

Art June 2024

# Exhibition note

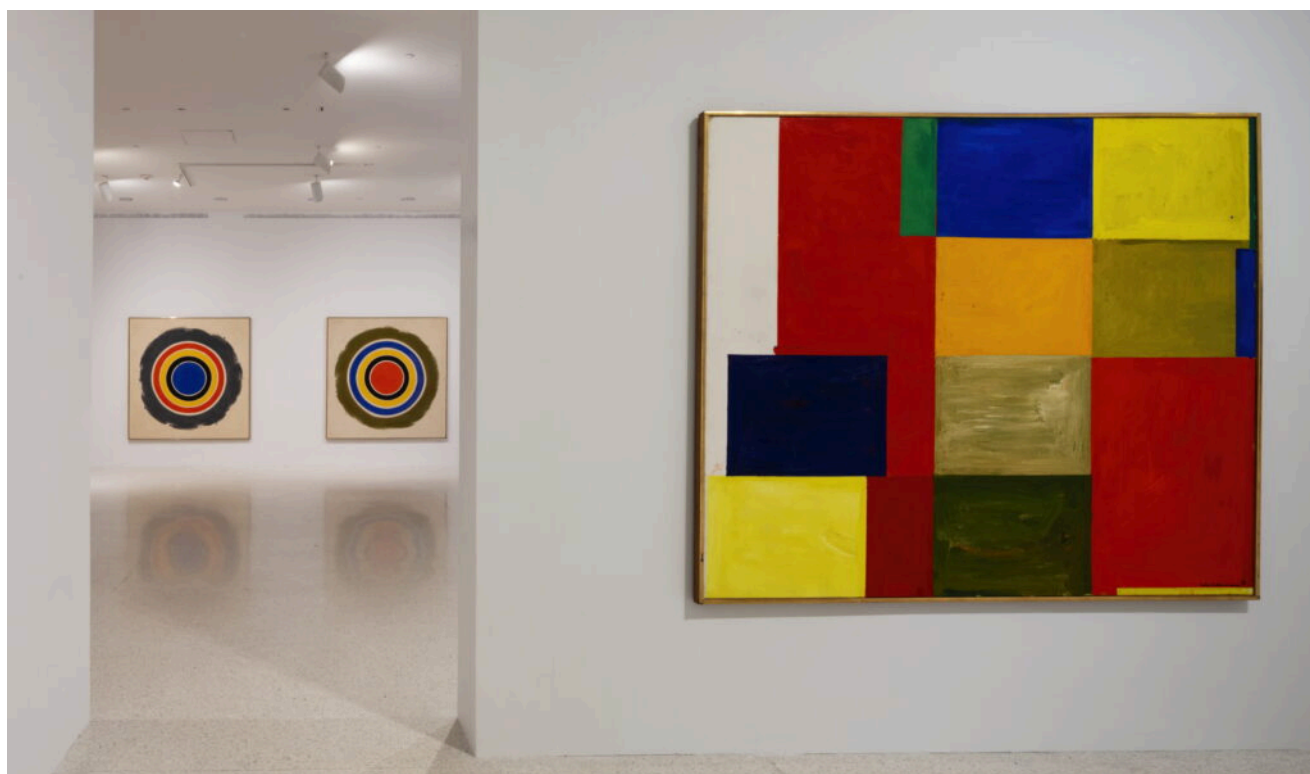
*by Franklin Einspruch*

*On “Glory of the World: Color Field Painting (1950s to 1983)” at NSU Art Museum, Fort Lauderdale.*

Walking into the NSU Art Museum in Fort Lauderdale is like setting foot in a more serious time. “Glory of the World: Color Field Painting (1950s to 1983)” displays a one-knockout-after-another selection of work, and the aggregation of creative achievement is magnificent. No doubt the period of high modernism in America saw its share of folly and shenanigans. But aesthetic matters were at stake, as opposed to all the other matters now competing for artists’ attention, and the paintings of the era show it.

As reported by Julia Friedman in these pages in April, Amada Cruz, the director and newly self-appointed chief curator of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, as well as an exemplar of the underqualification and sheer nastiness of our progressive-bureaucratic overclass, canceled a sixty-two-loan exhibition with three months’ notice that would have served as an homage to the vision and taste of Michael Fried (see “Cruz control” in *The New Criterion* of April 2024). The exhibition was to be a reimagining and expansion of his seminal “Three American Painters” show at the Fogg in 1965. Cruz suggested fatuously to the museum’s erstwhile chief curator that she offer the exhibition to a university gallery that better suited it than the SBMA and its “diverse audiences.” Even the art historian Christa Noel Robbins, whose exposure of some trifling dirt on Fried dating from almost sixty years ago arguably caused all this, was appalled at Cruz’s cowardice. Not that Robbins had much of a leg

to stand on to complain, as she did, that “bravery seems to be in short supply in the museum world.”



*Installation view of “The Glory of the World.” Photo: Steven Brooke.*

Despite that shortage, some courage remains where it was stockpiled. The NSU Art Museum’s director and chief curator, Bonnie Clearwater, has here presented important aspects of what the Santa Barbara show might have been. Fried himself, unfortunately, doesn’t feature, but the titular subjects of his prodigious 1965 exhibition do: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Frank Stella, the last of whom died at age eighty-seven just weeks ago. So do several other important figures of the time, notably Frank Bowling, Peter Bradley, Helen Frankenthaler, Sam Gilliam, Jack Bush, Morris Louis, and Larry Poons, among others. The title of the exhibition derives from a remark Stella made on a work by Hans Hofmann:

Hofmann proved that the straightforward manipulation of pigment can create exalted art. . . . Glory of the world this painting surely is, and glory of the world his painting surely was and is.

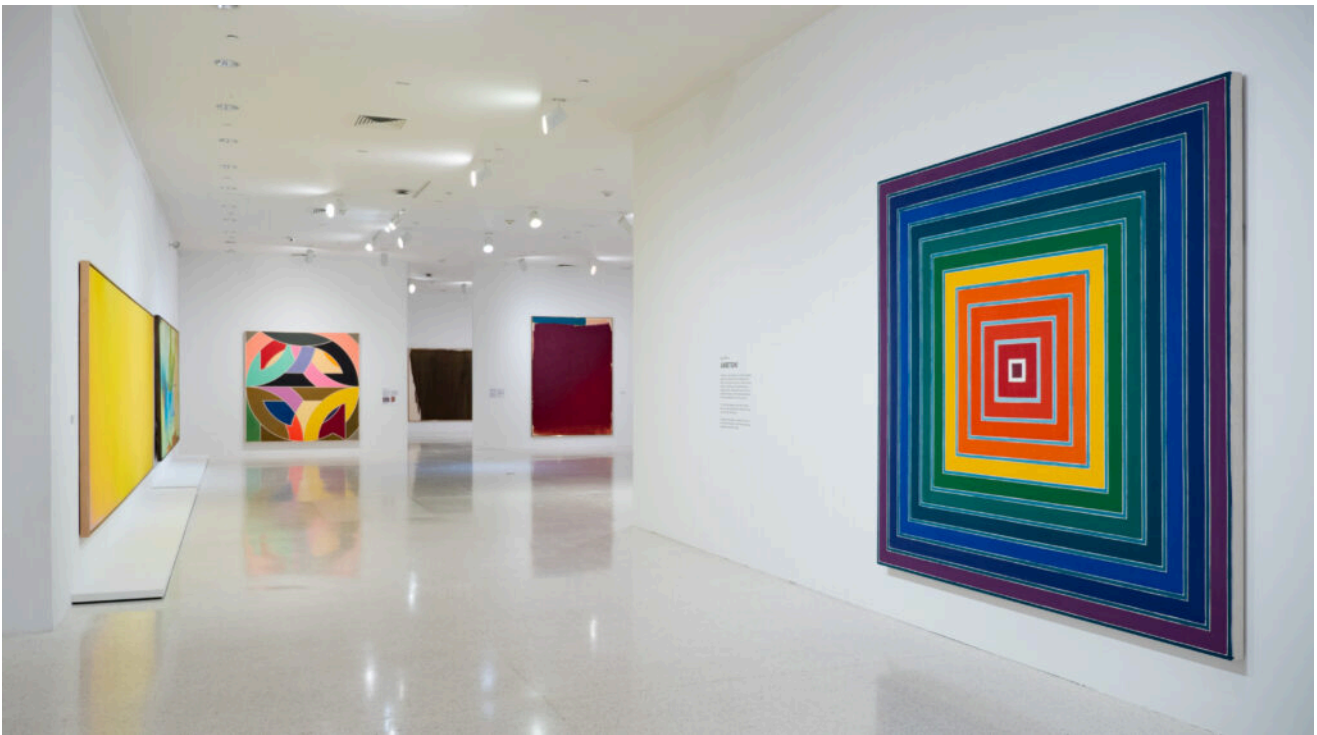
There is a single, excellent Hofmann in the exhibition, *Iris* (1964–65). “We do not have access to the kind of figurative illusionism that Rubens had at his disposal,” noted Stella in his Harvard lectures compiled as *Working Space*

(1986). “On the other hand, we do not have its limitations either.”

Unfortunately, the converse is also true: without the conventions that figurative illusionism provides, you have to come up with your own. In theory, the abstract painter might use whatever color he wanted. In practice, if you load up a canvas with a lot of strong, differentiated hues, they break away from each other visually. The artists of the time solved this in various ways; Hofmann’s solution, here, was to echo the shape of the canvas in rectangular units that abut and cover one another. The upper half of the painting places blue next to orange and green next to red, two sets of complements. That invites disaster, but Hofmann includes a couple of rectangles of smeared ochre and a third of limpid, greenish mud sitting at the bottom edge. The neutrals are markedly more variegated and brushy than the primary and secondary colors, and their emphasis on texture over hue causes the painting to compose itself instead of devolving into a kind of obnoxious quilt.

**S**tella, for his part, resorted to aggressive geometries to divide the areas of canvas in a manner that conveyed a sense of interlocking form. An excellent work from his Protractor series, *Waskwain II (Variations on a Circle)*, from 1968, employs an evocative range of pinks, yellows, and teal. Again, an ochre protractor shape serves as the composition’s base.

*Waskwain II* hangs in a room with an Olitski and a Frankenthaler, each of which is handily ten paces wide. They represent two more solutions to the problem of organizing pure color. The Olitski, *Yellow Looshe* (1968), is a subtly varied expanse of yellow, so the color has no competition. In the Frankenthaler, *Hint from Bassano* (1973), colors wash into each other oceanically. The forms seem to have blown into position and might waft away. (Here is yet another instance of an area of ochre along the bottom.) Olitskis around the rest of this room are also mostly devoted to a single color, but Olitski introduced intrusions of others at the edges, a scheme by which he was able to produce a striking variety of interesting results.



*Installation view of "The Glory of the World." Photo: Steven Brooke.*

Stella was too ambitious to repeat protractor shapes for the rest of his career, and his geometries became increasingly adamant until the colors became an array of inset squares, such as *Sacramento No. 6* (1978). A wall label recalls:

It was ambition, Larry Poons repeatedly insisted in an interview with art historian Karen Wilkin, that defined the cohort of mid-20th century American artists who committed themselves to abstract painting . . . ambitions for their paintings and the future of painting.

By then Stella was echoing Noland's Target series from twenty years earlier, in which he had placed circles within circles. A few of those Noland's from the Mirvish Collection are in "Glory," and they continue to look audacious. The organizational ochre form in *THIS 1958-1959* is a ring that encircles the others, but with a contrasting gestural application of paint, akin to the Hofmann.



*Kenneth Noland, THIS 1959–59, 1959, Oil on canvas, Private collection. Photo: Michael Visser. © 2023*

*The Kenneth Noland Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

Stella reappears once more in a new incarnation with *Zolder* from 1982, by which time he felt entrapped by the planar canvas and began painting on increasingly wild constructions of corrugated aluminum. Nearby is a charming painted assemblage of quilted fabric by Al Loving from 1975, also indicative of creative impatience with geometric abstraction even among those who were best at it. Regarding this last artist, a wall label discusses Clement Greenberg, the foremost critic of this work, like so: “Recent exhibitions and research on these and other Black artists are bringing greater attention to Greenberg’s association with them.” This, too, is a return to seriousness, in defiance of the kind of abuse that Greenberg continues to receive thirty years after his death.

The exhibition is especially flattering to Morris Louis and Larry Poons. The selection of Louis favors some umber pours from the late 1950s whose verticality and neutrality evoke the profundity of good Chinese landscape painting. There is a room of Poons's drip canvases from the 1970s and early '80s that is nearly comparable in effect to Monet's cycle of water lilies in the Musée de l'Orangerie. It is just that engulfing and luminous.

How could such visual amusements ascend all the way to glory? By playing directly on the mechanisms by which we experience the world. The brilliant Michael Schreyach, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, describes one of the achievements of Jackson Pollock as

investigating—at the level of technique—abstract painting's capacity to represent various modes of perception as the means by which the artist's statement or proposition could be expressed.

(Pollock does not appear in "Glory," but the 1950–83 selection demonstrates how long the problems investigated by him and other earlier painters remained vital.) Schreyach compares Pollock's superimposition of the pictorial and the actual with Merleau-Ponty's superimposition of the body's "virtual" and "physical" space, arising from the unitary nature of percepts and objects.

That we experience these works of art simultaneously as things and pictures reveals something key to human nature that had never been so expressly demonstrated until abstraction was applied to the tradition of easel painting and driven to mural-painting proportions. Such work makes the viewer conscious of the somatic aspect of perception, which Michael Fried wrote about evocatively as "bodiliness." Its details are pointedly difficult to articulate. But the thrill, however ineffable, is real, and "Glory of the World" is a welcome opportunity to sample it in several delectable permutations.

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**Franklin Einspruch** is an artist in New Hampshire. "Franklin Einspruch: Tangibilia" appears at THERE in New York City on June 1–8, 2024.

