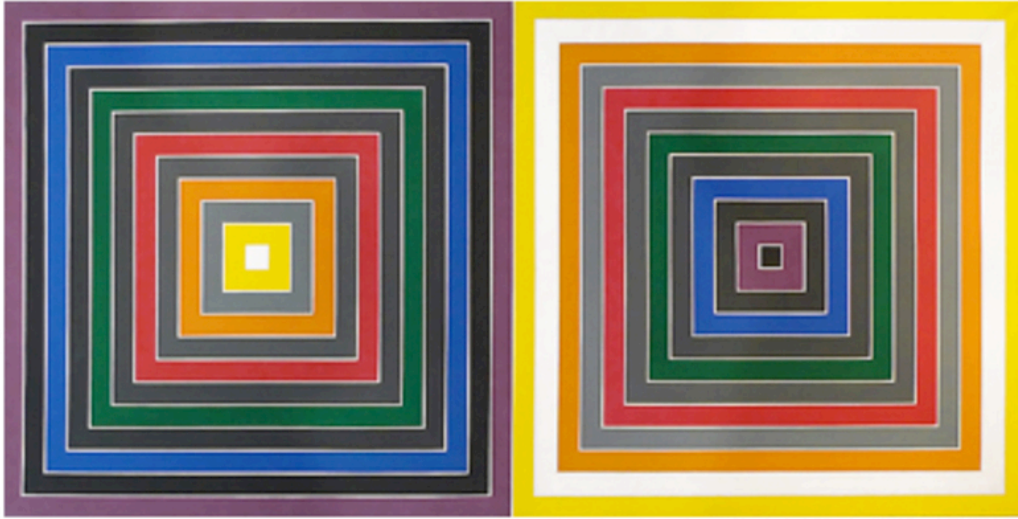


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Frank Stella: *Geometric Variations*
Paul Kasmin Gallery
293 10th Ave., New York, NY 10001
September 22, 2011 – October 29, 2011



Grey Scramble X (Double), 1968, oil on canvas, 69 x 138 inches. Courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery.

Stella in Bonds

by Noah Dillon

At Paul Kasmin's "Geometric Variations," Frank Stella's oil and alkyd paintings are front and center. The paintings are materially and conceptually flat, smooth, dry, possessing aggression without force.

They tantalize with funny tricks that don't do much: spirals break free at the corners, but such escape is nothing with the hulking didactic chain left fettered to its ankle. The especially vapid titles do not help.

A few small diptychs fare better though. *Malcolm's Bouquet* (1965) is exciting if only for the residual accident of some cursory spilled white paint over a few black stripes. *New Madrid* (1961) is a rusty spiral reminiscent of Stella's early monochrome paintings, with the radical inclusion of spatial depth. A large diptych, *Grey Scramble X (Double)*, 1968, evokes mixed feelings. Funny tonal shifts occur as concentric squares are inverted.

What is black on the left is white on the right, and so forth: blue and orange, green and red. The white center on the left looks stable where it sits within dingy yellow. At right,

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the same white band feels madly shoved. Loosened too much at the perimeter, it gets tangled between blades of yellow and orange. This gives much by illuminating the contradiction of pattern, which creates illusionistic space or not depending on rearrangements of color, and shows the potential for movement and complexity inherent in very simple, very flat geometric paintings.

Deborah Kass' *Frank's Dilemma* (2009) hung in almost the exact same place on the same wall just a day shy of one year ago. Her painting is an explicit parody of works like *Grey Scramble*, though Kass also appropriates Warhol-type camouflage and lyrics from *A Chorus Line* (1975), capturing some of the fun that Stella devised to create in these works. Stella's paintings appear programmed for play, without ever actually playing. Instead, he makes the declaration for fun. Having early on presented himself no easy way forward from his break against Abstract Expressionism, this show presents a brusque rush back towards representation. That's an intriguing art-historical proposition (the sort of problematizing for which Stella is known), but probably not enough.