



Interview

'I'm almost enjoying myself!' - Frank Bowling's six-decade journey to success

Elizabeth Fullerton

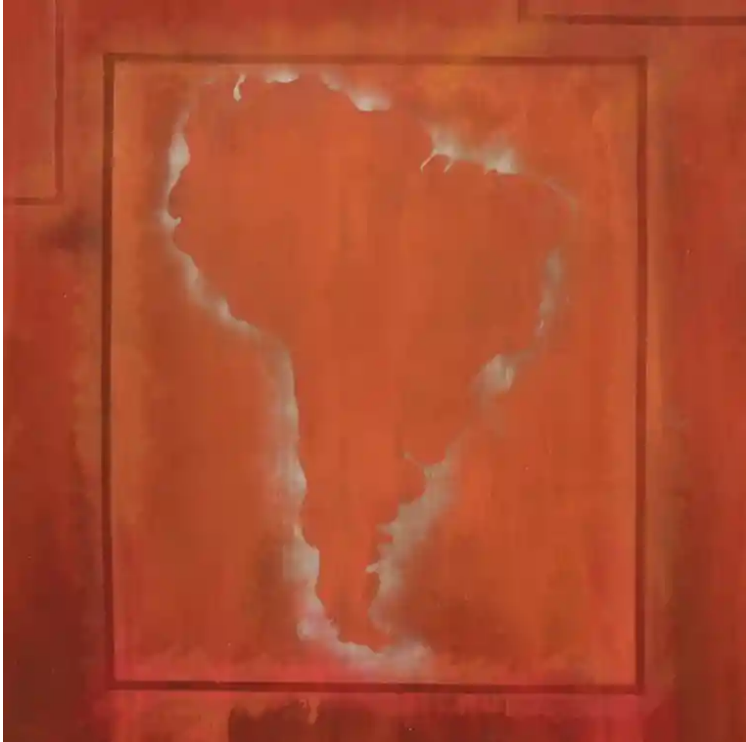
Collars, car keys, poly bags - they've all made it into his vast and richly colourful paintings. We meet the Guyana-born painter who is finally receiving his dues

Wed 29 May 2019 10.40 EDT

Put something down in Frank Bowling's studio and it could easily end up embedded in one of his vast paintings. Bangles, cigarette lighters, even his wife's car keys - all have suffered this fate. So I am on my guard when I drop by his workplace in south London. And indeed, one of the first things he shows me is his latest painting: an exuberant seven-metre work-in-progress in which yellow, red and gold ripple out from two hemispheres. It's decorated with scraps of a dress belonging to his grandson's girlfriend - although, to be fair, the dress was offered rather than swallowed up by one of his vats of paint, as the car keys were.

“She walked in with a dress she had made in Africa,” says the Guyana-born artist, “and she didn’t like it so we tore it up.” He points up at the work and says: “That black there across the middle was the petticoat, and the circles around it are made up of the dress itself.”

Bowling is just about to have his first full retrospective, which opens this week at Tate Britain in London, celebrating his extraordinary six-decade career. Starting in the early 1960s, it’s a journey that has seen him swing back and forth between London and New York via Guyana, and from figurative pop art to huge abstract canvases with colours and textures you can easily just get lost in.



'Controlled accident' ... South America Squared, by Bowling.
Photograph: © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

The artist has tirelessly explored the material of paint, continuously inventing new techniques that pushed the medium to its limits. This long overdue exhibition doesn’t just offer a rare chance to experience the sheer range of his art, it’s also part of an equally overdue drive to redress the dominance of the white male and give the spotlight to overlooked artists. “My own life has defined this change,” he says. “I am pleased with that.”

Despite the wait to be feted in Britain, Bowling is thrilled about the exhibition - although, now 85 and in frail health, he did have to relinquish control of the show to others. “I had to lie low and let them run over me,” he says. “It didn’t hurt. I almost found I was enjoying it. I’m a masochist.”

These days, he also needs help with applying paint to canvas. He tends to sit on a chair in the middle of the room and direct the action using a laser pointer. “I’m like an extension of his brush,” says Frederik, his grandson and helper. “I’ll start on one part of the canvas and he’ll go, ‘OK, to the left, to the left, to the left. Up, down. Left left, left.’”

Not a drop is wasted. The floor is lined with strips of canvas that, once spattered with paint, are integrated into new works. A bag of colourful cloth scraps sits alongside large tubs of acrylic paint, all clustered around two tables laden with jars and brushes. And stacked against the walls of the studio are what all these things go into creating: recent paintings of varying sizes.

By the entrance hangs a dreamy expanse of yellow and pink, with dollops of gel meandering across the top like an archipelago. On the far side of the room, an electric-blue canvas is punctuated by a strip of black fabric and a luminous area of raised yellow resembling a landmass. Made this year, it's called *El Dorado With My Shirt Collar*, a reference to the fabled city of gold that drew Walter Raleigh and other explorers to the former British colony of Guyana, on the coast of South America, in the 16th century.



Starting out ... Bowling in a London studio in 1962. Photograph: Tony Evans/Timelapse Library Ltd./Getty

And what about the collar? “That’s from one of Frank’s shirts that was in tatters,” says Frederik. He gestures to the strip of black floating on a blue background, then switches to a lumpy form within the landmass below. “And here you can see a lighter!” When a plastic bag fell on to the canvas, Spencer Richards, another assistant and close friend, said: “That looks a bit like Guyana, don’t you think?” So they went round it with a stencil and built it up using lots of gel until they had a miniature version of the country. These moments of shared creativity bring Bowling enormous satisfaction. “My romantic life - which, like everybody else’s, is usually unplanned - has produced grandchildren who really make me feel as though I’m something. It’s very special, I think.”

Bowling hadn’t always wanted to be an artist. When he arrived in Britain in 1953, at the age of 19, he had notions of being a poet. But while doing his national service in the RAF, he met the artist Keith Critchlow, who encouraged him to change tack. He studied first at Chelsea School of Art then at the Royal College of Art (RCA), which initially rejected him because he lacked experience of drawing from life.

“All that sort of bullshit, as though I wasn’t living,” he says. “Dead disciplines. I proceeded to get checked for competence, which is not to do with art but to do with being locked in and intimidated and frightened. You get crippled very quickly.” He was “rescued” - and funded - by the RCA’s head of painting, Carel Weight, whose signed photograph hangs in the studio.

Bowling studied alongside the stars of British pop art: David Hockney, Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty. But he was making pop-inflected work with an expressionistic, Francis Bacon-type twist (the two men were friends for a time). Bowling soon began to feel constrained by the expectation that art should tell a story and the last straw came in 1966, when one of his paintings was sent to represent Britain at the inaugural World Festival of Negro Arts in Senegal. “I was the stool pigeon to help the necessary pacifying for the awfulness of colonialism,” he says. “I represented the black world, so to speak.”



Echoes of Monet ... Bowling's Great Thames IV. Photograph: © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

Feeling “squeezed out” of London, Bowling decamped to New York, where he encountered the abstract expressionists and the colour field painters. At the time, he was still incorporating images of home and family members in his work. His childhood memories of Guyana remain vivid to this day: he tells me he used to regularly feed and bathe beggars at his mother’s insistence, and recalls the beatings meted out to him by his father.

Soon after his arrival in the US, an epiphany propelled him down the road to abstraction. “There was a discussion among artists,” he says, “of how to get the materials to deliver all the expectations and emotions and truth and clarity. And I realised - Boom! This is it. It’s about the *material*, not some sort of story. Gradually I decided to erase, say, the image of my mother and replace it with shape, colour and structure.” He began to introduce stencilled maps of Africa, South America and Australia on to ornate washes of colour to create the wonderfully atmospheric vistas known as his Map Paintings. Next came experiments with pouring: Bowling built a tilting platform that he used to pour paint from a height on to the canvas in “controlled accidents”.

Against the turbulent backdrop of the civil rights movement, artists of colour came under pressure to use their skills to serve the cause. Bowling wrote several important essays defending black artists engaging in abstraction. “He was part of that generation who were adamant they were artists first,” says Connie Choi, a curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem. “The fact they were black was secondary.”



Intriguing clash ... Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton.
Photograph: © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2018

Bowling enjoyed success in New York - he had a solo show in 1971 at the Whitney Museum of American Art - but by 1975 he had returned to London to be with his family, although he still has studios in both cities. His return was marked by a more confident and fluid style: glorious effervescent paintings suggestive of deep oceanic convulsions gave way to increasingly built-up, tactile surfaces using acrylic foam, acrylic gel, shells, packing materials and even toys to create bewitching contoured landscapes.

His stunning Great Thames series, created in the late 1980s, combines the magnetism of Monet's dissolving waterlilies with the mystery of Turner's ethereal coastal scenes. Yet it's his own innovations - with material, texture and colour - that perfectly evoke the river's movement, life and shimmering depths. His success has been an inspiration to generations of black British artists. "I believe in practices that appear to embody a kind of ecstasy of excellence," says the artist John Akomfrah. "When we were starting off, there were very few people like that. Frank Bowling was one."

For the past decade, Bowling has been revisiting his collage and relief techniques, combining them with a range of others such as pouring, staining, stencilling, cutting and stitching canvases. In less seasoned hands, the juxtaposition of such wildly different styles might jar. Take his 2017

painting Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton, in which the luxuriant, object-strewn surface is bisected with a neat horizontal line of colourful stripes. Rather than jar, the clash is intriguing.

Although he no longer handles the paint much himself, Bowling remains obsessed with the act of creating and comes to the studio every day. I wonder, after all this time, if he can still find things surprising? "Oh yes," he says. "I'm looking for something that will jolt me and I can feel that rush - the nervous system being so excited it's going to act. It's what keeps me awake at night."

The Frank Bowling retrospective is at Tate Britain, London, from 31 May to 26 August