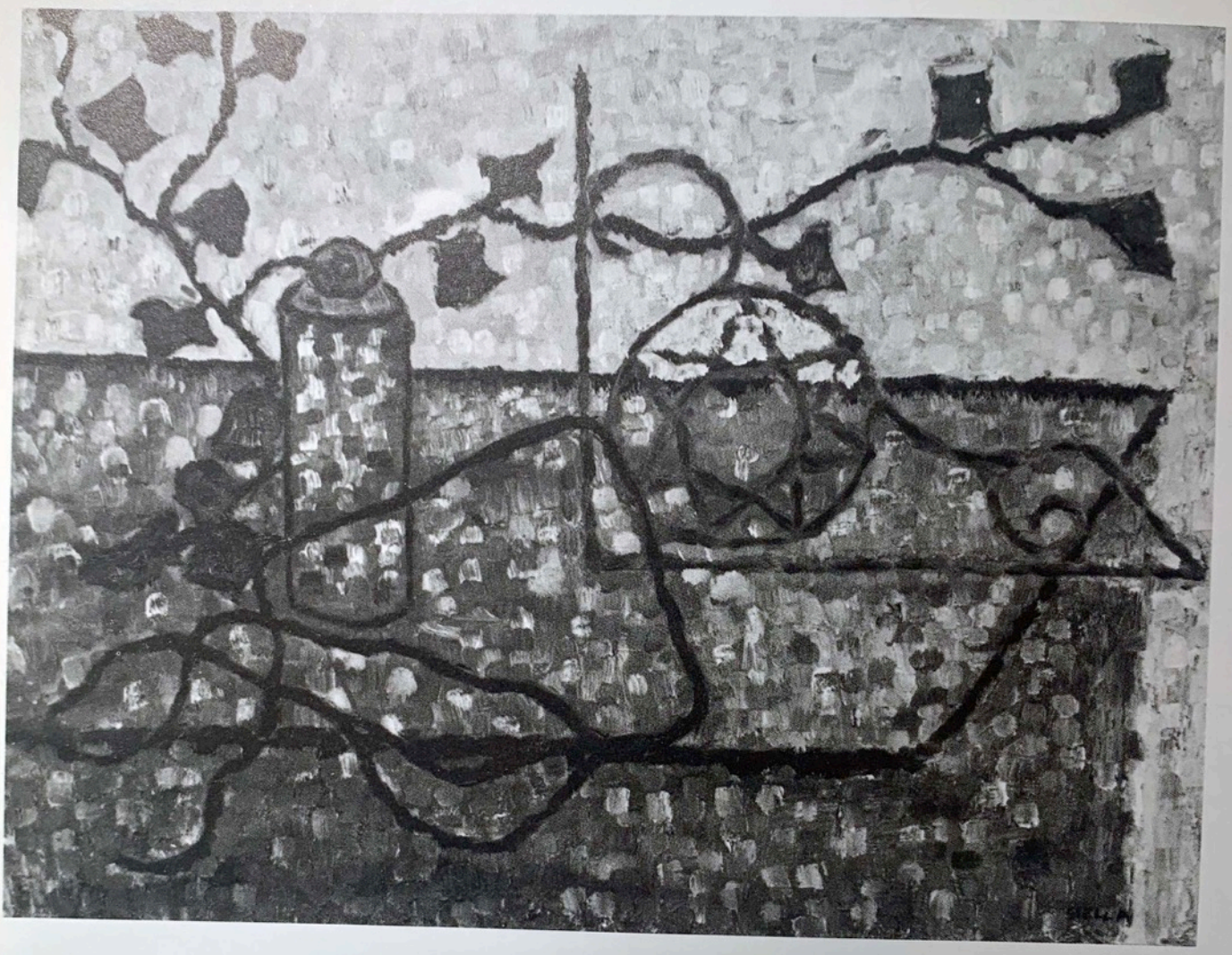


Figure 55 FRANK STELLA
Still life (1954)
Oil on paper, 19 × 25 in.
Collection: Addison Gallery of American Art,
Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts

abstract image with an image from the real world. Abstraction has the freedom to be large without magnification, the ability to be small without miniaturization. In a sense abstraction gains its freedom, its unfettered expandability, its own working space by eluding the spatial dictates of the real and the ideal image. Clearly, abstraction today works to make its own space.

All these arguments may be open to dispute, but the fact remains that where it counts, on the pictorial surface, there has not been a serious challenge to abstraction in the last thirty years. The only challenges come from within. Sometimes they echo problems from the past, but mostly they just reflect our uneven abilities as we confront the challenge of making art.