

Arts

Atlantic sublime

Frank Bowling | Ahead of a long overdue Tate retrospective, the British-Guyanese artist talks to Maya Jaggi about his 60-year transatlantic career

When I first interviewed Frank Bowling, 12 years ago, his studio in a cobbled yard in Kennington, south London, was stacked full of canvases — as was his red-brick loft on the East River in New York. Nowadays most works leave the studio the moment they dry, destined for museums around the world.

Recognition in Britain lagged behind the US, until he was elected a Royal Academician in 2005 (the first black artist in the RA's 250-year history), but now his first career spanning retrospective — an accolade even Tate itself describes as “long overdue” — opens at Tate Britain this week. His excitement at a lifetime's show is tempered, however: “Such gaps!” he laments.

In the exhibition about 60 works (Tate owns only four) move from Baconesque expressionism, with elements of pop art, to large-scale colour field acrylic paintings. His abstract art reflects the turmoil of history, with traces of personal memory like flotsam on tidal flats.

Capable of evoking terror and bliss with its range and intensity of colour, it was dubbed by the Yale critic Kobena Mercer — with a nod to JMW Turner — “Atlantic sublime”. Series such as *Great Thames* (1989), built up with thick impasto, gel and foam, are seen by the Guyanese artist Dennis de Caires as “more land than landscape” — the title of a current show of new works at Bowling's London gallery, Hales, in Shore ditch.

“Batticalborn I” (1967), chosen by Tate for its banner, alludes to the trading town at the confluence of three rivers in British Guiana where he was born in 1934. In New Amsterdam, they lived above Bowling's Variety Store, run by his mother, a seamstress. “My mother was the only black woman with a store on Main Street.” As a teenager, he cycled

with “samples of her dresses and women's underclothes to deliver to shops all along the coast”.

His relationship with his father was less nurturing. “My father was a nasty guy who liked to beat me up,” he says. “He only stopped because I threatened to kill him.” Holding up damaged fingers, he adds, “this is one of his legacies, from his policeman's belt. I have terrible wounds.” Later, he understood this brutality in its colonial context. “He wanted to be a doctor . . . Through therapy, I concluded it was a leftover from generations of slavery.”

After his passage in 1953 from British Guiana to London, where the 19-year-old felt instantly “at home”, he moved to New York from 1966 to 1975, into tempestuous debates about Abstract Expressionism and black art. Since the 1980s, he has criss-crossed the Atlantic and tacked between two studios, one near the Thames and one under Manhattan Bridge in Brooklyn.

The artist, now 85 and dapper in bottle green velvet jacket and grey felt hat, paints every day, but tries to limit himself to two hours, on doctor's orders. He has diabetes and uses a cane or wheelchair. He met his wife Rachel Scott, a textile artist, at the Royal College in 1959. They married other people before they “reconnected”, he says, 30 years ago. Hearing her on the loom at Sam, “the beat lulls me. I have the urge to work all the time.”

Early influences began when he frequented the National Gallery while on national service in the RAF, and was “hooked”. Among his pantheon are Rembrandt, Velázquez, Monet and Van Gogh (“deep colour straight out of the tube”), but “there's always been Turner”.

Goya and Bacon are behind early figurative paintings, including a series on beggars. “My rage at cruelty, bullying and death was something I tried to



Frank Bowling in his London studio, photographed for the FT by Toby Coulson

express as nausea and discomfort.” He was “gripped by German Expressionism”, but in New York the Modernist critic Clement Greenberg “spotted I was a natural colourist, so I moved into abstraction. A lot of colour field painting, like [Mark] Rothko and [Nicolas] de Staël had the feeling of a heartbeat, of breathing freely, and at times being

short of breath — much like the life one was living oneself, in colour.”

As a West Indian at art school in London, and a British intellectual in the post-civil rights US, he knew an astonishing range of people, from Francis Bacon (“a mentor but we fell out”), David Hockney (at the Royal College of Art, Bowling won the silver medal for

painting to Hockney's gold in 1962; “60 years later we're still friends”) and the Guyanese artist Aubrey Williams, to Jasper Johns and Miles Davis. “Moving to New York was a blessing; all the crazy people in the Chelsea Hotel became friends,” he says, mentioning Norman Mailer and John Ashbery. His epic *Map Paintings* of 1966-71,

some seven metres long, with stencilled outlines of the Americas and Africa in layers of colour, re-centre the world from a postcolonial perspective. Ahead of their time, the *Map Paintings* were in storage for decades before causing astonishment at the 2003 Venice Biennale. In *Mapa Mundi*, a solo show in 2017 at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, the curator Okwui Enwezor recognised Bowling as a “late-Modernist master”.

Works such as “Middle Passage” (1970), with maps and spectral family photographs, unsettle ideas of modernity. As Bowling once told me: “The African input in Modernism has never been acknowledged . . . The Middle Passage” was a cleansing of old notions. The new way of making art stems from what the same people they put in chains and dragged across the water brought to the New World.” His critical writings helped inspire Tate Modern's *Soul of a Nation*, a group show in 2017 when “it was thrilling”, he says, to be among African American artist friends.

In intimate contrast are the *White*

‘The African input in Modernism has never been acknowledged’

Paintings that greeted the birth of his eldest son, Dan, in 1962, and his sudden death from a brain clot in 2001. Bowling's abstract art is saturated with life experiences.

“When I started getting very sick and my bones were aching, I went for acupuncture.” Needles found their way into paintings, along with diabetic syringes and “plastic urine tests”. Other recent works are encrusted with snipped-up credit cards and family detritus like combs and hairpins.

Spurred to be “as good as the old masters — or even better”, he experiments ceaselessly. The new paintings in hot pinks and yellows have an exhilarating luminosity, because, he tells me, “colour has its own mathematical clarity and grammar in laying bare and explaining light. It's not reflected light, as in nature. The light comes out of the work.”

tate.org, halesgallery.com
Soul of a Nation is at the Broad, Los Angeles, until September 1, thebroad.org