

Bunker, John. *The Map Paintings: Frank Bowling Interview*, Abstract Critical, October 10, 2013



John Bunker: Before we focus on the Map Paintings, I'd like to explore with you for a moment the work just prior to them. I think it may help us contextualise the Map works more coherently and shed some light on the complexity of the thinking behind them.

Frank Bowling: That's an interesting start...

JB: So let's begin with *Mirror* (which has rightfully taken a prominent position in the 60s room at Tate Britain); *Cover Girl* from '66; and *Mothers House with Beware of the Dog* from the same year. After working in an explicitly figurative manner using paint in an expressionistic style there seems to be a very clear 'cooling down' period in your work. You seem to be taking a step back from a certain approach to painting. You seem to be intellectually looking at your place, if you like, in painting's histories and the tumult of competing styles and ideologies behind them...?

FB: That's one way of putting it...

JB: *Mirror* seems to contain so cleverly all these influences and ideas that are running through you and others who were also studying art the RCA at that time. *Cover Girl* takes on the cooler pop aspects of the time. *Mothers House with Beware of the Dog* maintains an autobiographical slant but in a detached or distanced manner.

What do you think about that supposition?

FB: I think you're on the right track there. After the original burst of work made in college I was in the heat and ferment of society changing – the ideas of a post-colonial society; artists really did think they could change the world. I fell for that! I made work about beggars, the suffering of childbirth, these really emotional things that grabbed me. But by the time I'd graduated from the Royal College I was aware of the people close around me like Dave Hockney, Derek Boshier and Pete Blake. Round about '63 I worked alongside Pete Blake. I became enamoured by how he slowly drew and glazed the surfaces of his work – those extraordinary pictures of his early time. I suppose you could say some of that rubbed off on me.

Mirror is very personal to me. I tried to marry up different aspects of my life as I saw it then. It contains all the prevailing dogmas about painting of the day too. We were all working from photographs at the time. Finding funny things, tragic things, ironic things happening in the world. We were trying to catch those things. I think my generation of painters were being very ironic about modern art. They were mixing up Colour Field, Op art and Pop art – trying to marry up styles to make a new body of work. JB: I'm very interested in what you are saying here. Were there a lot of humorous exchanges in the way American



Abstract Expressionism was talked about by your painter friends in college?

FB: Oh yes very much in my generation at the Royal College. There were many jokes about it!

JB: When you started to spend extended periods in the States – particularly in New York – you began to find a new relationship to Colour Field approaches to painting. This brings you into an interesting tension with the prior work and your experience of the RCA. In this respect the 'Map Paintings' represent a powerful transitional phase in your development. Is it a sort of bringing together of opposing forces in your work so far?

FB: Yes, although I had no claims on using maps as such. But I could lay claims to my mother's house so I used this image [silkscreened photograph onto canvas] first. On completing *Mirror* and *Cover Girl* I'd developed an interest in staining and drawing.

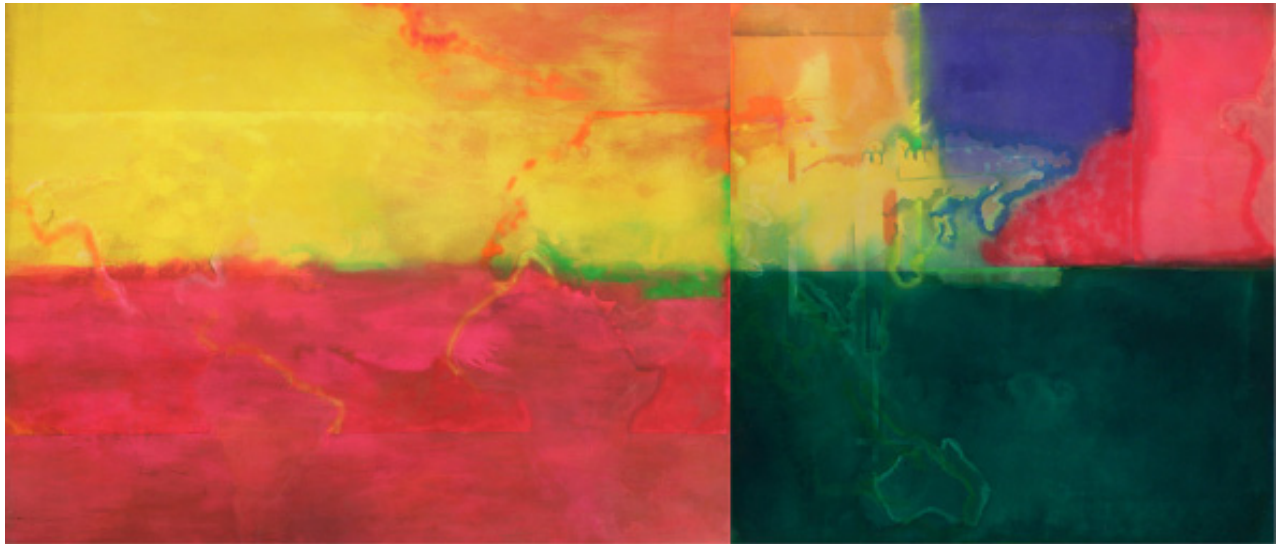
JB: These processes seem to have formed a lot of really interesting and original creative tensions in these works. Now, you say you could lay no claims on maps but they interested you. How did that discovery come about?

FB: In the beginning when I arrived in the states I was living in the Hotel Chelsea, in what turned out to be a more extended stay in New York. I was just laying the canvas on the floor and would then lay on the paint and start staining. I'd use colour to follow the way the light moved

across the room as the day went along. At one point the liquid paint started to form a pool in the shape of a head. At first look it seemed like a caricature of General de Gaulle. At that time he was making a lot of claims on the Western Hemisphere - another ironic aside! But as the paint settled it looked less like de Gaulle and more like a map of South America. I also recalled that as a child at school we were taught how to draw the map of Guyana. Larry Rivers suggested I use an overhead projector to get an accurate rendition of the maps of South America and Guyana. When I moved to a bigger studio in downtown New York I began cutting out these big thick brown paper stencils and started making the maps for real. I was working into a kind of field painting where the work formed its own shapes. *Cover Girl* was a little different because I was deliberately trying to make a work that would establish my own career within the Pop Art movement. But before then, even though we were all painting out of photographs and commenting on society as a whole, my work was never included because my work seemed to have more startling content like child birth and dying swans. It wanted to be deeper – it was more reified.

JB: It wasn't ironic enough? It was too intense somehow – what you were exploring?

FB: Yes, that's right. And once I'd moved from the Chelsea into bigger spaces – the Broadway studio was 100 feet by 25 – I had a lot of space to explore Field painting and



the map shapes. That is the journey from taking this ironic distanced stance about current dogma like Colour Field painting and Pop art and finding my own special, individual voice. This was my own singular path through the morass of stylistic confusion.

JB: You were not only traversing all these new stylistic possibilities being opened up by the scrutiny of popular culture or your own background....

FB: And the pressure of Abstract Expressionism...

JB: A pressure? Or a connection you felt?

FB: Yes! I felt it as a connection!

FB: I'd like to explore how this connection comes through in your work on the maps. I'm interested in how the 'Map Paintings' bring together ideas of geographical displacement and the diaspora experience that you may have felt as an artist of African descent born in South America and a British citizen – though this could apply to many more peoples in our post-colonial world. The paintings seem to suggest somehow a place between places, a liminal realm. I think we tend to associate 'identity politics' in art with other media – with the rise of photography and video since the 70s. I think the 'Map Paintings' are precursors of many of these ideas but from within painting... And within abstract painting too! They make one very aware

of painting's histories. We talked from the beginning about you finding your place in painting, within its traditions and contemporary innovations – whether one is being a part of it or being excluded from it. These paintings also allude to the intensely personal experience of finding one's place in the world, so to speak...

Am I jumping the gun here? Am I reading too much into them Frank?

FB: No, no. I would not have been able to articulate it the way you have because you've got distance on it and I was in the swim... But if I'd been talking about the 'Map Paintings' at that time, my position would have been similar, yes. I wouldn't have been so clear because I was struggling to know where I stood as an artist, because I was in competition. Now, actually that word 'competition' was handed to me on a plate by Clement Greenberg. When I was asked why I delayed becoming an abstract painter I said, like some of the other black artists I'd met in New York, that we didn't feel like we were allowed to participate. Clem said "no! What you mean is – you were not being allowed to compete!"

JB: But what you wanted, to extend the metaphor, was a level playing field, at least?

FB: That's right.