

LOOK CLOSER

At the age of 85, Frank Bowling is having a moment

Like his paintings, the British-Guyanese artist resists easy categorisation



ALASTAIR CURTIS | JUNE 5TH 2019

Frank Bowling put up his paintbrush a long time ago. Now he prefers to pour and throw paint directly onto the canvas, scrubbing and whipping it into a richly textured impasto. His methods are improvised, their results largely spontaneous. More than 70 of his paintings are included in Tate Britain's retrospective and no two of them are alike. They are the product of Bowling's intensely independent style, which flows free of convention and easy categorisation.

Bowling has always refused to follow the crowd – perhaps the reason why his work has not had the attention it deserves. Born in 1934, he emigrated from Guyana to London at the age of 19, then enrolled at the Royal College of Art, where his contemporaries included David Hockney and Derek Boshier. Bowling, however, was less interested in the beginnings of British Pop, preferring instead to paint dour dramas of poverty and social neglect, inspired by his Guyanese childhood and the visceral style of his friend and sometime mentor, Francis Bacon. But there was little appetite in England for his early experiments, which were considered unfashionable and, in some cases, destroyed – like his first self-portrait as a regal Othello.

Walking along the Thames one day in 1964, he spotted a swan slicked in oil and struggling to stay afloat. This swan features in many of his 1960s paintings, its wings flapping as it tries to take flight: an image that no doubt resonated with the young Bowling. His exclusion from the art world can also be seen in "Mirror", one of his early paintings. Bowling sits slumped at the bottom of a spiral staircase, his head in his hands. High above him, another Bowling, perhaps the artist he aspires to be, confidently swings from the stairs and into the air, at last achieving lift-off. The

mash-up of styles – op art, abstraction and pop art, to name but a few – underlines Bowling’s restless desire to try on every style for size.

Many artists change style over the course of their careers, but few do so as often as Bowling. In 1966 he decamped to New York, where he fell in with Melvin Edwards and Jack Whitten, black artists producing politically charged responses to the civil-rights movement. Bowling wanted to paint what he felt like painting, but in America, he said in an interview a few years ago, “everyone was expecting me to paint some kind of protest art out of post-colonial discussion”. To escape this pigeonholing, in the 1970s he turned towards abstraction, which was at that time an overwhelmingly white discipline. The results were revelatory. “Middle Passage”, one of his paintings from this period, expresses the horrors of slavery through colour alone. Its 23-foot blaze of blood red and orange appears like a deep wound gored in the canvas fabric, an echo of the unimaginable pain experienced by enslaved Africans en route to the Americas.

Bowling delights in the freedom to pick and choose his colours and materials, without the interference of ideology. As well as giving Bowling’s long career its due, the exhibition shows that his appetite for experimentation is as healthy as ever. At the age of 85, he continues to paint wildly and at will, bulking up his canvas or breaking it in two. His recent abstract works, many on display for the first time, are smothered with foam and bandaged in cloth. They are not easily interpreted or understood. But in each one we encounter the artist, and the world, anew.

“Cover Girl” (1966)

The model in this painting is Hiroko Matsumoto, whose picture Bowling copied from the cover of *The Observer* magazine. Wearing a Pierre Cardin dress and a helmet haircut, she cuts a sharp figure, arms akimbo; Bowling has made her a glam symbol of the post-war affluence he enjoyed in England. But for all the distractions of Swinging London, Guyana was never far from Bowling’s mind, as this painting suggests. Matsumoto is flanked by the bold green, yellow and red stripes of the Guyanese flag. Further into the background, Bowling inserted a silk-screened photograph of his New Amsterdam home and family-run shop, the lettering on its awning (“Bowling’s Variety Store”) barely visible in the yellow haze. Up above, an ominous blue cloud threatens to clamp down on the house – and it’s memory – like a lid. This painting captures Bowling’s growing alienation from Guyana, after 13 years spent living in London. Recoloured and occasionally overprinted, this photograph of his home, with its white clapboard facade and lone palm tree, crops up in several of his paintings from this 1960s: a memento of the family Bowling left behind.

PRIVATE COLLECTION © FRANK BOWLING, DACS 2019

“Barticaborn I” (1967)



Bowling hit upon the idea for his “map paintings” by accident. Spreading his canvas across the floor of his New York studio one day, he began to drop paint on its surface, guiding it only gently, until it collected into a shape resembling South America. Bowling was immediately inspired. He began painting vast expanses of washed-out colour, often more than three metres high, from which the outlines of South America and Africa emerge like ghosts. Bowling’s focus on continents from the Southern Hemisphere is a playful but powerful attempt to reorient the Western-centric focus of modern cartography.

LOWINGER FAMILY COLLECTION

“Ziff” (1974)

A sticky plume of violet, mauve and dull orange acrylic slides down the face of this canvas. Its title alludes to Barnett Newman’s

1940s “zip paintings”, the inspiration this “pour painting”. But whereas Newman’s strips of primary colour were carefully controlled compositions, Bowling’s messy columns of paint are free to merge into lurid combinations. Bowling once said that his “pour paintings” merely involved “dumping the material down on the surface”, but in reality it was an exacting process, involving the operation of a tilting platform to control the speed and direction of the paint slick as it moved across the canvas. But the colour combination of the finished pour was always a surprise.

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“Ah Susan Whoosh” (1981)



In the 1980s Bowling began to trigger chemical transformations on his canvas by applying ammonia and pearl-essence to its surface, creating works that were richly textured with spatter and speckle. By pouring acrylics directly onto the canvas and tilting it, Bowling made his colours coalesce into the luminous, low-lit shapes that seem to inhabit this painting's emerald depths. His hand-painted silver splotches are suggestive of the depths of cosmic space, or possibly the drift of underwater currents, although the painting's riddling title offers no clues as to its meaning. This is Bowling at his most mysterious.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, LONDON ©
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“Great Thames IV” (1988-9)

A lifelong admiration for Turner, Gainsborough and the English landscape tradition inspired this riverscape. Bowling painted the illuminated surface of the Thames, as observed from his riverside studio in Pimlico. Its mixture of blues, green and burnished gold paint perfectly capture the fluid movement of the water. Lodged deep within the impasto you will find bottle caps, pill packets and oyster shells.

Glued to the canvas and swept over with paint, these odds and ends create the illusion of hidden depth, a reef of rubbish on the murky riverbed. Anything lying around Bowling's studio is liable to find its way onto his canvases, which have previously swallowed up cocktail umbrellas,



jewellery, and, on at least one occasion, a set of missing car keys.

ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION,
SOUTHBANK CENTRE. © FRANK
BOWLING, DACS 2019

“Iona Miriam’s Christmas Visit
To & From Brighton” (2017)

Bowling’s recent work combines techniques he has developed over the past 60 years, resulting in increasingly imaginative compositions. He has stitched this canvas together with a thin strip of technicolour print, dividing in two its washed-out green and metallic grey surface. Its gel splatters are bulked up with the addition of old toys, ribbons and plastic bracelets that once belonged to his step-daughter Iona, who gives this painting its name. But, as always, it is the intensity of Bowling’s colours to which we are drawn. Generous dollops of pink and mauve,

orange swirls and a sudden smattering of yellow: Bowling finds great joy in the beautiful and occasionally abrasive juxtaposition of colour. Over the years, Bowling has overhauled his style more than once, but he has always maintained his interest in colour and its inexhaustible possibilities for experimentation.

Frank Bowling Tate Britain until August 26th

COURTESY FRANK BOWLING AND HALES GALLERY, ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATIONS AND MARC SELWYN FINE ART © FRANK BOWLING, DACS 2019

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MAIN IMAGE: MATHILDE AGIUS



