

VENICE

FORT LAUDERDALE'S MAGAZINE

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DAWN OF A NEW ERA

As the NSU Art Museum celebrates its 60th anniversary season—capping off with a highly anticipated Frank Stella exhibit—we look back on its evolution and impact.

BY TOM AUSTIN

Zoom In

THE BEAST OF A CITY Inspired by author & entrepreneur Barry Katz, the magazine is leading the charge in coverage of cultural events in Fort Lauderdale.



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Art is an avenue of corporate, civic and personal ambition, and the NSU Art Museum—which began in November 1958 as the Fort Lauderdale Art Center, a Junior League of Greater Fort Lauderdale effort situated in a former hardware store on East Las Olas Boulevard—has been seized with bouts of ambition over the course of its long history.

After a fire in 1967, the brave-little-art-space-that-could moved a few blocks down on Las Olas Boulevard and hung on throughout the 1970s as an anchor in the Las Olas art scene.

Its ascension, however, came in the 1980s. On January 5, 1986, the Fort Lauderdale Art Center—now named the Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale—supercharged its destiny with the launch of a new building by architect Edward Larrabee Barnes, an elegant modernist landmark with spiraling walls. The newly christened Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale led the charge for the local art scene with the inaugural exhibit “An American Renaissance: Painting and Sculpture Since 1940,” a show curated by renowned art historian Sam Hunter. The art world of the era, from art dealer Leo Castelli to critic Clement Greenberg, showed up for the opening.

The next century ushered in a new era for the museum. In 2001, the museum added the William J. Glackens Wing (not coincidentally, the museum currently has the world’s largest collection of work by Glackens). In 2008, the museum became part of Nova Southeastern University, adding more prestige and an institutional support system. A highlight of the museum is the Golda and Meyer Marks Cobra Collection, which entails about 1,600 pieces from the post-World War II European art movement named for its artists’ home cities of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam.

Now, more than 30 years after the debut of the Barnes-built building, the NSU Art Museum is marking its 60th anniversary with a blockbuster exhibition, “Frank Stella: Experiment and Change,” that will open on November 12 and be on view through July 8. As it happens, the 81-year-old Stella—who had his first exhibit in 1958—is celebrating his 60th anniversary as a professional artist in 2018.

For Bonnie Clearwater, who has served as the NSU Art Museum director and chief curator since 2013, featuring Stella’s minimalist paintings and sculptures is a kind of

homecoming. In her previous role as director and chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, Clearwater curated the exhibition “Frank Stella at 2000: Changing the Rules.”

The roughly 300 pieces in the NSU Art Museum’s Stella show trace his career from the minimalism of his early black paintings to the epic, kick-out-the-jams sculptures of the Moby Dick series. The gems on view include 1974’s double concentric painting, *Paradoxe sur le comedienne*. A 1966 Stella mitered maze work, *Fortin de las Flores*, featured in the 1986 “American Renaissance” exhibit and donated to the museum, is also part of “Frank Stella: Experiment and Change.” Many of the Stella pieces, such as 1970’s 45-foot-long *Deauville*, a thoroughbred racetrack-shaped painting, are ideally suited to the curves and spirals of the NSU Art Museum space.

“This Frank Stella exhibit is full of visual jolts,” Clearwater says. “The radical power of his art hasn’t changed in 60 years.”

The 60th anniversary season will entail a slew of celebrations with Stella, including an NSU Art Museum dinner in November. Stella’s work has always been deeply influenced by architecture, and he’s a longtime friend of architect Richard Meier, who’s responsible for the Four Seasons Private Residences at The Surf Club and such modern landmarks as the Getty Center in Los Angeles. (During Art Basel Miami Beach, Stella and Meier will be honored at a dinner held at The Surf Club.)

The Stella exhibit should strengthen the NSU Art Museum. In Broward County, the institution—which sees about 80,000 visitors a year—is an important engine for the local art scene and plays a vital civic role in the financial and cultural health of the county, in the same way that the Pérez Art Museum Miami defines the contemporary art scene in Miami-Dade County and the Norton Museum of Art brings together the art world of Palm Beach County.

Currently, the NSU Art Museum has more than 7,000 works in its collection—roughly comparable to the Norton Museum of Art—and is using its permanent collection for a series of 60th anniversary exhibitions. Over the past four years, the NSU Art Museum has also presented singular traveling shows, such as “Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968.”

To Clearwater, the 60th anniversary of the NSU Art Museum is also about the emergence of contemporary Fort Lauderdale. “Finally the often-ignored middle child of South Florida, stuck between Miami and Palm Beach, will become the center of attention,” she says.

In truth, with South Florida being one vast urban mass, there’s no reason the NSU Art Museum can’t step outside Fort Lauderdale. Clearwater has hosted such events as a conversation with Miami-based artist Carlos Betancourt, author of the Skira Rizzoli book *Imperfect Utopia*. In 1993, before Clearwater took over at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, she curated a group show at the old Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale with artists from the 1990s Miami art scene, including Carol Jacque, Marilyn Gottlieb-Roberts, Charles Recher and Roberto Juarez.

The NSU Art Museum also has a support base of several prominent local collectors. David Horvitz and Francie Bishop Good, known for creating Girls’ Club—a Fort Lauderdale-based collection and exhibition space that focuses on female artists—have donated \$2.5 million in matching grants to the NSU Art Museum. The husband and wife have also made a promised gift of roughly 100 paintings from their collection, and until recently, Horvitz served as chairman for the museum’s board of governors.

For Horvitz, the NSU Art Museum is a symbol of the new Broward County, a multicultural city that’s a long leap from a sleepy southern town. “The world has come to South Florida, and the NSU Art Museum is now responding to so many diverse communities with different backgrounds,” he says.

Dr. Stanley Goodman is the new chairman of the museum’s board of governors, and his wife, Pearl, is also a longtime benefactor. The Goodmans have made a promised gift to the NSU Art Museum from their collection of Latin American and Mexican art, entailing work by such luminaries as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera.

To Goodman, the future of the NSU Art Museum is about quality exhibitions drawn from a strong permanent collection. “Museums are always struggling, but we’ve been moving in the right direction for several years,” he says. “The Frank Stella show should move the museum along to the future.” ■

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WORKS OF ART Clockwise, from top left: The exhibit "Bellissima: Italy and High Fashion 1945-1968"; The exhibit "Some Aesthetic Decisions: A Centennial Celebration of Marcel Duchamp's Fountain"; The exhibit "Francesco Clemente: Dormiveglia"; NSU Art Museum opened its new home at the corner of Andrews Avenue and Las Olas Boulevard in 1986; Frank Stella's *Lettere: sur les sounds et muets N.* 1974.

