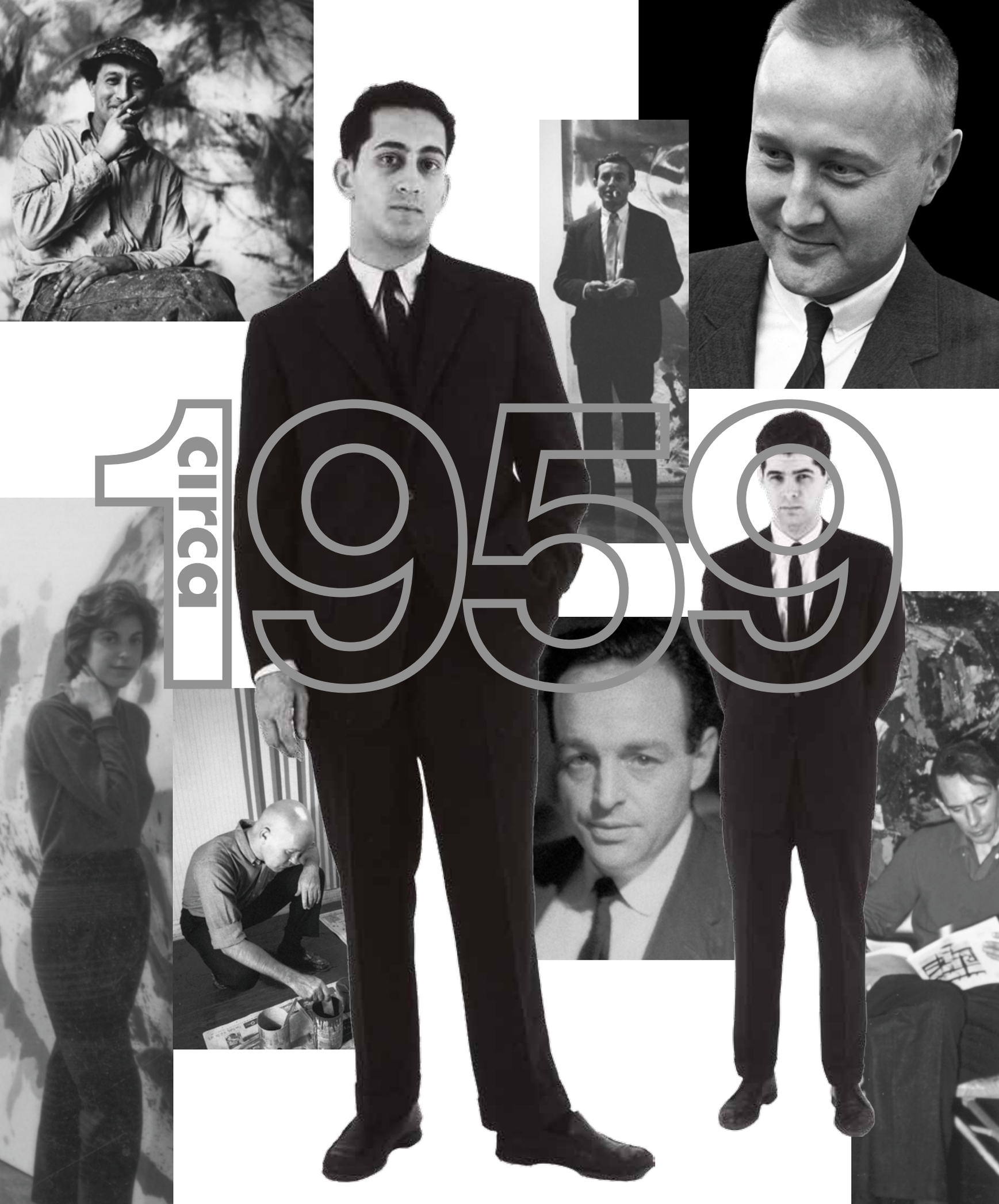

circa
1959

SEPTEMBER 10 TO OCTOBER 24, 2009
Opening Thursday September 10th, 6-8 pm

circa 1959

JACOBSON HOWARD GALLERY

33 EAST 68 STREET NEW YORK, NY 10065
T: 212 570 2362 www.jacobsonhoward.com

NINETEEN FIFTY-NINE

Michael Fried

"Michael, you've gone from boy strength
to man strength," Frank said to me approvingly.
But he was wrong. When we wrestled it took less than half a
minute
before he was sitting on my chest.

Frank rose disappointed. He preferred a challenge.
One sweltering late afternoon in New York Darby obliged him--
still close friends, they went at each other like mortal enemies
for a solid hour
as I sat and watched, appalled.

Earlier that day we had driven to beneath the Brooklyn Bridge
and walked around, and smoked cigars, and felt shiningly
alive. The sixties had not yet begun
but we knew with utmost certainty that whatever was coming to
pass (until then without us)

we three would have a hand in it. Frank first of all--
"These paths lead only into painting," Carl Andre wrote about
his stripes
later that year. And they did, they did,
as far as they went.

cover clockwise from top left: Bluhm, Stella, Dzubas, Anuszkiewicz, Bladen, Bannard, Held, Davis, Frankenthaler (for complete caption see inside back cover.

inside cover: New Year's Eve at The Club, 39 East Eighth Street, New York, 1959. On the wall is a poster that features phonetically rendered, stereotypical dialect-style text that reads 'Gleetings; Happy New Lear 1958-1959; flome San Flancisco Crub to New York Annex.' (Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images)

Critical Inquiry 34, suppl (Winter 2008)

circa 1959

Transitions in the Work of Nine Abstract Painters

Roni Feinstein

During the mid-fifties, artists working across the United States succumbed to the seductive allure of Abstract Expressionist paintwork. The drips of Jackson Pollock, the lush, gestural brushstrokes of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, and the densely layered, craggy surfaces of Clyfford Still inspired any number of younger and emerging artists to produce abstract work featuring an emphatic paint handling, generally imbued with an expressive urgency derived from the first generation's ethos. Abstract Expressionism, which originated in the late forties, was an art of high moral purpose largely conceived in response to the horrors of World War II; impulsive or pronounced paintwork was used to express agitated states of mind and being and/or reveal aspects of the human condition. By the late fifties, American society was enjoying a period of peace and enhanced prosperity, and increasing numbers of artists began to see Abstract Expressionism as irrelevant, outmoded and far too widespread. Many artists moved towards a more dispassionate art characterized by precision and clarity, reflecting the cooler sensibilities of the time.

Circa 1959 explores the transitions that occurred in the painting of nine abstract artists during the late fifties: Richard Anuszkiewicz, Darby Bannard, Ronald Bladen, Norman Bluhm, Gene Davis, Friedel Dzubas, Helen Frankenthaler, Al Held and Frank Stella. To this end, it takes the rather novel approach of juxtaposing two works by each artist: a painting of the mid-fifties paired with another dating to around 1959. In most cases, the shift in the artist's work represents a move away from a style of painting heavily influenced by Abstract Expressionist practice toward a variety of alternative styles, most of them involving more objective attitudes about the materials and processes of art making. For most the work dating to circa 1959 documents a significant change in their art, but is also a way station--a short-lived, intermediary stage--on the road to a still more radical transformation that was to come later. Several of the artists in the exhibition were to be leading figures in the new, anti-expressionist avant-garde that emerged in the early 1960s, their anonymously rendered, impersonally conceived work paving the way for Color Field painting, Hard Edge abstraction, Minimalism and Op art.

View of a row of art galleries on E. 10th Street between 3rd and 4th Avenues, New York, New York, late 1950s. (Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images)

There are numerous interconnections among these nine artists, despite a variety of ages and life experiences. In the fifties, the New York art community was small. Helen Frankenthaler and Friedel Dzubas were both included in the "9th Street Show" in 1951 and had their first solo shows at Tibor de Nagy, in 1951 and 1952 respectively. They shared a studio from 1952-53, during the period in which Frankenthaler executed the landmark painting Mountains and Sea. In 1956, Al Held and Ronald Bladen relocated together to New York from San Francisco. The same year, Norman Bluhm, who had gone to Paris on the GI Bill and had become closely associated there with Al Held, Joan Mitchell and Sam Francis, moved back to New York. All these artists became regulars at the gathering places established by the first generation of Abstract Expressionists: The Club, the Tenth Street galleries and the Cedar Tavern. A couple

of years later, Frank Stella and Darby Bannard, recently graduated from Princeton, would make their presence felt. Several uptown galleries began to play a role. During the late fifties, Bluhm, Dzubas and Stella, the latter two becoming close friends, showed at Leo Castelli's gallery. Al Held and later Gene Davis would both exhibit at the Poindexter Gallery. Frankenthaler, Held and Dzubas would eventually be represented by the Andre Emmerich Gallery (a relationship that continued for several decades).

The friendship and support of the critic Clement Greenberg drew together a number of the artists in the exhibition, and was key to transitions that occurred in their art late in the decade. Early in the fifties, Greenberg had begun to champion the non-gestural branch of Abstract Expressionism, emphasizing color over linear activity. He promoted, as well, impersonal execution, a flat picture surface, and what he called "opticality" (or non-tactility). In 1964, he would curate "Post-Painterly Abstraction" for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, summarizing his formalist ideas and celebrating the color-based abstraction of a host of artists, among them Frankenthaler, Dzubas, Gene Davis, Held, Bannard and Stella.

By the late fifties, many observers and participants in the New York art scene were calling for alternatives to painterly expressionism. The paired works in this exhibition reveal something different about each of these artists. By 1959, they were moving, or had substantially moved, in the direction of the work which would establish their places in art history. For most, this meant arriving at an art in which painterliness was either reduced or replaced by anonymous handling, accompanied by repetitive or unitary formats. Large scale, however, would continue to be a hallmark of American painting for years to come.

Attendees at a lecture at The Club, New York, February 13, 1959. Among those visible are Beat writer and poet Gregory Corso (leaning against back wall at left), painter Sam Francis (center, under the 'Kootz; Marca-Relli' poster), sculptor Ronald Bladen (against wall, under the 'Exit' sign), and dancer and choreographer Erick Hawkins (at far right, cropped). (Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images)

Friedel Dzubas, in the mid-fifties, produced dark and moody expressionist paintings featuring brushed shapes and an extensive use of black; his dispersed compositions evoked landscapes wracked by wind, water and storm. A few years later, while retaining a gestural quality, his paint

handling grows increasingly light and lyrical as he moves toward an art of color shapes and the use of stain techniques. With bright, contrasting areas of spreading color set upon large, lightly gessoed canvases, his paintings appeared sunlit and expansive.

Clement Greenberg visits Friedel Dzubas at his home and studio in Ithaca, NY while teaching at Cornell University, circa 1970. (Photographer unknown)

An opening for a group show at the Tanager Gallery, 90 East 10th Street, New York, circa 1959. (Photo by John Cohen/Getty Images)

Helen Frankenthaler had indicated this direction earlier when she painted Mountains and Sea (1952). She developed a stain painting technique in which thinned oil paint was poured onto the canvas surface where it was allowed to pool and soak in, thereby eliminating both gestural brushwork and paint textures. Frankenthaler's innovation famously influenced the Washington D.C. painters Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, as well as Dzubas and Davis and made her a leading figure during the decades that followed. Unlike the other artists included in "Circa 1959," Frankenthaler did not undergo a major transition in her work during the late fifties; rather, she continued to develop and expand her range of painting techniques. Frankenthaler's 1959 painting, featured here, is a masterful work of commanding presence in which calligraphic marks in strong colors are layered, interwoven and juxtaposed.

Gene Davis, a self-taught painter, was producing in the mid-fifties lushly brushed, centered compositions of great chromatic richness. By the late fifties, his use of staining techniques on unprimed canvas linked him with Color Field painting. At the same time, he originated his stripe paintings, a signature format that he would explore for the rest of his life. In these works, narrow vertical stripes of a consistent width, rendered with great precision, completely fill his canvases. Disrupting the linear order and activating the surfaces, Davis developed a brilliant and un-

predictable use of color in which varying hues and intensities, juxtaposed and arranged at intervals, established rhythms and counter-rhythms.

Norman Bluhm in his studio at 333 Park Avenue South, New York, 1967 (Photograph by Daniel Frasnay)

Like Davis, Bladen and Held were initially heavily indebted to Abstract Expressionist practice. Before leaving San Francisco, working together and sometimes sharing a studio, they both were motivated to strive for authenticity of experience in thickly encrusted works inspired by the tactile impastoes of Clyfford Still. After arriving in New York and exhibiting their work at the Brata Gallery (a cooperative of which they were founding members), each artist steered his work away from expressionism to hard edge geometry.

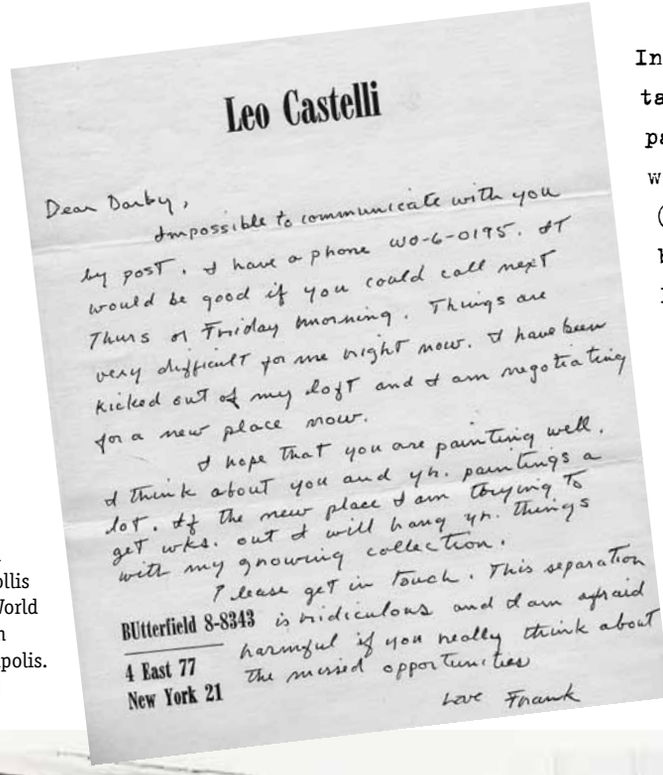
Bladen carried his work into increasingly high relief, at first using pure pigments, then in 1959 creating a series of folded paper collages. By the early sixties, he was making abstract geometric relief sculptures of painted wood with metal elements; these led to his signature sculptures of 1965, their unitary shapes and often monumental scale causing them to be associated with Minimalism. Their heroic, gestural nature, however, looks back to the artist's roots in Abstract Expressionism.

Walter Darby Bannard and Frank Stella, 3 Cents, 1957. Collage on paper. Inscription on verso reads: "Done early in the morning of Thursday the 14th of December 1957 in Godfrey and Bethany Winham's apartment on 31 East. 17 street. With the help of Franklin P. Stella. The edges were edited Dec. 25 1957 about ¼" inward"

In 1959, Held began to translate the expressionist vigor of his early works into bold, graphically rendered geometric shapes. An untitled collage/painting of 1959 in the present exhibition reveals much about the imminent change. The work's surface is covered with sheets of newspaper, comics and pages taken from magazines. Superimposed upon the collage layer is a veritable frenzy of surface activity, consisting largely of outlined geometric and quasi-geometric shapes framing certain of the photographic reproductions. The collaged canvas acknowledges a growing contemporary practice, incorporating everyday materials in a manner already established by Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow and others. From this work he proceeds to the more controlled "Taxi Cab" paintings, which soon give rise to work of still greater precision and clarity, focused on a few weighty, crisp-edged shapes.

Darby Bannard and Frank Stella were close friends, having met at Princeton, where poet Michael Fried, who would become a prominent formalist critic, often joined their debates about painting and art criticism. In 1958, Bannard produced a series of brushy abstractions evoking

landscapes and skies with dramatic meteorological effects. By 1959, he radically simplified his means, initiating an extended series of paintings in square and near-square formats in which a large, anonymously rendered shape, most often a circle or rectangle painted in a single, luminous color, was isolated against a flat ground. Although these stark compositions can be understood as anticipating Minimalism, they are poetic and strangely expressive, eliciting a range of moods and harking back to Rothko's abstract sublime.

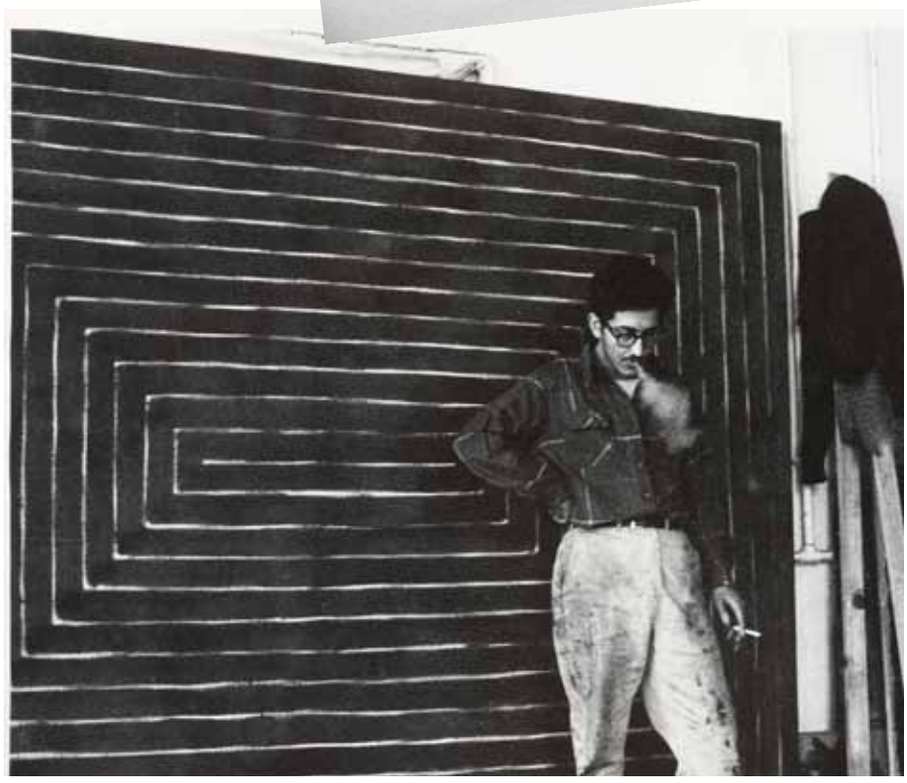


Leo Castelli

Dear Darby,
impossible to communicate with you by post. I have a phone WO-6-0195. It would be good if you could call next Thurs or Friday morning. Things are very difficult for me right now. I have been kicked out of my loft and I am negotiating for a new place now.
I hope that you are painting well. I think about you and yr. paintings a lot. If the new place I am trying to get wks. out I will hang yr. things with my growing collection.
Please get in touch. This separation is ridiculous and I am afraid harmful if you really think about the missed opportunities
Love Frank

BUtterfield 8-8343
4 East 77
New York 21

Frank Stella's letter to Darby Bannard, on Leo Castelli Gallery stationery, June 10, 1960 (courtesy Darby Bannard)



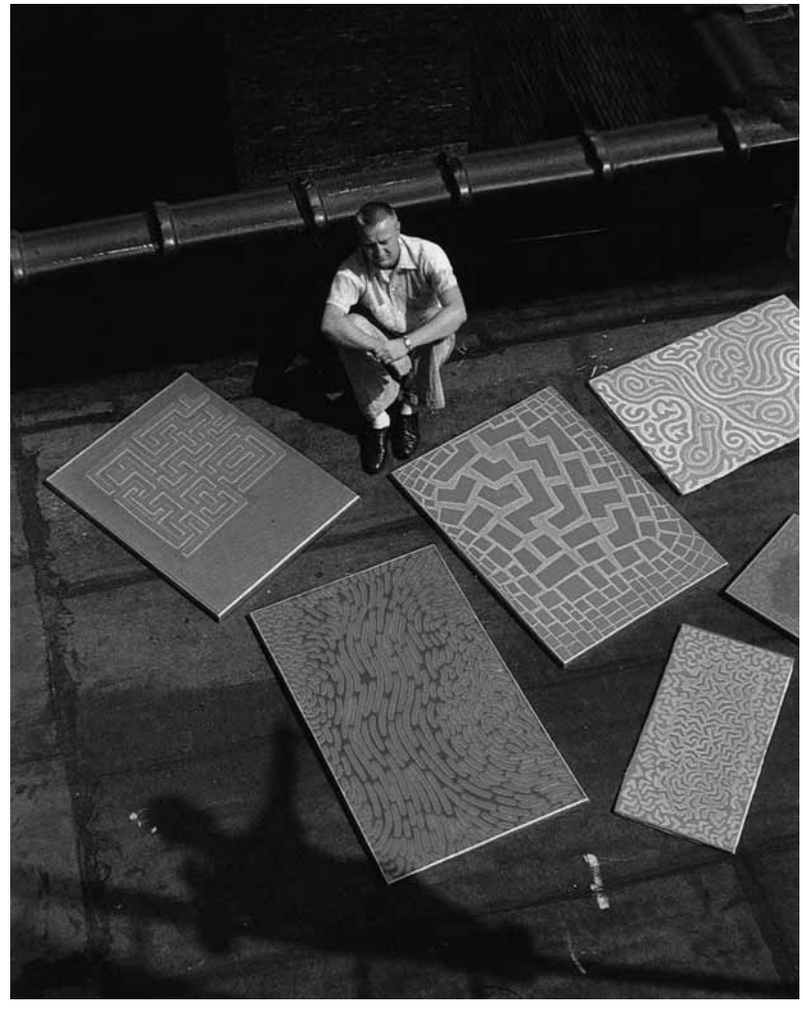
Frank Stella with one of his "Black Paintings" from 1959. Photographed by Hollis Frampton for The Secret World of Frank Stella. (Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Estate of Hollis Frampton)

In 1957, Stella, sometimes working in tandem with Bannard, created a number of pasted-paper collages and mixed-medium works incorporating everyday objects. (These pieces may have been infuenced by their study at Princeton with art historian William C. Seitz, who would curate "The Art of Assemblage" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961.) Although some of Stella's early paintings show an attraction for the art of Clyfford Still, it was Jasper Johns who directly affected the course of the younger artist's work. As has often been recounted, after seeing John's Flag (1954–55) at Castelli in January 1958, Stella spent the rest of the year producing paintings filled with bands of stripes.

"Circa 1959" features Stella's Requiem for Johnnie Stompanato (1958), named after Hollywood actress Lana Turner's abusive lover, who was shot by her fourteen-year-daughter in April of that year. The painting, which has a dominant pink coloration, is organized into a nine-block grid that consists of both loosely (sensually) and forcefully rendered vertical or horizontal bands. In 1959, Stella began his extended, anti-expressionist "Black Painting" series. The inclusion of four of these works in the Museum of Modern Art's "Sixteen Americans" of December, 1959, launched Stella's career.

Norman Bluhm and Richard Anuszkiewicz differ from the other artists in the present exhibition in that the first never shed his expressionist roots, while the second never had any to shed. In Bluhm's paintings of the mid-fifties, an accretion of marks forms a dense web that extends across the picture surface; rivulets of paint run downward. By 1959 his tightly bound, all-over webs burst apart into looser and more muscular gestures. The paintings convey a raw, explosive energy. Drips, previously assigned a more modest role, now form torrents of paint that run down, activate and articulate the work's surface. With such paintings, Bluhm carries his highly individualized interpretation of Abstract Expressionism into the realm of bravura performance.

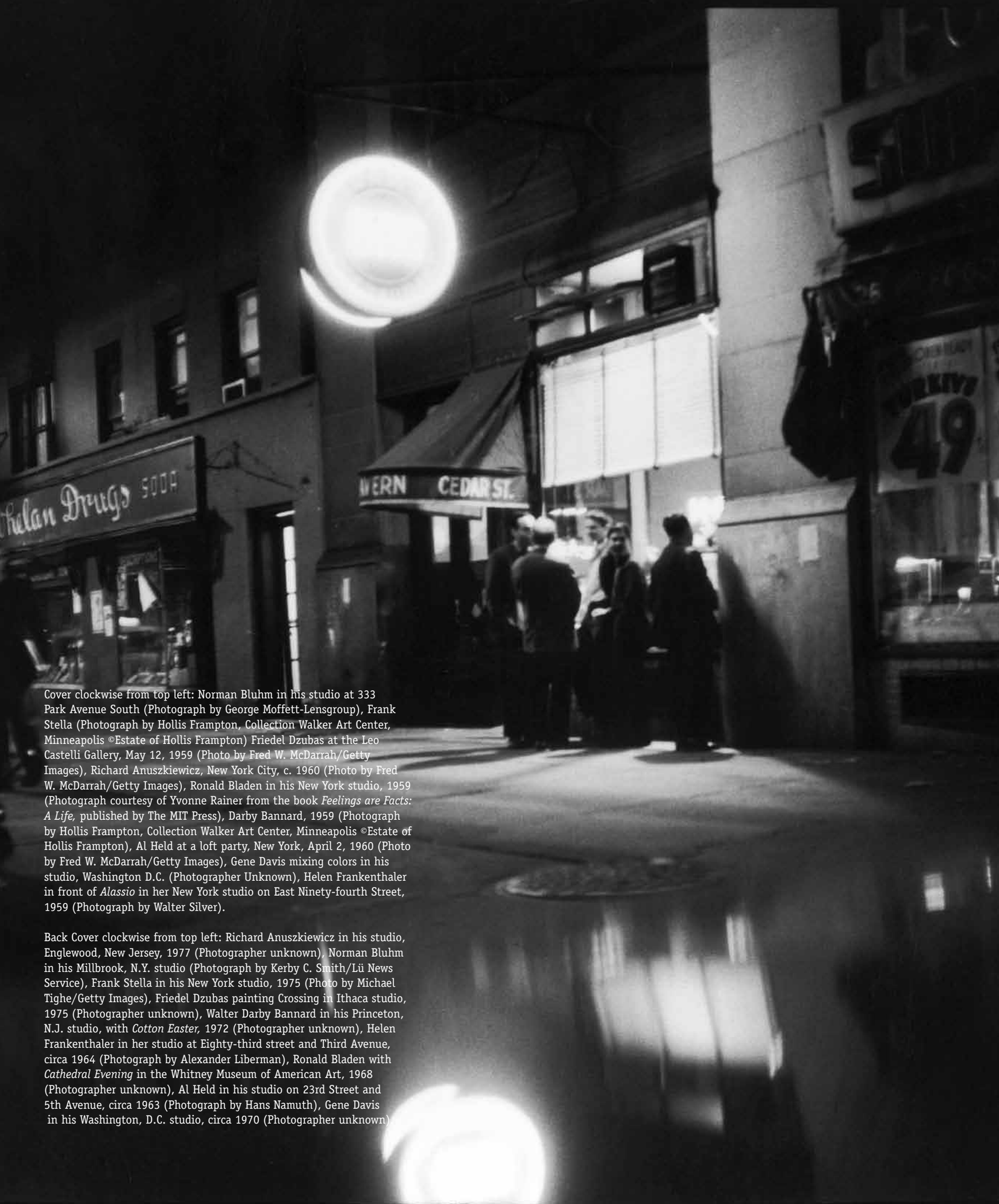
In the early fifties, Anuszkiewicz attended Yale University where he studied with Bauhaus master Josef Albers. From Albers he acquired technical discipline and attentiveness to the dynamic interaction of colors. Anuszkiewicz was also interested in scientific principles of perceptual psychology then gaining currency in academic circles. Although he had begun his career working in a realist style, by 1955-56 his work was abstract, focused on the study of color contrasts, figure-ground relationships and implied movement. His paintings of the late fifties grow increasingly more sophisticated and precise in rendering, the whole of the painting's surface now occupied by patterns and forms in strongly contrasting colors that give rise to illusionistic effects and optical vibrations. While the term "Op Art" was not coined until 1964, and the Museum of Modern Art's "Responsive Eye" exhibition (curated by Seitz) was not held until 1965, Anuszkiewicz had begun to exploit dynamic optical effects in his work many years before.



Richard Anuszkiewicz on the rooftop of his New York studio with his recent paintings, circa 1959. (The photographer was his roommate whose shadow is visible)

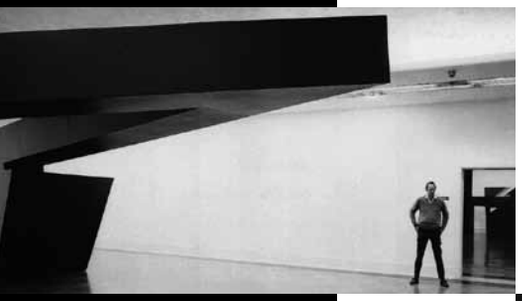
"Circa 1959" illuminates some of the transitions that occurred within the realm of American abstract art during the 1950s after expressionist painting ceased to be a cultural imperative. The nine abstract painters represented here, often informed by one another, moved their work in a variety of directions in keeping with their personal inclinations and the tenor of their time. Whether geometric or fluid in nature, this work set the stage for the clean edges, flat surfaces and cool sensibilities of the art of the sixties.

inside back cover: Outside the Cedar Street Tavern, Al Held talks to artists Joe Stefanelli, and Matsumi Kanemitsu, and Tom Doyle, circa 1959. (Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/ Getty Images)



Cover clockwise from top left: Norman Bluhm in his studio at 333 Park Avenue South (Photograph by George Moffett-Lensgroup), Frank Stella (Photograph by Hollis Frampton, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis ©Estate of Hollis Frampton) Friedel Dzubas at the Leo Castelli Gallery, May 12, 1959 (Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images), Richard Anuszkiewicz, New York City, c. 1960 (Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images), Ronald Bladen in his New York studio, 1959 (Photograph courtesy of Yvonne Rainer from the book *Feelings are Facts: A Life,* published by The MIT Press), Darby Bannard, 1959 (Photograph by Hollis Frampton, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis ©Estate of Hollis Frampton), Al Held at a loft party, New York, April 2, 1960 (Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images), Gene Davis mixing colors in his studio, Washington D.C. (Photographer Unknown), Helen Frankenthaler in front of *Alassio* in her New York studio on East Ninety-fourth Street, 1959 (Photograph by Walter Silver).

Back Cover clockwise from top left: Richard Anuszkiewicz in his studio, Englewood, New Jersey, 1977 (Photographer unknown), Norman Bluhm in his Millbrook, N.Y. studio (Photograph by Kerby C. Smith/Lü News Service), Frank Stella in his New York studio, 1975 (Photo by Michael Tighe/Getty Images), Friedel Dzubas painting Crossing in Ithaca studio, 1975 (Photographer unknown), Walter Darby Bannard in his Princeton, N.J. studio, with *Cotton Easter,* 1972 (Photographer unknown), Helen Frankenthaler in her studio at Eighty-third street and Third Avenue, circa 1964 (Photograph by Alexander Liberman), Ronald Bladen with *Cathedral Evening* in the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1968 (Photographer unknown), Al Held in his studio on 23rd Street and 5th Avenue, circa 1963 (Photograph by Hans Namuth), Gene Davis in his Washington, D.C. studio, circa 1970 (Photographer unknown).



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