

## Culture

# Frank Bowling at Tate Britain: 'The effect is, frankly, emotional'



Frank Bowling at Tate Britain, in front of his painting 'Wafting'.  
Photo: Tate/ Matt Greenwood

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Tate Britain has constructed a chapel at the heart of its latest exhibition – at least that’s how the space feels. Four monumental map paintings by Frank Bowling take the cardinal points, lit from above by cool daylight from the rising roof.

To one side, the turbulent *Dog Daze* (1971) billowing clouds of intense pink – magenta, Mexican, cerise, rose, Schiaparelli – roil like liquid ink in water, out across a vast expanse of fiery, dirty yellow, like a ferocious desert sunset. The continent of Africa appears in floating silhouette near the centre, its outline licked in hot reddish orange that floats up the canvas in smeared clouds as if the landmass was on fire.

Opposite is *Penumbra* (1970), almost seven metres in width. Here we are in the colours of the night sky or deep ocean. Through a field of hectic indigo, uranium and arsenic greens scud modified outlines of Eurasia and the Americas, curved, leaning, recognisable but unlike the ‘authoritative’ world maps in school atlases.

A penumbra is the bright cloud surrounding a form that partly blocks light, like the moon before the sun. Here such a ring appears around the continents, the result of pale spray paint around a stencil, but suggestive, too of other kinds of light, other sources of power blocked from fully shining out.

In the altar position is the ethereal *Raining Down South* (1968), pale washy pinks and cloudy of green, shimmering through a misty coating of silver. Repeating across the canvas like a textile pattern are the outlines of South America, and Bowling's birthplace of Guyana. The forms seem to float upwards in the pearly space of the painting – the effect under the daylight of Tate's (rarely exposed) roof lights is, frankly, emotional.



Frank Bowling's 'Raining Down South', 1968. Courtesy Frank Bowling and Hales Gallery, Alexander Gray Associates and Marc Selwyn Fine Art

Now 85, Bowling's 'map paintings' of the late 1960s and early 1970s were made during a 10-year period in New York. There he worked in concert both with the leading abstract painters of the day and with black artists explicitly addressing urgent social and historical issues in their work.

Critic Clement Greenberg, the great champion of Abstract Expressionism, became a pivotal influence: "Clem was able to make me see that modernism belonged to me also, that I had no good reason to pretend I wasn't part of the whole thing," Bowling later explained. "I believe that the black soul, if there can be such a thing, belongs to modernism".

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**Frank Bowling**

Throughout his career, his paintings have occupied a hinterland between pure abstraction and image: fascination with the stuff of painting itself, and with the context (personal, as well as political) in which it is being made and seen.

The artist grew up in New Amsterdam, Guyana, where his mother ran Bowling's Variety Store. Silk-screened images of their white wooden house and shop appear in many of Bowling's poppier works from the mid 1960s. He had moved

to London aged 19, and started studies in art after two years in the Air Force.

In 1959, a scholarship carried him to the painting department at the Royal College of Art where he studied alongside David Hockney, R.B. Kitaj and Patrick Caulfield. Bowling was awarded the silver medal on graduation: Hockney, gold.



Frank Bowling's 'Mirror' 1966. Tate, presented by the artist, Rachel Scott, and their 4 children, Benjamin and Sacha Bowling, Marcia and Iona Scott 2013

Tate Britain's exhibition meets Bowling as he graduates from the RCA, with early paintings – a woman giving birth, a man begging on the streets of New Amsterdam – that are clearly influenced by Francis Bacon. Four remarkable works follow. Three are increasingly abstracted studies of a dying swan, its serpentine white form fragmenting with distressed movements against backgrounds of clean-edged coloured chevrons and blocks.

Bowling's graduate thesis was on Piet Mondrian: instead of that artist's cool, artificial primary colours, here the geometric forms are warm and evocative. The fourth is the monumental *Mirror* (1962-4) in which three figures (two based on Bowling, one on his then-wife Paddy Kitchen) are seen on a gold spiral staircase slicing between two stories of brightly coloured interior.

While it is very much a painting of its time – the influence of Bacon is still there, likewise Peter Blake, R.B. Kitaj, and Michael Andrews – the impact is startling and dynamic, full of movement and play with space.

Bowling started experimenting with other Pop tropes – stencilled text, silk screen and images lifted from magazines – creating a body of work expressive simultaneously of childhood memories of Guyana and of London in the swinging sixties. In *Cover Girl* (1966) a model with a geometric bob and Pop-inspired dress appears beneath a ghostly green impression of Bowling's Variety Store.



Frank Bowling's 'Cover Girl', 1966. Private Collection, London



Even early in his career, Bowling could not be reduced to a neat pigeonhole: ‘just’ a Pop artist, ‘just’ an abstract painter, ‘just’ part of the Young Commonwealth Artists’ Group.

In 1996, the artist and art historian Eddie Chambers wrote of Bowling’s refusal “to aesthetically rule himself out of the main currents of contemporary, international art practice [...] As a black artist, he confounds and frustrates stereotypes of what work a ‘black artist’ should be producing or might be expected to produce. Through his painting, he relentlessly expresses the view that for him, art should not be burdened down by considerations of race, racism or racial/national identity.”

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Still in New York, Bowling followed his map paintings with experiments in pure abstraction, pouring thinned acrylic paint onto canvases from a height, producing liquid confections evocative of waterfalls and plumes of fire.

By the end of the 1970s, he was experimenting with the chemical and textural properties of paint as well as colour. By using ammonia, metallic and pearlescent paint he created

reactions in the surface of the paintings. The coalesced and crystalline layers of *Ah Susan Woosh* (1981) create an effect like a satellite image of a coastline, gazing down at coloured forms through different material layers.



Frank Bowling's 'Benjamin's Mess (Hot Hands)', 2006. Private collection, London, courtesy of Jessica McCormack

Bowling's work became increasingly sculptural as the decade progressed. He built up the surface of his painting into thick reliefs with acrylic gel, adding debris suggestive of maritime flotsam and jetsam, or grim leavings caught in mud.

Slowly, light arrives in the paintings again like an exhalation: a series of silvery works created in 1988-9, with their choppy, wave-like surfaces, hazy pearlescence and depth, evoke both the reflective body of the Thames, and the Guyanese coast near New Amsterdam.

The show's final rooms find Bowling unbound in his late career, uniting techniques honed over a lifetime of experimentation, in works embracing chance (marks left by buckets, poured paint), meticulously collaged textiles, and bands of strong colour.



Frank Bowling's 'Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton', 2017. Private Collection, London

In *Wafting* (2018) strips of printed cloth cluster like rods in the centre of the work. In *Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton* (2017) tree decorations find their way into the paint, along with a tightly striped line bisecting the canvas: it feels like Bowling is having fun.

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Bowling's works are big on mood: stormy, pensive, serene (and in the case of the more sculptural works of the mid 1980s, heavy and troubling). For all his experimentation, what remains a constant is a dynamite sense of colour and play with surface, from shell pinks breaking through a pearly mist in *Haze* (2005), to the pomegranate, ochre and viridian green relief work of *Benjamin's Mess (Hot Hands)* (2006).

A treat, well overdue. And there's a chapel on hand, should you wish to bow down.

**Frank Bowling: The Possibilities of Paint Are Never-Ending**, Tate Britain, London, to 26 August (020 7887 8888)