Frank Bowling, Artist

‘I was a salesman selling lengths of cloth – I had a huckster’s licence’

Frank Bowling found his studio in Elephant and Castle, south London, 30 years ago. It sits in a charming mews, away from the infamous concrete roundabout. The studio is surprisingly modest, dominated by the large amount of paintings neatly arranged in racks, labels visible, many of them from the 1990s.

Bowling was born in B duta, Guyana, South America, in 1936, the son of a policeman and a mother who, Bowling acknowledges, was his creative influence. She designed clothes and had a small shop where he had his first job to raise money for his passage to England in 1952 to study and join an uncle already here. “I was a salesman selling lengths of cloth – I had a huckster’s licence.”

Bowling landed in the UK and quickly was told to his compulsory National Service. He chose to join the RAF but when he got there they saw him as a potential athlete. He was charged with insubordination, not wanting to “carry my superior’s hill”. That’s not surprising after he tells me “I was a difficult child always wanting to run away from home.”

Bowling came to London. “I met artist Keith Critchlow who introduced me to painting and the Tate and National Galleries. I discovered the Wallace Collection myself.” His mother paid for one term at art college, hoping he would get a scholarship. When that did not happen he was lucky to meet Roger de Grey, who gave Bowling a lifeline: £20, allowing him to find digs until that time he was sleeping on people’s floors. He eventually made it to the Royal College of Art with a scholarship, where he was to be awarded the silver medal to David Hockney’s gold.

He met American Pop artist Larry Rivers who encouraged him to go to New York in the 1960s and get him lodgings at the Chelsea Hotel. Rivers saying, “Hey man, the colours in your world! The guys here don’t know what you’re doing.” The advice of “cooling down” his colours and abandoning the challenging subject matter schooled in his ears, turned away from his ears, often confrontational figurative work. Critic Clement Greenberg became a supporter and he was included in the Whitney Biennial of 1971. Bowling, now 79, is having a moment. He became a Royal Academician in 2005, the first black British artist to be given this honour, and was made an OBE in 2008. He has a large show in Sweden and had a sell-out exhibition in New York, and now is represented by a “hip” gallery in London. The Tate has several works in their collection including Mirror (1966), which reflects his figurative roots. He still comes to the studio every day, although he can only work for a few hours at a time due to increasing fragile health.

He has outlined many of his contemporaries from the Royal College including John Hoiland, RR Ring and Patrick Caulfield, standing to the studio surrounded by busy, juicy colours, I felt that although his family are now mostly all in England, his vision was somehow formed in the colours of his birthplace. Sadly, when he went back to Guyana after his mother’s death in the 1990s her shop was completely razed to the ground. “It’s sad,” he says. “I had this idea of making sculptures from the sewing machines.”

Photograph: Paintings by Frank Bowling, Spreetsvarv, Stockholm (Spreetsvarv's site) on 6 April.