

NEW YORK | April 27, 2012, 10:03 p.m. ET

On Superman and Airships

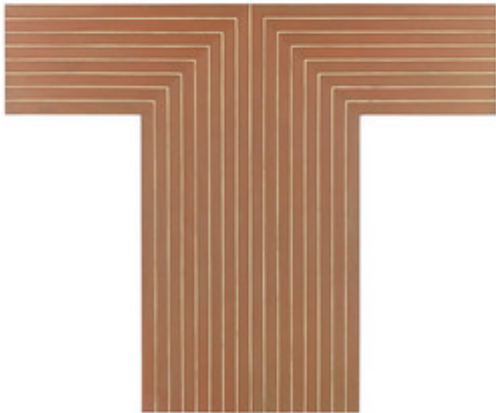
By PETER PLAGENS

Frank Stella: Black, Aluminum, Copper Paintings

L&M Arts

45 E. 78th St., (212) 861-0020

Through June 2

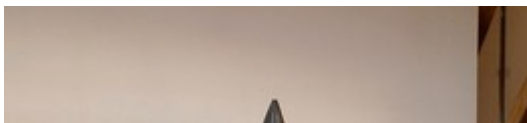


Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/L&M Arts

Frank Stella's 'Telluride' (1960-61) at L&M Arts

Frank Stella (b. 1936) had a significant epiphany at the precocious age of 22 when he decided to make all parts of the picture equal—doing away with one of the last vestiges of traditional painting. First in "Delta" (1958), he covered the canvas with wide, close-together black enamel stripes. A year later, in such paintings as "Die fahne hoch," he made the stripes echo and repeat the rectangular format of the stretcher frame itself. In 1960, he switched to a silver color and, when his geometric compositions yielded "leftover" shapes, he simply notched them out of the painting's physical format. (This was a bit of pictorial sleight-of-hand, because the stretcher frames had to be built that way beforehand.) Mr. Stella's 1961 copper paintings took his premise further; They assumed emphatic T, H and sideways L configurations that made them as much like sculptures as like paintings.

Putting aside the credit—or blame—Mr. Stella gets for a half-century of subsequent painters who have cranked out paintings-as-objects resembling everything from car wrecks to bank-vault doors, how do the original artifacts of his pictorial Big Bang look today? Pretty good, and oddly romantic. Instead of the—gasp!—violation of painting many people saw at the time, what comes across now is Mr. Stella's perhaps unconscious reverence for other aspects of traditional painting: sheen variation, subtle color changes, and an insistence on at least a little bit of handmade imperfection. That the artist went from this kind of economy to the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink excess of his later work is, as they say, another story.



Bryan Hunt: Recalculating

Danese Gallery

535 W. 24th St., (212) 223-2227



Danese, New York

Bryan Hunt's 'Black Venus' (2011-12) at Danese Gallery

Through May 25

Back in the 1970s, I saw the airship-moored-to-skyscraper piece Bryan Hunt (b. 1947) made when he lived in Los Angeles. His return—after years of wonderfully improbable bronze waterfalls and flumes—to curving, twisting and implicitly softened versions of that faceted, pointed obloid form prompted the words "Dairy Queen dirigibles" to pop into my head.

But that facile alliteration doesn't capture the austere elegance of this show. And this almost perfect installation of only a half-dozen sculptures and four drawings, in a generous, polished gallery space, has got some quiet daring, to boot. Mr. Hunt fastens some of his sculptures, such as "Ulysses (White U)" (2010), to the wall 10 feet or so from the floor, which lends mystery (you can't see their tops) to their otherwise clear configurations. If only "Black Venus" (2011-12) were stuck directly into the floor like its companions are into the wall. The octagonal wood base supporting it is an unwelcome stumbling block in an exhibition

otherwise as sleek as an airship.



Edward Thorp Gallery

Katherine Bradford's 'Clear Underpants' (2011) at Edward Thorp Gallery

Katherine Bradford: New Work

Edward Thorp Gallery

210 11th Ave., (212) 691-6565

Through May 26

The artist, who was born in 1942 and won a Guggenheim Fellowship last year, paints with a youthful insouciance that daubers half her age ought to envy. She coats, patches, drips, spots and colors with an abandon that's deceptively controlled and conspicuously informed. Ms. Bradford knows what she's doing every step of the way. But visual charm goes only so far, and when there are as many works in a

show as there are in this one—a couple of dozen, big and small, on canvas and on paper—with multiple themes (ocean liners and sailing ships, Superman, and a nod to capital letters and New York), the easygoing nature can get forced, the gentle jokes wearying, and the attitude toward the subject matter indecisive.

For instance, does Ms. Bradford mean to skewer Superman or not?

He is "super" and he is a man—a man's man, moreover, when he morphs from his everyday nerdy-reporter persona of Clark Kent. Somehow, merely depicting him from behind while he either soars or jackknifes (it's not clear which) into the brushy beyond ("Superman Responds," 2011), or painting him vulnerable in a picture consisting mostly of raw canvas, as Ms. Bradford does in "Clear Underpants" (2011), isn't opinionated enough, especially when it concerns such a perennially lampooned character as Superman.

There's a similar fence-sitting with Ms. Bradford's color. She's quite adept at choosing and handling it,

but the paintings as a collection don't seem chromatically hers.

Much of a reaction like mine could have been mitigated by editing. Somewhere inside this exhibition of a very lively artist, there's a much more succinct show crying to get out.

—Mr. Plagens is a New York-based painter and writer.

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