

Sanne Mestrom's work often engages with the canon of modernism. She constantly reframes, re-makes and repositions canonical images and artists from Picasso and Matisse to here Frank Stella. In Griselda Pollock's book *Differencing the Canon* she asks us to deconstruct the very foundations of art history based on the "great master" which she says infantilises us all; Pollock asks us to play in the many possibilities of difference, never allowing the story of art to neatly fall in a single (teleological) line. Mestrom's work then, although bound in some way to the canon of modernism, keeps this play open. Her work on one hand celebrates the work of Frank Stella while at the same time dismantling it. It eruditely illuminates some of Stella's (still vital) concerns for abstraction and painting while at the same time expanding upon them or reconfiguring them. This work defines contemporary painting practice which revels in plurality and multiple meaning. Everything compresses into equivalence. It elides places and cultural contexts from Australia now, to the now past but still powerful centre of the New York School. What is important to note is that this work is not a piss-take. It is not the angry critique found in post-modern pastiche but a more open affair. Mestrom does not necessarily see Stella in a master position but merely a starting point from which to commence like two friends casually bantering.

Mestrom has perversely recreated many of the *Black Paintings* (from the early 60s) in tapestry. It is a bold gambit which sets up many resonances. Frank Stella is a great foil for Mestrom's explorations in painting and the object. Stella himself is not easily categorisable and allows Mestrom to make the positioning of the *Black Paintings* shift in different ways. On one hand Stella is seen as an apotheosis of Greenbergian thinking, where the surface is all. Stella believed in abstraction and wanted to get rid of any gesture (for example seen in the work of Pollock or Rothko) that could be reread as a Romantic narrative. His black paintings were done serially and mathematically with black house paint to obfuscate gesture. On the other hand this disavowal of the authorial subject (the hand of the artist) makes Stella famously proto-minimalist, a movement that was opposed to Greenbergian gesture and surface. Stella's assertion of the "object" qualities of the painting, its stretcher, its place in the room, its shape (by the mid-60s) really sees him as an important artist in a minimalist mode that moved painting away from the surface (and towards the object).

Mestrom dives straight into these ambiguities. On one hand the works obviously play with the minimalist industrial object. The tapestries are “stretched” on industrially made steel supports which in the large works act also as a stand. The paintings are now clearly objects in space. Stella once said “A sculpture is just a painting cut out and stood up somewhere.” The seriality of the works also ape Stella’s minimalist and controlled production. The lines drawn on with rulers in pencil in Stella are now avowedly straight in Mestrom’s work, made in steel. (However the softness of the Stella edge is quite uncannily reproduced where the two woools connect). The steel stretchers are also an extension of Mestrom’s other sculptural works and plinths in recent years. The holes in the works, the gaps, tend to declass the original canvasses and also to highlight the constructed and sculptural aspects. So all this looks to counter Stella in someway, making a hyper sculptural version of his 60s works; however by the 80s with Stella’s “maximalist” works (in his own words again) he showed that perhaps this was latent in his work anyway. For Stella and Mestrom the works not only represent spatial techniques of painting and perspective (something Mestrom has been playing with since her majestic PhD work) but also physically cut up space forcing the viewer to encounter the painting in an obviously bodily way.

Most comically I think is the more subtle reassertion of flatness. By turning the work into tapestry Mestrom makes a joke on the warp and weft of the canvas; it is all warp and weft. If as Stella asserts “Painting is a flat surface with paint on it,” Mestrom completes the Greenbergian flatness by NOT applying paint and only providing a woven support. What could be flatter than that? In a way it is more reductive than bleached, woven threads because the fleece is totally unworked, or dyed (in an interesting irony this creates more colour and contrasting tones). But of course here it is not flat but bubbly and soft, like canvas under a microscope. Again too what at first seems contradictory can also be seen as part of Stella’s practice. It is well known that Donald Judd and Frank Stella had large collections of Navajo Indian weaving with their famously geometric patterns and it has long been asserted that these rugs were an influence on Stella’s work.

Finally to return to Griselda Pollock, although not directly related to feminist critique,

Sanne's work, unlike Stella, does encompass this theoretical history. The notion of "women's work" and "craft" was reappraised through the works of Pollock and Linda Nochlin et al. It sits as a spectre in this work, as it does in Pollock's late, work as an influence but now expanded.

There is no doubt that Mestrom's work de-authors in a way that Stella's paintings do not. Mestrom learnt the craft from a guild of women in regional Victoria; her mother helped in the works' production (also a skilled tapestry maker). It is possible that this collaborative and communal aspect is the boldest counterargument to Stella. Then you see other softness and moves away from the minimalism of Stella. The greys and brown-blacks are natural. By coming directly from the sheep and they can be distanced from painting totally. Perhaps these works talk to rugs, the domestic space, a cosy corner some-where, to gifts between families for a newborn?

Then you are thrown back into the white cube. The works reassert themselves as paintings or at least as flats, objects in space. The works are characterised by this sort of equivocation and ghosting.

Dr. Oliver Watts