

The Possibility of Paint

THE GUYANESE-ENGLISH ARTIST FRANK BOWLING IS GETTING A LONG-AWAITED RETROSPECTIVE AT TATE BRITAIN. BY CHRIS SHIELDS

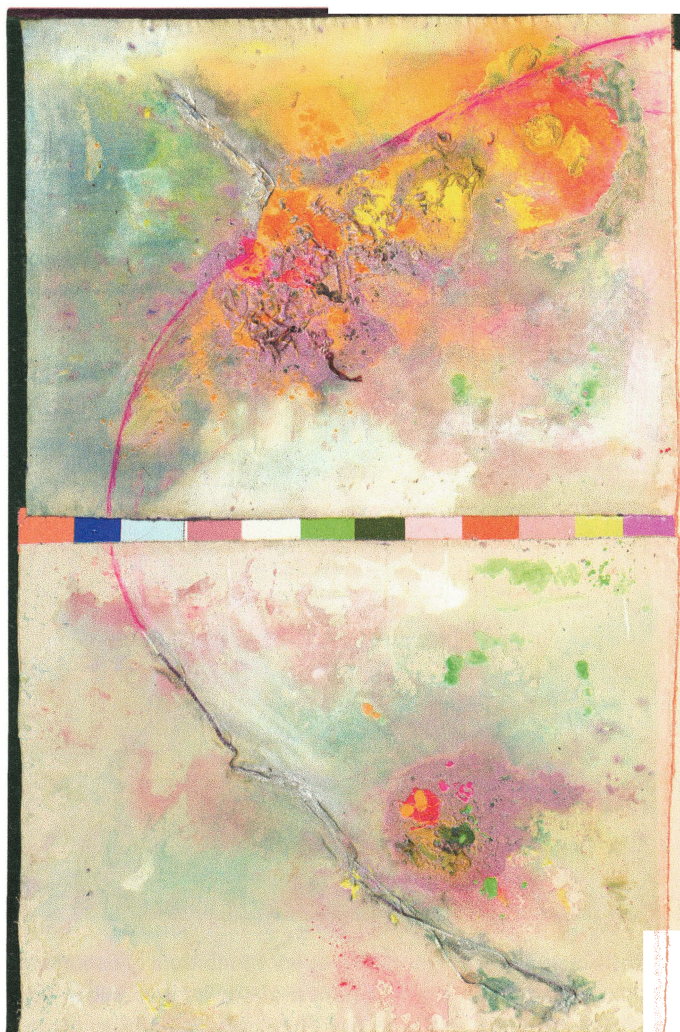


Frank Bowling, *Towards Crab Island*, 1983, acrylic paint, acrylic gel, acrylic foam and other materials on canvas, 175.3 x 289.6 mm.

PAINTER FRANK Bowling was thought of, by some, as an artist of the Caribbean diaspora because of his Guyanese heritage and subsequent immigration to Britain. His friend and Royal College of Art classmate, the painter David Hockney, because of his whiteness is thought of as an artist who likes to paint pictures of his pool. Bowling lamented the pigeonholing he and his paintings have experienced in a 2012 interview with Courtney J. Martin for *Frieze*. About these early experiences, Bowling says, “I was not allowed to explore the paint possibilities. Every time I did a group of pictures, it had to be nailed down within this black dilemma or Caribbean dilemma. It could not be taken as art qua art; it had to be socio-political or socio-anthropological. All of those disciplines kept getting in the way of my effort to be a painter, so I had

to be constantly on the move.” And on the move he has remained.

In his painting and in his thought Bowling is both expansive and rigorous. His long career is marked by innovation and experimentation in the service of expressing his own uniquely human experience. Sensitivity and careful attentiveness to his own memories and sensations fill his canvases, from phantom images of his mother’s general store to the spectral continents of his masterful “Map Paintings” to colors that seem to radiate the heat of his early childhood. To this day, the 85-year-old artist is still working and challenging himself technically and physically. He has however, finally, and deservedly, attained an important goal in his life and career. In a 2014 interview with Nadja Sayej for *ArtSlant*, Bowling was questioned as to whether his



then-current exhibition in Stockholm at the Spiritmuseum was the “big show” he had been waiting for. Bowling responded, “This is a really good show and I’m really grateful to the Swedes, but the big show I’m waiting for is a proper survey of my achievements in somewhere like the Tate.” Now, five years later, it’s happening.

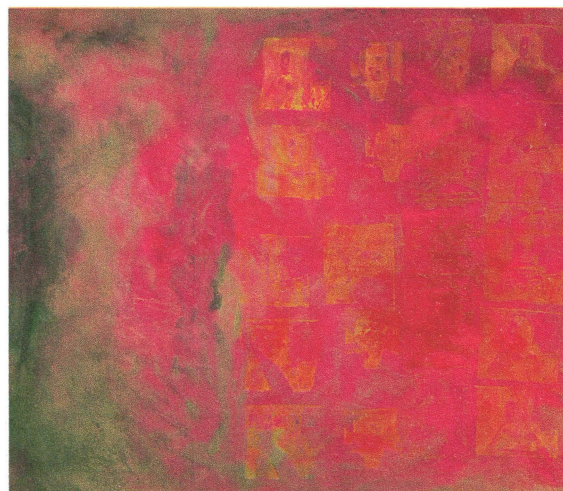
Tate Britain will present “Frank Bowling” from May 31 through August 26. The retrospective presents Bowling’s work in its full breadth, from the figurative to the abstract, with a myriad of technical and conceptual approaches along the way. In a sense, Bowling is coming home. When he arrived in London from New Amsterdam, Guyana, at the age of 15, the city quickly became his home. After military service, Bowling developed an intense interest in painting and entered

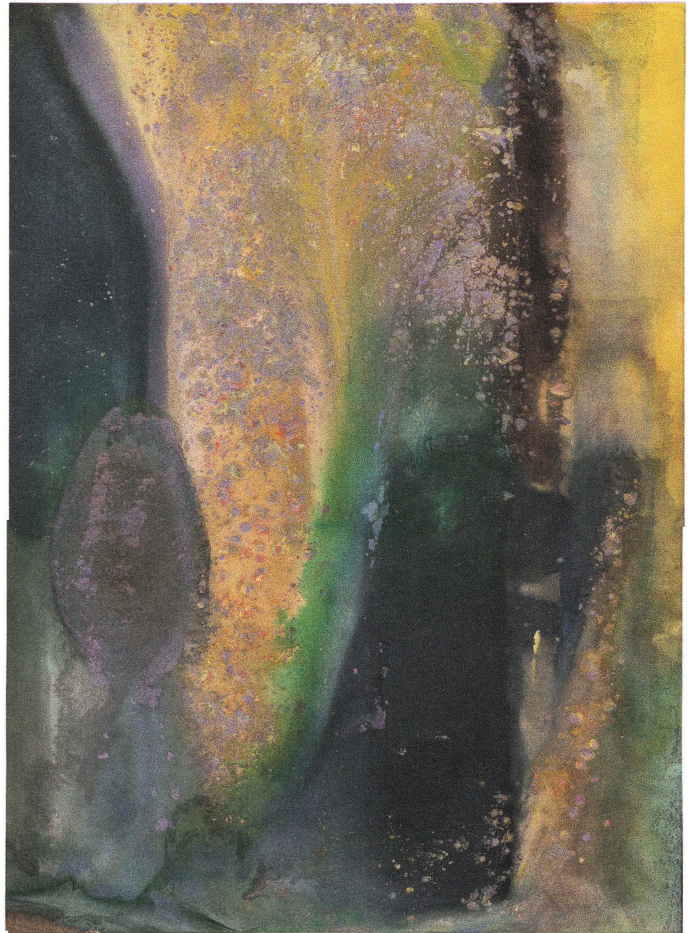
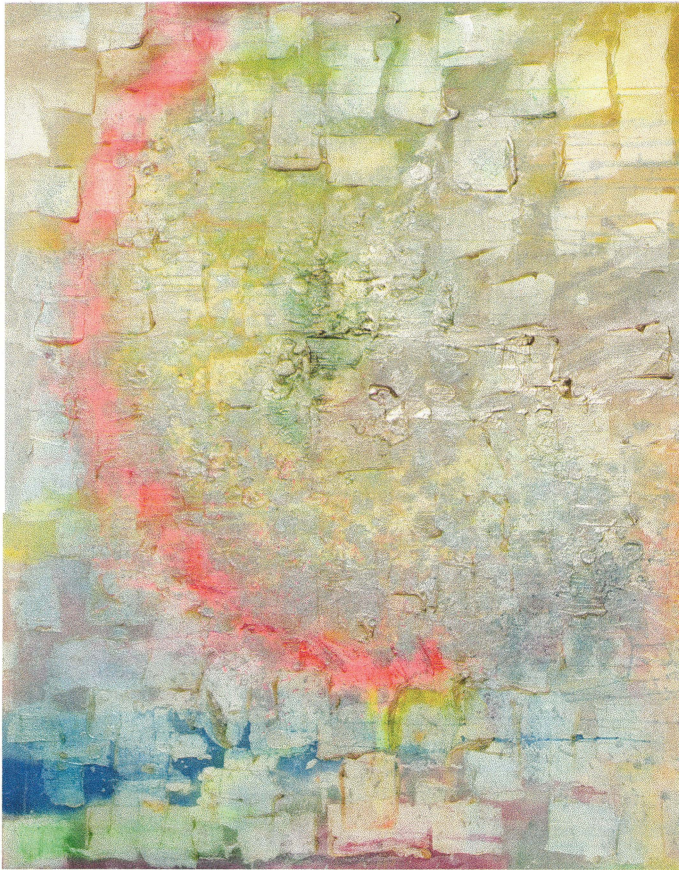
but the desire to express himself was not. Bowling saw writing as his medium prior to his transition to painting. His desire to give his experience form, previously realized through the written word, was transmogrified into paint and gave his images sensory poetics which continue to mark his work.

Early works such as the figurative 1966 acrylic, oil paint, and silkscreened ink on canvas painting *Cover Girl*, will introduce Tate visitors to the “impurity,” even at this relatively early stage, of Bowling’s approach. The painting combines figurative painted elements, Pop art screen print-

the Royal Academy of Arts on the suggestion of a friend. Bowling’s interest in painting was new,

Clockwise from top left: Iona Miriam’s *Christmas Visit To & From Brighton*, 2017, acrylic paint and plastic objects on collaged canvas, 1890 x 1225 mm; *Cover Girl*, 1966, acrylic, oil paint, and silkscreened ink on canvas, 1448 x 1016 mm; *Bartica*, 1968-9, acrylic paint and silkscreened ink on canvas, 284 x 328.3 mm.





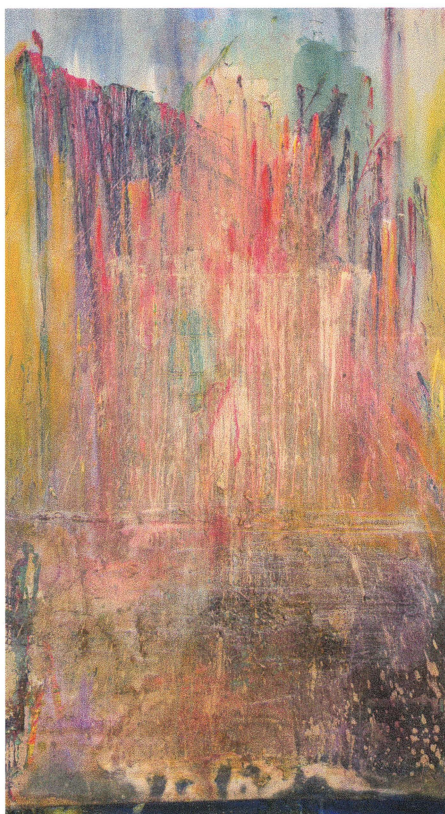
Clockwise from top left: *Sacha Jason Guyana Dreams*, 1989, acrylic paint and resin on canvas, 1780 x 1360 mm; *Ah Susan Whoosh* 1981, acrylic paint on canvas, 2415 x 1750 mm; Frank Bowling, 2017.



ing, and washes of color. The audacious collage approach is one that appears uniquely suited to writers who step into the sphere of images. Bowling's writerly beginnings give his work a formal edge, a freedom, and a refreshing boldness when it comes to materials and plasticity. Technique and material are not prescriptive; rather, they submit to the artist, making possible his or her personal expressions and idiosyncrasies. *Cover Girl* uses a collection of techniques to convey an unutterable sense of memory, sensation, thought, and symbolic intimacy unique to Bowling. In the foreground stands a woman. Behind her lies a broken horizon reconstructed from the colors and shapes of the flag of the newly independent Guyana. This horizon gives way to shapeless colors, and in the center sits the silkscreened ghost of a building: his mother's general store. The painting is part portrait, part mysterious work of personal symbology. The complexity and density of thought and technique create a rich-

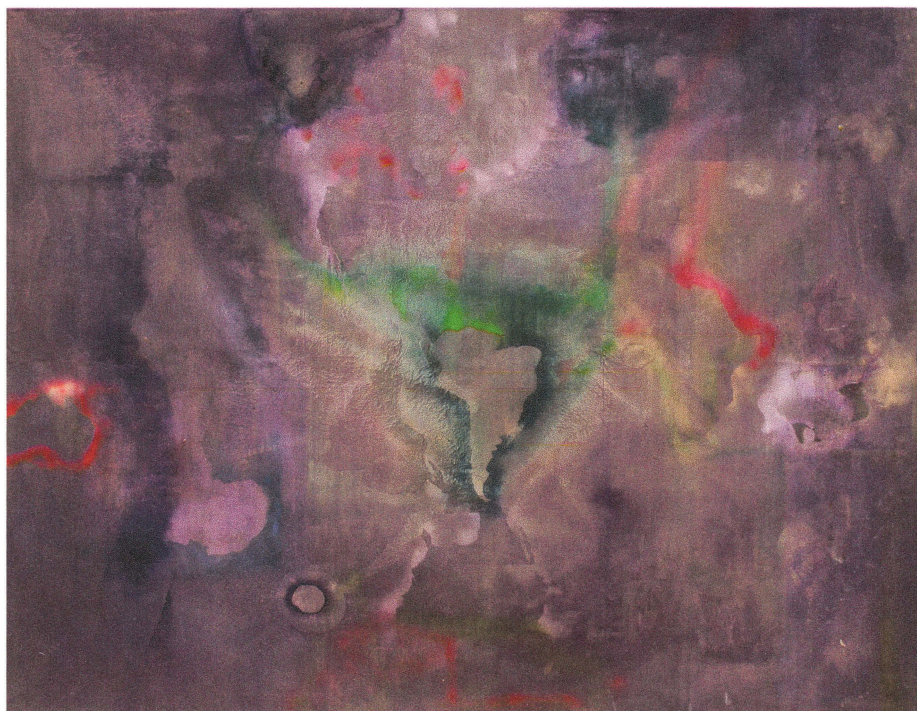
ness that is at once ambitiously commanding and honest about its own contingent subjectivity. Personal and political history meet and mingle, and each leaves room for the other's significance.

In the painting *Mirror* (1966), Bowling's tendency toward poetic narrative is fully evident. The canvas is filled with figurative objects and subjects which carry personal significance for Bowling: his soon to be ex-wife, the Royal Academy's circular staircase, and an Eames chair. What emerges in paint is as much a literary mode as an imagistic one. The collection of swirling reminiscences recalls the shifting temporal and spatial constructions of a stream-of-consciousness novel, where space and time collapse into a new subjective truth made expressible through expanded form. The colors and lines blend and bleed, and beginning and end are seemingly in flux. The painting manages to capture something particular about consciousness, namely that



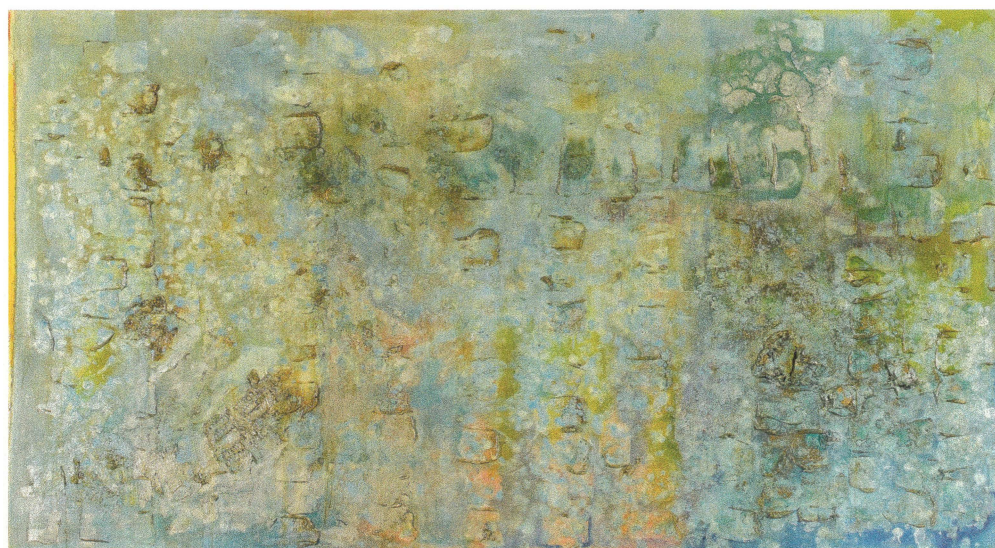
a momentary state of mind can be experienced as totalizing and infinite.

Later in 1966, Bowling made his way to New York. During this time, while he was in the company of artists such as Larry Rivers and Melvin Edwards, his work took a further step away from the figurative elements of his earlier paintings. Bowling integrated new approaches, most notably by utilizing the epidiascope, introduced to him by Rivers, which projected opaque images by illuminating objects from above with a bright light. From this new discovery would emerge the “map paintings.” These largely abstract works contained ghostly silhouettes of the continents of Africa and South America, traced from images projected by the epidiascope. The works resembled Color Field paintings, but the figurative geographical elements are unmistakable. These works served to illustrate what Bowling was concurrently expressing in print. During the late 60s and early 70s, Bowling served as an editor at the now



defunct *Arts Magazine*. Bowling’s time as editor came at a critical moment for the Black Arts Movement. Bowling articulated a perspective wherein the black artist could be politically engaged but this engagement did not foreclose or define formal possibilities or the preeminence of paint. It was not in the representation of black faces that black art found expression but in the black artist’s process and in the artist’s “black experience”, and in Bowling’s words, “experience has no literal meaning.”

Clockwise from top left: *Ashton'splunge*, 2011, acrylic paint, acrylic gel and other materials on canvas, 302.5 x 165.5 mm; *Polish Rebecca*, 1971, acrylic paint and spray paint on canvas, 277 x 359 mm; *Great Thames IV*, 1988-9, acrylic paint on canvas, 1810 x 3210 mm.





Clockwise from top left: *Mirror*, 1964-6, oil paint on canvas, 310 x 216.8 mm; *Remember Thine Eyes*, 2014, acrylic paint on canvas, 237.5 x 189 mm; *Philoctetes Bow*, 1987, acrylic paint, acrylic gel, acrylic foam and other materials on canvas, 183 x 360 mm.

The “map paintings” earned Bowling a 1971 show at the Whitney. After this, he would take his plunge into complete abstraction. The artist was hesitant at first and wondered if abstraction was open to him. It was critic and Ab-Ex champion Clement Greenberg who dispelled this apprehension, telling

Bowling, “There is no no-go area” when it came to this kind of art. During the mid-1970s, Bowling produced his “pour paintings,” in which paint was poured from the top of a vertically oriented canvas. The results are beautiful and strange. The background of the 1974 acrylic on canvas *Ziff*

resembles the soft, washed-out layers of some of the “map paintings,” wherein Bowling would layer his paint and remove it with water to achieve a streaky record of color. In the center of this soft bed of washed-out color, though, is an explosion of purple, orange, and white dripped paint caught in action. In *Ziff* and other poured paintings, Bowling was able to capture his process, finding the image in the act of painting and defining the act of painting as his image. Soon after their exhibition though, Bowling






stopped showing his “poured paintings.” He was restless.

In the early 1980s, Bowling would push the boundaries of his practice even more, incorporating acrylic foam into his canvases. His paintings grew structurally and texturally. Found objects made their way into them. The line between sculpture and painting intrigued the artist. The boundary-pushing he saw in artists like Ornette Coleman drove him to expand his practice further. Bowling has continued in this vein up to today. The 2017 acrylic paint and plastic objects on collaged canvas painting *Iona Miriam’s Christmas Visit To & From Brighton* is a canvas filled with the remnants of washed-out colors and bright sculptural obtrusions, bisected by a line of organized colors. The work evinces Bowling’s continued belief in the expressive power of paint.

Ultimately, the key to Bowling’s work is found in the man. The freedom offered by abstraction merely opens the door to the

personal and intimate in the artist’s work. Bowling becomes his own frame, and this framing enables a resultant particularity imbued with a deep humanity based in experience. Bowling’s focus is the possibility of paint, but it is expressed through the man and his experiences. As the artist told Courtney J. Martin, “My poured surfaces didn’t billow like Rothko’s. Mine billowed like the kind of heat haze that you get in Guyana in the middle of the day. The sun is so hot that the water evaporates, rises and stays still: it is just *there*. You get a kind of heat haze that is almost impenetrable. If you go outside, you have to go out into the water. I felt those things about these pictures. I had to open it up.” Bowling succeeded in doing just that. Now, the Tate, an institution the artist has enjoyed a long and supportive relationship with, is opening the full career of Frank Bowling, an artist with a unique devotion to the expressive power of paint, to the world. 

From left: *Vitacress*, 1981, acrylic paint on canvas, 236.5 x 174 mm; *Ziff*, 1974, acrylic paint on canvas, 2010 x 1460 x 50 mm.



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Frank Bowling is represented by

Hales Gallery, London

Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Beverly Hill