

Abstract Expressionism 1940's and 50's



- **Abstract Expressionism** is an avant-garde art movement that flowered in America after the WWII and held sway until the dawn of Pop Art in the 1960's. With this movement **New York replaced Paris as the center of the art world.**

- The Abstract Expressionists' goal was a **raw and impulsive art.** What mattered were the qualities of the paint itself and the **act of painting itself.**

- **Influenced by Surrealism,** with its emphasis on **spontaneous, automatic** or **subconscious** creation, it combined the emotional intensity and self-expression of the German Expressionists with the anti-figurative aesthetic of Cubism.



The major players in Abstract Expressionism were:

Jackson Pollock

Willem de Kooning

Mark Rothko

These artists formed what is known as **The New York School.** Some were Americans by birth, but others came from Europe to the United States as a result of pre-war & wartime (WWII) upheavals.

- **Abstract Expressionism** celebrated the angst-ridden individual, making that artist's struggle towards creativity seem both dramatic & heroic. For the Abstract Expressionist, **ART could liberate the soul of the isolated individual in a messed-up world.**

- The world was pretty messed up by the late 1940's when you factor in WWI & II, The Great Depression & top it off with the horrific destruction of the A-bomb. What's an artist going to paint?

- The Abstract Expressionists **liberated themselves from geometric abstraction & the need for recognizable images** (tradition since the Renaissance).

- **Abstract Expressionism** involved very little to **no subject matter** (non-objective).

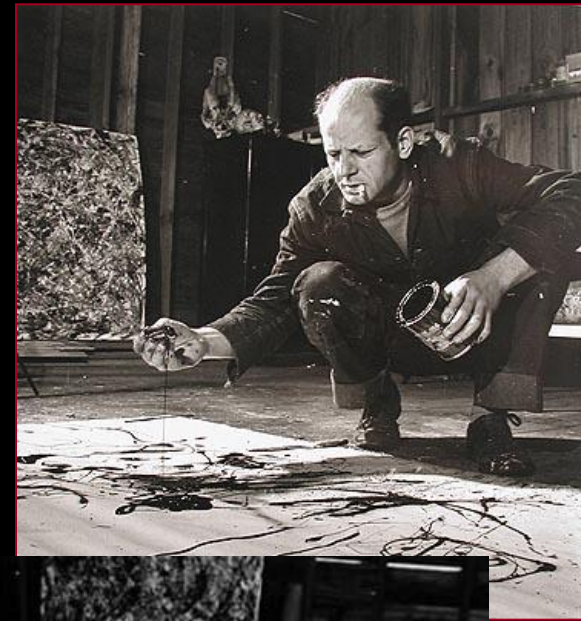
Paintings prior to WWII



Non-objective gestures after the war

Jackson Pollock

No one better optimized this wildly subconscious approach than **JACKSON POLLOCK**. Labeled “Jack the Dripper”, Pollock made a revolutionary breakthrough by **abandoning the paint brush** altogether, sloshing, slinging, flinging, pouring, ..and dripping....commercial paints onto vast rolls of canvases spread on the floor of his studio barn. Jackson’s methods epitomized **“action” painting**. Pollock conveyed **“energy made visible”** in mural sized abstractions that embodied his psychic state at the moment of creation.





Evolution of Pollock's style



No. 1 , 1950 (LAVENDER MIST)



Pollock, BLUE POLES, 1953



Jackson Pollock, #5, 8ft by 4ft
Sold in 2006 for \$140,000,000

✿ Another artist who focused on the physical action of painting was **Willem De Kooning**. Using large brushes and the Surrealist technique of automatism, De Kooning created **raw, gestural surfaces**.

✿ DeKooning is known for his series of **abstract depictions of women** (which he compared to the Venus of Willendorf). These frontal images combined **slashing brush strokes** with a **vague suggestion of naturalism** to create a frightening image.

✿ As unfinished as his work looked, De Kooning was constantly reworking them in his trademark hues of **yellow, buff** and “De Kooning” **pink**.

✿ “A painting must be felt, not known”





Rubbishes the idea of beauty

Woman on a Bicycle, 1952

Colour Field Painting: the '1950's into the '60's

- ❑ **Colour Field Painting**, as an extension of Abstract Expressionism was primarily concerned with exploring the **effects of pure colour on a canvas**.
- ❑ Often greatly **reduced references to nature**.
- ❑ Colour Field artists painted with a **highly articulated and psychological use of colour**.
- ❑ Artists, such as **Mark ROTHKO**, were interested in the **lyrical or atmospheric effects** of vast expanses of colour, filling the canvas, and by suggestion, beyond it to infinity.
- ❑ Most colour-field paintings are **large** -- **meant to be seen up close** so that the viewer is **immersed in a colour environment**.

White Center by Mark Rothko, 1950





Erasing all evidence of brushstrokes **MARK ROTHKO**, covered his large canvas with coloured veils of soft edged rectangles that floated on fields of contrasting or muted complementary hues.

He wanted the viewers to **immerse themselves in the colours and react to the sensations the colours evoked.**



Period: Late 1940s , early 1950's

Location: New York

Aim: Express inner life through art,
focus on process rather than product

Theory: Image not result of a
preconceived idea , but of creative
process

Key Characteristics:

Unconventional application of paint,
usually without a recognizable subject (de
Kooning's *Woman* series is an exception)
that tends toward amorphous shapes in
brilliant colours.

Dripping, smearing, slathering, and
flinging lots of paint on to the canvas
(often an unprimed canvas).

In the case of Colour Field artists: carefully
filling the picture plane with zones of
colour that create tension between the
shapes and hues.



David Smith

Although POP ART was not about color, Andy Warhol, one of its leading artists, explored the affect of color on series of the same image

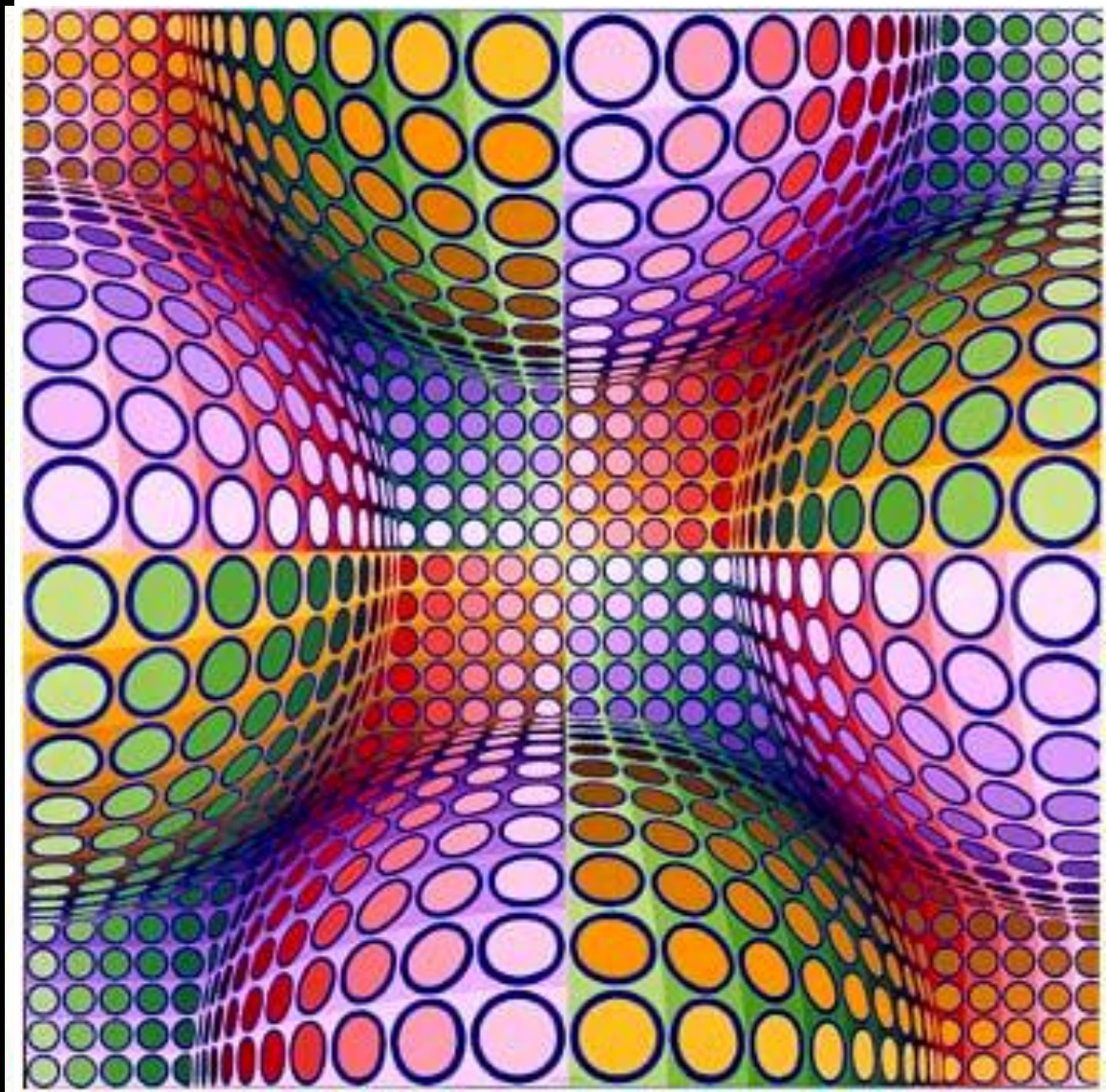
What is he saying in his silk screened images of Marilyn Monroe?

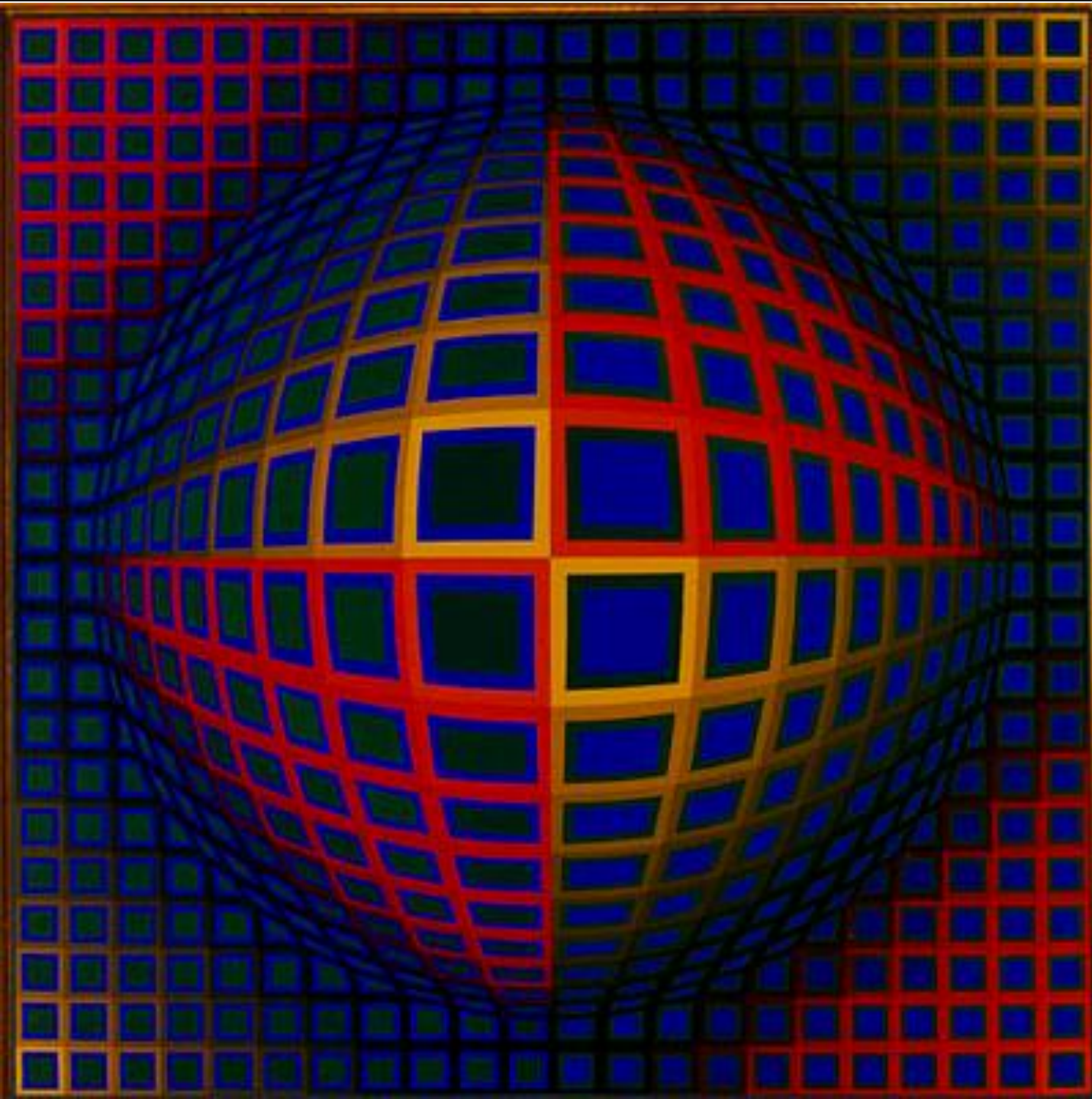


Op Art

OP ART (Optical Art) is a mathematically-themed form of Abstract art, which uses repetition of simple forms and colors to create **vibrating effects**, moiré patterns, foreground-background **confusion**, an exaggerated sense of depth, and other visual effects.

OP ART, a major development in the 1960s, used a framework of purely geometric forms as the basis for its effects and also drew on colour theory and the **physiology** and **psychology** of perception. Leading figures were Bridget Riley, Jesus Raphael Soto, and Victor Vasarely.





Vega-Nor,
1969
VASARELY



CHEYT PYR -
1970/71
Vasarely



***Portfolio Blue*, Bridget Riley 1977**

JOSEPH ALBERS: INFLUENCE on the NEXT GENERATIONS of ABSTRACTION

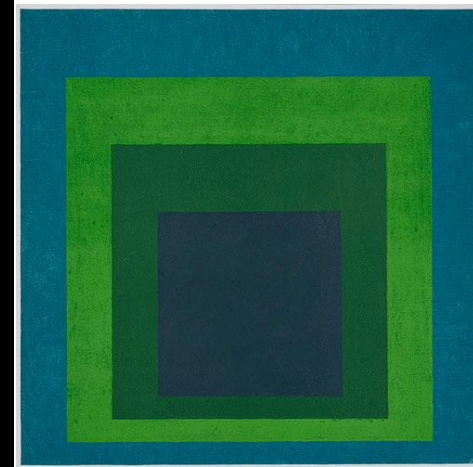
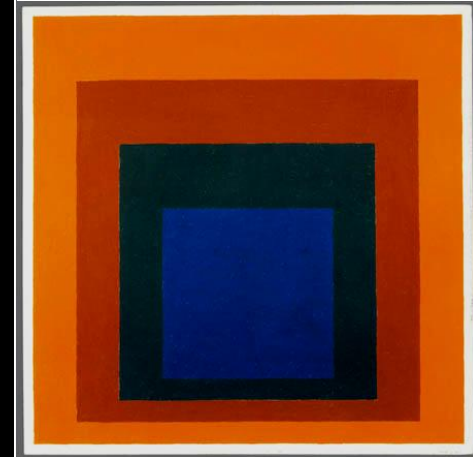
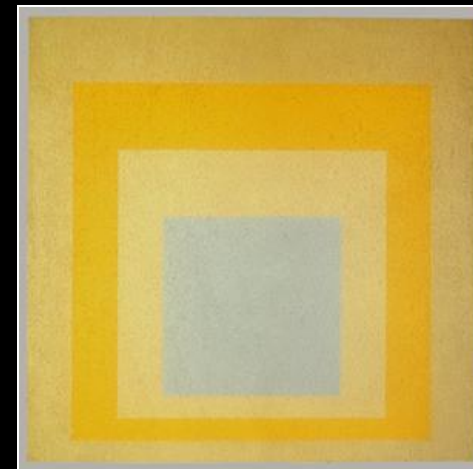


The square was the ideal shape for Albers' "Homage" series. Squares were mathematically related to each other in size, perfect for superimposition, shapes that never occur in nature--thus assuring its man-made quality.

Albers' theories on art and education were formative for the next generation of artists. His own paintings form the foundation of both Hard-Edge, Minimalism abstraction and Op art.

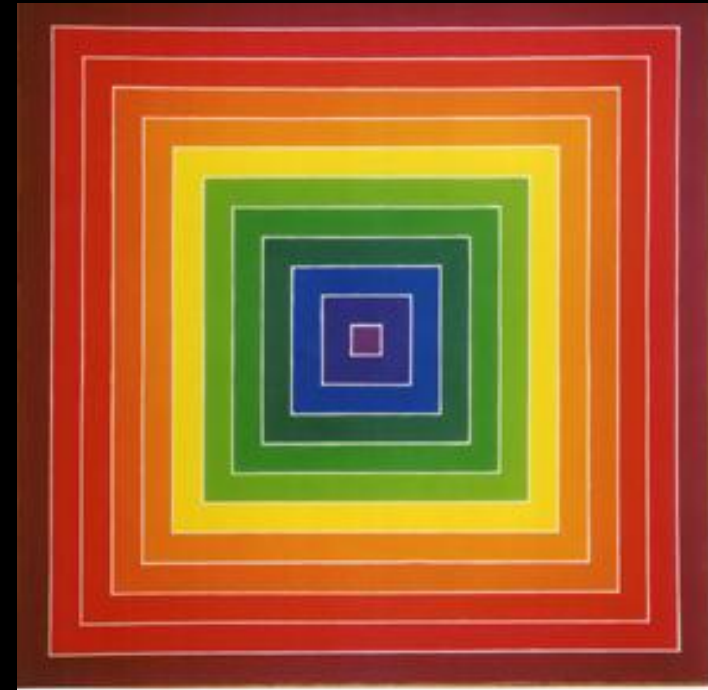
Using the square as a motif, he demonstrated the qualities of color & how different colors interact with each other when juxtaposed.

He called this repetitive exploration of color & design, **HOMAGE TO A SQUARE**.



Color for the Sake of Color

- **HARD EDGE** Painting emerged from Color Field painting.
- It was a **reaction** to the more painterly or gestural forms of Abstract Expressionism,
- Importance on **impersonal paint application** & **delineated areas of color** with particular sharpness and clarity.
- It encompasses rich solid colors, neatness of surface, and arranged forms all over the canvas. **DESIGN OVER EXPRESSION!**
- **HARD EDGE** artists wanted to present each painting as one **unified, cohesive, monolithic** image.
- **HARD EDGE** paintings featured unmodulated areas of color; flat, two-dimensional space; monumental scale; and sometimes varied the shape of the canvas itself.
- This kind of approach to abstract painting became extremely widespread in the 1960s, particularly on the West Coast.



Frank Stella
Sunset Beach, Sketch
1967

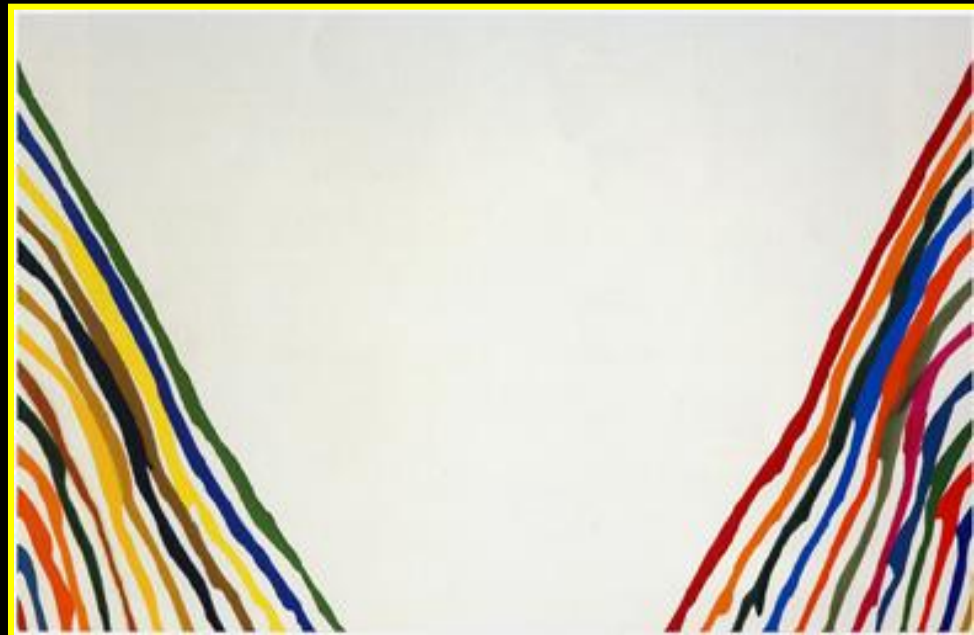
- **HARD-EDGE** also called **Post-Painterly Abstraction**

Morris Louis *Where, magna on canvas,*
1960



Morris Louis, "Point of Tranquility" (1959-1960)

Morris Louis was a prominent *Post-Painterly Abstraction* artist whose signature style featured poured veils of liquid pigment on raw canvases.

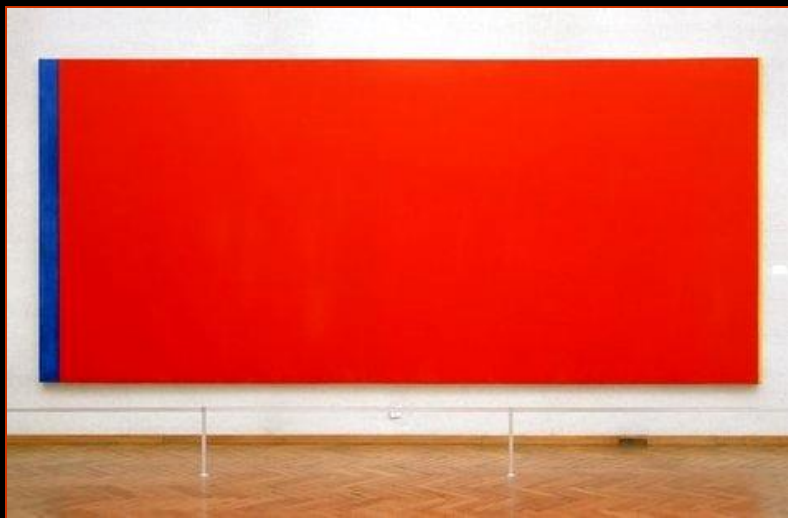


Morris Lewis, *BETA LAMBDA* 1961

MINIMALISM & BARNETT NEWMAN

Often using monumental scale, **NEWMAN** took abstraction to its farther reaches. He used large areas of saturated, sometimes primary color punctuated by narrow vertical bands of other colors that he called “**zips**” as the source of visual and emotional impact.

Neman's works, totally void of any visual or geometrical association, reduced the content down to virtually nothing. His & other **Hard-Edge** painting involving such severe abstraction were labeled **MINIMAL ART**





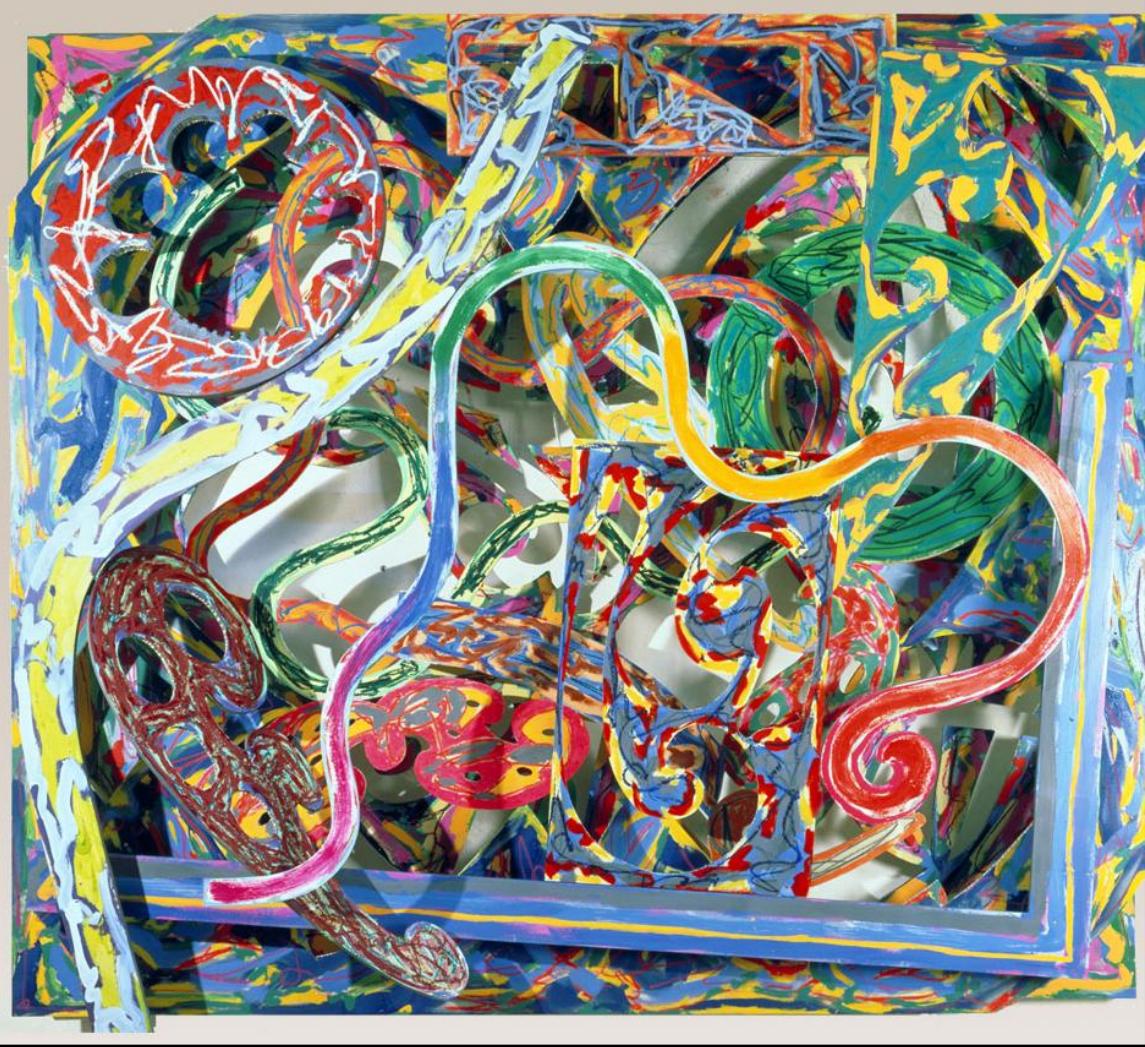
FRANK STELLA'S innovative and influential use of irregularly shaped canvases first appeared in his 1960's *metallic* series of pin-striped sooty black lines separated by narrow white spaces. Discarding the traditional rectangular format, Stella wanted to overcome the illusion that a painting is a window into illusionary space.





Frank Stella (American, b. 1936), **Agbatana III**, 1968, Acrylic on

Later examples of his work stress color in decorative **curved motifs**. These curved surfaces were featured in his **“protractor” series**. In his **“protractor” series** of paintings based on intersecting **protractor** arcs in **fluorescent colors**, **Stella** based both the design & and the shape of the canvas on a mechanical drawing tool.



In the 70's, **Stella** entered his *'baroque phase'* & developed a **new 3-D format** straddling the border between painting & sculpture.



Frank Stella's "Severinda" (1995), mixed media on Fiberglass