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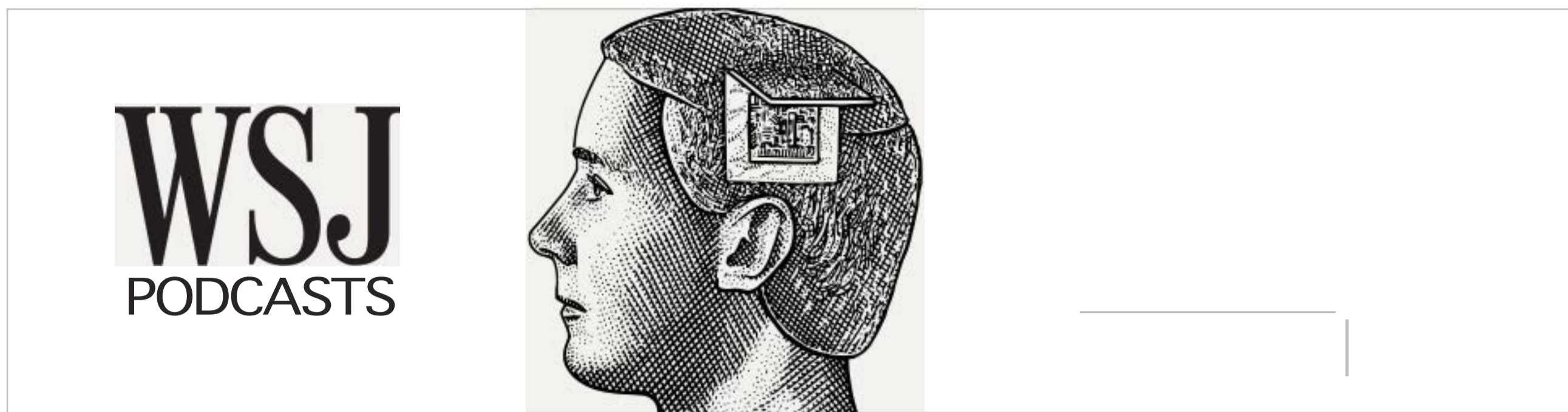
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CULTURE

From an Abstract Giant to None

By James Panero

July 6, 2012 6:00 pm ET



Frank Stella: New Work

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Frank Stella's 'k161a' (2011) at FreedmanArt FRANK STELLA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

What does music look like? A century ago, the Theosophists, an esoteric group that influenced the early modernists, believed they could see colors floating above performances of Mendelssohn, Gounod and Wagner. The look of music drove Wassily Kandinsky to experiment with abstraction.

Frank Stella (b. 1936) has been abstraction's leading innovator since painting his famous

chalk-stripe compositions in the late 1950s.

Now, by developing sculpture based on the music of Baroque composer Domenico Scarlatti, he returns to modernism's roots.

Today, the question of how music looks seems less mysterious than it did a century ago. Technology has given form to sound. In the iTunes era, we can easily "visualize" music with the use of computer software. Mr. Stella likewise uses computers to model his latest sculptures, producing them in plastic on advanced "rapid prototyping" 3-D printers.

Mr. Stella's innovations can outstrip his form. Some of his large sculptures of the past decade, fabricated through a variety of means, are overwrought jumbles. For his small sculptures at FreedmanArt, now entirely computer made, the laboring is gone. In his "k161" suite from 2011, with starlike chords topped with arpeggio cones, he composes work that sounds great and looks good, too.

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There Are No Giants Upstairs

Through July 29

Group shows are a dime a dozen come summer, but the best ones are more than rummage sales. They can expand our vocabulary of artists and draw connections between works, taking chances when the pressure to sell is off.

At Theodore:Art, a gallery that has recently moved from SoHo to a subterranean space in Brooklyn, the group show is called "There Are No Giants Upstairs." According to gallery owner Stephanie Theodore, the title comes from something a young patron once said, self-reassuringly, after hearing footsteps overhead. But it could just as well refer to the artists' desire to paint in their own ungoverned way.



Gary Petersen's 'Untitled S5' (2012), part of the group show, 'There Are No Giants Upstairs,' at Theodore:Art GARY PETERSEN/THEODORE:ART

This exhibition of work by Chris Baker, Mel Bernstine, Steven Charles, Harriet Korman, Gary Petersen and Andrew Seto is a tight little survey of contemporary abstraction, with work ranging from brushy (Mr. Seto) to hard-edged (Mr. Petersen), restrained (Ms. Korman) to anything goes (Mr. Charles). But whether it's Mr. Baker's rubbed-down surfaces or Mr. Bernstine's eye-popping bursts of color and line—the stars of the show—what these artists share is a deeply felt relationship to paint and an appreciation of the magic it can conjure.

Ellen Letcher: Photo Still

Through July 15

Photography's greatest power is seduction. As a onetime production designer for fashion magazines, Ellen Letcher (b. 1972) understands this better than most. Composed of photographs clipped from glossy publications, her seditious collages pull apart the products she once put together.

This survey show features a decade of Ms. Letcher's work. It also brings together two artists who ran formative Bushwick galleries—Ms. Letcher of the wonderfully named Famous Accountants; and Austin Thomas, whose Pocket Utopia has now relocated to the Lower East Side.



Ellen Letcher's 'Wrestler' (2012) at Pocket Utopia ELLEN LETCHER/POCKET UTOPIA

Here Ms. Letcher works to take some of the power out of photography and its use in magazine production by highlighting its fabrication.

Through the introduction of paint, she binds her images to paper and canvas. She also moves her images around, leaving behind outlines where the pictures used to be.

The process might mimic magazine paste-up but doesn't conceal its method of production.

As Ms. Letcher's paint handling has become more sophisticated, her command of imagery has become more authoritative.

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