

STELLA STUDIO HOUSTON

Barrie Scardino

The discreet Stella Studio sign on the door of a huge warehouse at 1116 Nagle Street gives no clue as to the enormity of the project taking place within. Even after entering, it takes a minute to comprehend what is actually happening, because your eyes have to adjust to almost total darkness.

Three sides of the empty warehouse are filled with a dizzying, but static, multicolored light show. Giant sections of Frank Stella's monumental mural for the new Rebecca and John J. Moores School of Music Building at the University of Houston are projected onto 100-foot-long by 27-foot-wide connected canvas strips. Local artists and student assistants are spread out vertically and horizontally in the space, working from scaffolds or lying on the floor tracing, painting, weld-



Stella Studio, Houston.

vasses will be transferred and installed like wallpaper in the Moores Building.

To create a context for the Houston mural, the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston has mounted an exhibition of Stella's architectural and public work called *Stella in Studio*. The small but enlightening show, with models for bridges, houses, and theaters, along with more abstract sculptural pieces, will close on March 23. But work on the mural in the Houston studio will continue for approximately five more months.

Beth Morian, who has been a strong supporter of the Stella mural from the inception of the idea, remains full of enthusiasm and awe. "A cathedral is happening in our own back yard," she said. Morian explained that not only is this an incredible opportunity for Houston to

in the last decade toward a Spanish Churrigueresque or French Baroque style in which he seems compelled to fill every possible surface and space. His more recent work, and this mural in particular, produces feelings of both excitement and terror. The fluorescent colors, applied in swirls, dips, and geometric patterns, will be flamboyant and highly decorative in the space for which it is being prepared.

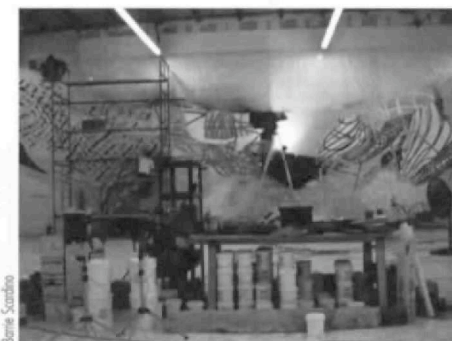
The design process for mammoth murals such as the Houston piece, which is still untitled, is complex. In this case Stella began by making a collage, photographs of which were scanned into electronic form, so the piece could be refined on a computer. This part of the design process was completed in the New York Stella Studio, where as many as five assistants work with Stella. The original col-

lage is retained to be used as a reference point, but the artists work directly from the transparencies projected onto the wall.

Although Stella and his assistant Earl Childress are directing the Houston project, splitting their time between New York and Houston, Cindy Scaife and Tamsin Plant, from Toronto but living in Houston for the duration of the project, are the on-site project managers. They first worked with Stella Studio four years ago when they helped transfer the mural for the façade of Toronto's new Princess of Wales Theater. The design process for the Canadian project differed because the mural was painted directly onto the building, using Stella's projection technique, therefore all of the work had to be done at night. In Houston, the mural can-



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Top and above: Stella Studio, Houston.



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Artists at work in the Stella Studio on mural for Moores Building.

ing Stella's 5,000-square-foot painting, which will cover the vaulted ceiling of the Moores Building lobby and an arch over the grand staircase.

The preeminent American artist Frank Stella, born in 1936, began his career making austere black-and-white paintings in the late 1950s. After a wildly successful retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1970, Stella moved away from monochromatic minimalist work into an energetic style using brilliant colors and curving, complex shapes. These later pieces were the subject of another Museum of Modern Art exhibition that traveled to Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum in 1989.

The University of Houston's mural is a product of Stella's increasing movement



Rebecca and John J. Moores School of Music, The Mathes Group, architects, 1997. Computer-generated image of how the Stella mural will look in the Moores Building.

have a work of art that will be world renowned on the same scale as the Rothko Chapel, but also "the project has brought Houston's art groups together in celebration of this monumental piece."

The Moores Building is scheduled to open this May, but the mural installation will not be completed for almost another year. The Stella Studio will be open to the public on two Sundays, April 13 and 20, and guided tours for student groups can be arranged through the Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, at 713.743.9527. ■