

FRANK BOWLING OBE, RA

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Great Critics and Their Ideas

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Savonarola on intensity

Interview by

Matthew Collings



The Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (born in 1452) preached against corruption in Florence at the time of the Renaissance. He encouraged the destruction of luxury goods, including art, in ritual burnings. In 1498, in an ironic reversal, he was tried and convicted for heresy and publicly burned in the same square in which these bonfires were staged.

ARTREVIEW *What have you been doing?*

GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA *Going round the museums in London.*

AR *Have you been to Tate Modern? Would you burn it? Is it all vanity?*

GS The whole Tate empire, its collection of institutions all over the UK, reflects many contrasting notions of art. It's really not so bad. But at Tate Modern at the moment you're encouraged to think about society. I saw a visually banal, large white object, made by Theaster Gates. A wall label explained it was about civil rights demonstrations during the 1960s. The demonstrators were fire-hosed, so the object is made from cut-up hoses. The result is a cartoonlike imitation of abstract painting, which in those days was a kind of art, the label says, that 'pointedly ignored civil rights'. I was shocked by this obnoxious insinuation. If a painting or other artwork doesn't have civil rights associations or ideas literally built into it, it ignores civil rights? It's against anyone being conscious of them? Really?

AR *Well, today the only important art is socially minded.*

GS Yes, but that shouldn't mean preaching ignorance.

AR *What do you think of art schools?*

GS Today they tend to encourage one direction only: gamble on coming up with a wacky idea and it's possible you may hit the jackpot. But I would say another route you could try is to make something that has intensity. Enough people will always respond to that. You could have a future. But you have to accept that it might initially get passed over by the powers that be. Maybe later down the line it will be recognised, but you can have no control over that.

AR *What do you mean by 'jackpot'?*

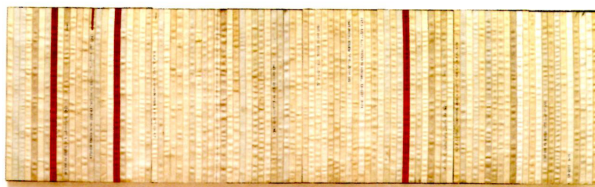
GS An illusion of relevance: Tate Modern's wall labels are not really thoughts but basic signs whose purpose is to ensure, in the minds of the people wandering round that place, that the work is connected to a faddish idea. In the case I just mentioned, it's not just civil rights but also the notion that if you do a one-liner joke art-object whose meaning is that art ought to have civil rights as its subject, then, for the time being at least, this will be the definition of importance.

AR *What kind of art do you think is morally acceptable or spiritually helpful or neutral, I mean not evil – something you wouldn't put on a bonfire?*

GS I saw something the other day that I was impressed by in a group show at the Turps Gallery in Elephant & Castle. Do you know it? It's part of the Turps Art School, a new institution run by artists, set up in a residential tower block. The students pay a fee, not all that high, but enough to run the school, the gallery and a magazine. The only art they teach is painting. Anyway, I'm recalling my impressions of an abstract painting in this show by Frank Bowling, the Guyana-born artist, an immigrant to England. He absorbed influences ranging from Turner and Francis Bacon to Jules Olitski, but also Catholic literature by the likes of André Gide, and for years he has worked back and forth in London and New York. Today, at eighty years old, he enjoys a high profile and great respect. Actually paintings by him from the 1970s were the subject of an exhibition at Tate Britain two years ago.

AR *He was my tutor at art school in that very decade.*

GS Well good, so you can indulge me here, Matthew, because you're probably familiar with this experience. It was an abstract



painting, as I say, about six feet high, a squareish format. I'm recalling agitated surfaces, a magnificent use of white, some glinting small metallic strips set into the white. (I learned later these are the leftover packaging for the prescription morphine he takes for pain in his joints.) The white was organised into circular swirls somewhere nearby this formation of strips, but elsewhere it was treated in different ways. It was partly thick and plastered, and scraped over with some transparent matter. In other areas there was hardly anything there at all: bare canvas with a few whitish stains. And there were some edges of canvas I remember too, collaged on. They'd been cut with pinking shears, those scissors used in tailoring, where

above Theaster Gates, *Civil Tapestry 4*, 2011, fire hoses, vinyl and wood.
© the artist. Courtesy Tate

facing page Fra Bartolomeo, *Portrait of Savonarola*, 1499–1500, oil on panel, 53 × 38 cm.
© Polo Museale, Florence – Gabinetto Fotografico. Courtesy Museo di San Marco, Florence

the blades have serrated edges, making a distinctive line with little triangular shapes.

AR *That's a lot of differences going on.*

GS And yet they were graspable in a second as a powerful unity. In describing to you what's in my mind when I think of the painting I'm also breaking it down as if all these elements revealed themselves sequentially. That's how verbal language works, of course. Paintings are not narratives. But the feeling was really of giving oneself up to an overall immediate sensation: sensuous, even delicious. At the same time one's rational mind was working fast, too: reason separating things out and recognising and naming every part.

AR *You were in a tower block doing this?*

GS Yes, in that galley up there. People going by outside with their shopping bags; the market nearby; the halal butchers; sheep's heads on slabs; fish; big colourful containers of cooking oil. You walk through a market, you go up a slope, along a concrete corridor and then you're in the gallery. It was a group show about subdued

colour. I thought it was a good theme, though it isn't connected to any important ideas outside of aesthetics.

AR *Ordinary people don't know what the word 'aesthetics' means.*

GS Well, you can easily read about it. It's from the eighteenth century. It names a tradition of thinking that goes back much further, to the Ancient Greeks

– Pythagoras in fact, who we're told coined the term 'philosophy' – about art's combination of sensuality and intellect, how it communicates ideas about the world or interprets it. It's not necessary to use the word 'aesthetics' when you're appreciating intensity in art. You just need a bit of familiarity with the process of objective looking to be part of the communicative process that art is always involved in, at least at some level. Sometimes the level is high and sometimes not.

AR *Did you think it was high with this painting by Frank?*

GS Yes. I gave myself up to it and felt free.

AR *It sounds very far removed from the spaces you were in, in Tate Modern.*

GS It's actually only a few stops away on the Northern Line.

AR *At ArtReview we sneer at splashy paintings. If you go on about them, it's like you've no idea that ideology critique ever happened.*

GS I think of ideology critique as examining the idea that art is free or has the power to make people free, by exposing the power interests hidden within the cult of art.

AR *Yeah. I mean, we're not necessarily constantly studying the idea. Er, could you remind me again what it is? What else is it about?*

GS A counter-idea, one that still acknowledges the truth of the critique, says that something can be ideological but still contain an element of truth and the potential to make people free.

AR *Oh, that's interesting: how does it work?*

GS Well, Impressionism, Cubism and Abstract Expressionism are full of surprises in relation to conventional depiction; they just do their own thing. It can broaden your mind to be exposed to the results. You saw things a certain way but now you realise there are limitless possibilities. The world is opened up.

AR *What about non-middle-class people, the marginalised?*

GS Ideology critique says that those without social status might not get so much of the benefit of the experience because in many cases they might not have the time to get involved. But I'm saying that lacking time relates to a more important factor, which is that the experience of art opening up new vistas isn't about status.

AR *Hmm...*

GS Anyway, ideology critique notices that if you don't have status, not having it makes you feel doubtful and fearful about the things that those with it feel perfectly fine about.

AR *So status itself when it's affirmed by art is negative? And art always affirms it because art itself is high status?*

GS Yes. Being excluded from art appreciation – so ideology critique maintains – isn't just to do with exotic visions that art goes in for that not everyone has the education to understand: abstraction, distortion and so on. It applies also to pre-modern art where usually depiction is straightforward – but only the powerful in society can really identify with the worldview pre-modern art embodies, because those pictures were created on their orders in the first place.

AR *Surely everyone in the olden days could identify with that art whether they had status or not?*

GS It's a myth that everyone sees art the same way. When immaculate clear representations of saints change to fuzzy shapes whose meaning is radically ambiguous (perhaps they don't even have a meaning), it's not necessarily the same jump for everyone from the reassuring to the alienating.

AR *Why not?*

GS Someone educated and therefore privileged is likely to be conditioned to get what's happening. The fact is that saints in art had a different meaning for the privileged than for the excluded or marginalised, or even just the ordinary.

AR *What happens when the marginalised see fuzzy shapes in splashy paintings?*



GS The marginalised – also by definition – already feel alienated, so, for that section of society, pictures of nothing by Abstract Expressionists are no different to pictures of saints by Dürer.

AR *Because an abstract painting as much as a Renaissance picture of a saint affirms the worldview and consciousness of the privileged and entitled: the high-status sector?*

GS Yes.

AR *And ideology critique in an art context looks at that issue of status?*

Frank Bowling, *Louis Jack*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 183 × 170 cm. Photo: Rose Jones. Courtesy the artist

GS Yes, it highlights it where the usual thing is not to mention it.

AR *But you were talking about something else with Frank Bowling: you would say not everyone can get his painting, but that doesn't make it decadent or socially oppressive? And also it's important even though it's not about civil rights. Its significance is not a passing thing only, just answering a temporary fad. But rather it connects to things that have always been important, because it communicates or interprets the world: what's out there. It does so through sensual meaning. That doesn't mean it's only about the senses. It means the medium through which the world is philosophised and interrogated in all its aspects, not just those that can literally be seen with the eye, is sensual.*

GS Yes, you've got hold of the basic elements of the idea: how to appreciate intensity in a painting. They could be taught in art schools, and Tate Modern could teach them too, and really put a lot of its abundant resources into getting them across to its vast number of visitors. But unfortunately it's not going to happen, because we all live in a neoliberal hell in which art is valued only as pursuit of novelty, like any product under consumer capitalism.

AR *I thought cultural capital was social capital. It's divisive.*

GS Ideology critique is a subtle tool, not a blunderbuss or sledgehammer. It's a shame that the assumption you just stated – that appreciating intensity in art is elitist – prevails in art circles, especially art-teaching ones, where a little learning has turned out to be a dangerous thing. If you really possess learning it doesn't mean you want to dominate

everyone. Education ought to be everyone's right, among all our civil rights, in fact. But if it isn't, and yet you have somehow found a way to possess the mental resources that allow you to read or gauge what an abstract painting is doing or what an abstract value is, then that's not some thing shameful. On the contrary, it's a marvel.

AR *Praise the Lord.*

GS Yes. Or any god: there's an Indonesian one called A'a, who I saw in the British Museum represented by a fantastically intense cedar-wood carving from the nineteenth century. Praise him!

NEXT MONTH *William Morris on de-skilling in art*