

# MIT List Center

## Frank Stella Heads or Tails

This is Heads or Tails by Frank Stella. Former List public art curator Patricia Fuller.

Frank Stella came to prominence as a painter in the late 1960s. And at first, he was known for geometric painting and later, a series of austere black paintings. His work was rigorously formal and minimalist in the sense of reducing the elements to as few as possible.

But by the time of this work from 1988, Stella had long been experimenting with color in three dimensions. Here, his brashly colored wall-relief comprises contrasting cutout shapes of aluminum, an explosive juxtaposition of curves, lines, and irregular shapes. It is one in a series of 138 works inspired by Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Each piece corresponds to a chapter in the novel.

Heads or Tails relates to chapter 90 in which Melville describes the head and tail of the great whale. The bottom of the sculpture has a fish tail shape. Above it, the forms swirling and leaping over each other evoke a world of water, fish, and birds in motion. But Stella would caution the viewer against any literal connections between the novel and this piece. You can find commentary on Stella's other work at MIT on the List's website.