

The Telegraph

From Windrush, via New York and back again: black British artists finally enjoy recognition at home



Green Valley with Kasia's sprigs, by Frank Bowling, the Guyana-born British artist. This month the artist is celebrated in a Tate Britain retrospective, and in a commercial show at the Hales Gallery

[Colin Gleadell](#) 7 MAY 2019 • 12:30PM

Along-awaited retrospective exhibition at Tate Britain for Frank Bowling, the 85-year-old Guyana-born British artist, opens later this month. But first, this week, his London dealer Paul Hedge is to show Bowling's most recent work at his Hales Gallery in Shoreditch, east London.

Late in life, Bowling is enjoying international recognition and for those who can remember being able to buy one of his paintings for under a grand (two sold at Bonhams in the 2000s for three figures), the prices may come as a shock. The big, joyous abstracts will be between £100,000 and £500,000.

Bowling's career pattern is revealing. A Windrush-generation artist, his early work was figurative, narrative and colourful, but restricted to exhibitions like Young Commonwealth Artists at the Royal Society of British Artists. As Bryan Robertson, the Whitechapel Art Gallery director, said in 1964: "England is not ready for a gifted artist of colour."



Frank Bowling, Green Valley, 2018

So in 1966, he moved to New York, where he painted abstracted fields of drenched colour as practised by Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. This “colour-field” painting was promoted by Clement Greenberg, the leading critic, who homed in on Bowling as the only non-American worthy of inclusion in his pantheon.

Indeed, Bowling, who was given a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971, is still considered American by Americans, and when the recent tidal wave of interest in neglected African-American artists hit the market, Bowling was swept up with it too.

In 2013, Hedge took a large Seventies painting to New York’s Armory Show and sold it for \$275,000 (£185,000); Bowling’s auction record then was just £12,000.

Since then, no doubt assisted by his inclusion in Tate’s 2017 Soul of a Nation exhibition, his auction prices have advanced to \$160,000 (£122,000) in America. “But nothing really good has surfaced at auction,” says Hedge, who has just returned from the Frieze Art Fair in New York where he sold two paintings for £150,000 and £250,000.

“Privately, some of his best earlier works have sold for close to a million dollars.”



Morning Light According to Ashton, by Frank Bowling

In Britain, there have been no barriers confronting the advance of the younger generation of black British artists. From Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare to Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, museums and market alike have welcomed them early in their careers.

But the older generation, until now, have only been sparingly recognised compared with the US where the long shadow of slavery has made the reappraisal of African-American artists far more urgent.

Last year, Tate acquired its first work by Winston Branch, another Caribbean-born British artist, now in his 70s. In 2017, it acquired its first work by Denzil Forrester – a Grenada-born Briton in his 60s who is enjoying his first exhibition in a major West End gallery, Stephen Friedman, where his large paintings of reggae and dub music club scenes are priced from £125,000.

Next month, Somerset House will host a survey of black British culture from the Sixties in an exhibition entitled Get Up, Stand Up Now. Among the older artists represented are film-maker Horace Ové and painter Aubrey Williams, a founder member of the Caribbean Artists Movement in London in 1966.

Bowling is not taking part because of his Tate show, says Hedge, and because Hales Gallery is giving him a solo exhibition at the world's most prestigious fair for modern and contemporary art, Art Basel in Switzerland, also in June.



Denzil Forrester, 'Velvet Rush', 2018. CREDIT: COPYRIGHT DENZIL FORRESTER./COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON.

One senses too that Bowling, who never wanted to be classified as a black artist, might also have resisted. He may be thinking of one of his champions, the African art curator Okwui Enwezor, who died in March.

In 2002, on the occasion of his truly global, postcolonial Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Enwezor criticised the marginalising ethnographic approach to non-Western art, saying he sought rather “the emergence of the margin at the centre”.

Now this is happening and black artists, designers and musicians are at the heart of British culture. The revival of interest in Bowling, Forrester, Williams and Branch is symptomatic of a historical revision that has gripped America and is gradually happening in Britain as well.

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