

Frank Bowling: Make It New

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Frank Bowling, *Regatta*, 2017. Acrylic on collaged canvas, 58.27 × 73.31 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Hales Gallery, London. © 2018 Frank Bowling.

Standing in front of Frank Bowling's *Regatta* (2017), I want to wade into its hazy expanse, shimmering with electric pink, marine blue, tangerine, and flecks of silver, and to tongue the lozenges of beeswax dropped on the canvas like a line of boats. I have the impulse, in other words, to both eat and be eaten. Bowling's sumptuous colors and allusive abstractions seduce the eye and awaken the whole body to an awareness of looking. Here is the luminescent sublime, modeled by Turner, articulated in materialist terms.

Born in colonial Guyana, trained at the Royal College of Art alongside David Hockney and R.B. Kitaj, Bowling arrived in New York in the late 1960s, at the height of Pop Art and the Civil Rights Movement. Mentored by Clement Greenberg, whose formalist concerns set the terms for mid-century, modernist painters, Bowling has nonetheless spent nearly sixty years pursuing a mode of abstraction that evades both the gestural fundamentalism of the so-called action painters—Pollack, de Kooning—and the post-painterly abstraction defined by Greenberg. Now in his eighties, Bowling's abstractions—dripped, poured, splashed, or spread thickly on the canvas—are imbued with the painter's post-colonial, transnational memory. He may be best known for his series of map paintings, first shown at the Whitney Museum in 1971. These large-scale works summon continental landmasses from the oceanic murk, evoking the spatial history of the black diaspora. In the nine recent works presented by Alexander Gray, Bowling has left figuration behind as historical time and geographic place flicker across the canvas like phantoms.



Frank Bowling, *Elder Sun Benjamin*, 2018. Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas, 119.29 × 203.54 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Hales Gallery, London. © 2018 Frank Bowling.

Frank Bowling, *Elder Sun Benjamin*, 2018. Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas, 119.29 × 203.54 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Hales Gallery, London. © 2018 Frank Bowling.

Like *Regatta*, Paul Hedge's *Gift of Unraveling Silk* (2017) alludes to the language of landscape with its horizontal bands of thin pigment. Flecks of fuschia and a bright moss green against liquid pools and cracked wax the color of dust give the impression that steam vents in the earth have opened to create the darkening disturbance in the center of the canvas. But Bowling builds the landscape with tangled lines of string and found objects suspended in the atmospheric haze; he frames it by stitching one canvas to another, leaving the seams exposed. Puncturing the picture plane, Bowling delivers the work from oblivion by the immanence of his materials.

Elder Sun Benjamin (2018) is a 10 × 17 tricolor with the declarative force of a flag. Its blue, yellow, and red planes of color are sutured together by a line of beeswax and thin strips of colorful fabric that bring to mind the artist's mother who was a seamstress.

Bowling further intervenes in his color fields with decorative elements and cutout images collaged with wax. Imbricating the language of family, nation, and formalism, Bowling proves his polyglot wit. The painting's title extends the wordplay: a son—the artist's second child, Benjamin; a sun—a figure not depicted by the painting, which, like Jasper John's flags, invites the viewer to encounter the painting as an object, rather than a visual representation.

Bowling may have also had in mind the work of his contemporary Barnett Newman. In 1966, Newman completed a series of four paintings, *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?* The series reifies "the hierarchy of Newtonian optics between primary colors (which are indivisible) and secondary ones (which are mixtures)," as Kobena Mercer points out in his recent catalog essay "Charting the Atlantic Sublime" (*Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, edited by Okwui Enwezor). Bowling's tongue-in-cheek response, *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman?* (1968) calls into question the "purity" of primary colors and the authority of Western systems of knowledge; its green, yellow, and red bands echo the colors of the Ethiopian flag, a symbol of African and Caribbean independence movements beginning in the late 1950s. Bowling injects Newman's abstraction with historical memory and challenges the mold of Black Art, with its insistence on representational forms. In *Elder Sun Benjamin*, Bowling muddies Newman's primary colors even more, as if relishing their recombinant pigment, and inserts a collaged image: the face of a man, his mouth open with laughter.

Is it a stretch to imagine Bowling returning to a conversation with Barney Newman begun a half century ago? After all, the title of the exhibition declares Bowling's modernist commitment to "make it new." Ezra Pound's charge to the modern artist is a talisman, but it's worth revisiting the origin of the phrase in light of Bowling's concerns. The phrase "make it new" is itself sampled material—a found object with its source in Confucian texts. Translated by Pound from the French, *fais-le de nouveau* might also be rendered "do it again." Put like this, the phrase points to an important facet of Modernism: its reliance on the past, simultaneous to the invention of something new.

Bowling's *Drift I* (2017) and *Drift II* (2017) recapitulate forms that Bowling has returned to since the early 1970s, when he developed a technique of pouring paint directly onto the canvas. The vertical canvases are bisected by horizontal bands of bold color doused with poured paint—the paint falls like a funnel cloud on the horizon or, as Bowling has described these forms, like "the kind of heat haze that you get in Guyana in the middle of the day." Here, renovation coincides with a return to the sense memories of childhood—Bowling's early life in a colonized land, whose command structures are one day overcome by an emergent discourse, spilling its bounds again and again. Repetition with a difference: this is the essential modernist gesture.



Frank Bowling, *Paul Hedge's Gift of Unraveling Silk*, 2017. Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas, 52.2 × 69.25 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Hales Gallery, London. © 2018 Frank Bowling.

Frank Bowling, *Paul Hedge's Gift of Unraveling Silk*, 2017. Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas, 52.2 × 69.25 inches. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Hales Gallery, London. © 2018 Frank Bowling.

Significantly, Bowling's work exposes a rift in modernism: on the one hand, its insistence on aesthetic "purity"—in painting, the self-referential investigation of the medium itself—and on the other hand, the impulse, broadly evident in literature, toward a promiscuous mingling of methods, materials, and histories, pushing right up to the brink of Postmodernism. This latter strain of Modernism owes a crucial debt to "the Africanist presence" in the Western tradition, as Toni Morrison has put it.⁴ Speaking to Kobena Mercer in 2006, Bowling reminds us that "The African input in modernism has never been acknowledged; we talk about 'primitivism' instead. But 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." He said, "the black soul, if there is such a thing, belongs in Modernism."⁵

Here, Bowling highlights a crucial distinction, often elided by the modernist forager: the difference between primitivism and the archaic, a dimension marked by surplus, rupture, purging, rebirth. The latter, Bowling suggests, finds a channel in the savage violence of slavery. There—the field cleared of history, tradition, blood ties, roots—the modernist imperative begins to sound quaint.

In a letter to Clement Greenberg in 1974, Bowling wrote: "My present work, which heaven knows I wish you were around to see, is giving me no end of trouble, not because of its expressive content which I am now not able to judge [...] but rather as: what am I supposed to be expressing anyway?" Bowling continues, "The existentialist man of action, with his destiny in his hands, cutlassing and bombing his way out of oppression and indignity has fallen foul of and humbled [*sic*] by sons who want the same Edwardian gear and pocket money and freedom they know I had."⁶

Reading this letter now, published last year in connection with Bowling's exhibition *Mappa Mundi* at Munich's Haus der Kunst, I find Bowling's candor disarming: *What am I supposed to be expressing anyway?* I imagine the question is earnest—a sincere attempt to grapple with the legacy of the abstract expressionists—existentialist heroes wrestling with paint. In reply, Greenberg wrote, "I can't answer any of yr questions about art."⁷ Indeed. What could Greenberg do for Bowling—passing over the cracked earth and forced freedom—the terrible freedom—from tradition which defines Bowling's work?

Notes

1. Kobena Mercer, "Charting the Atlantic Sublime," *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2017) 50-51.
2. Pound scholars have identified neo-Confucian scholar Chu Hsi (1130–1200 AD) as the likely originator of the phrase "make it new." Pound relied on a French translation of Hsi's text, *Da Xue* (Ta Hio), published in the 1850s by M.G. Pauthier.
3. Frank Bowling. "The Middle of the Day," interview by Courtney J. Martin. *Frieze*, 1 May 2012, <https://frieze.com/article/middle-day>. Accessed 2 October 2018.
4. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 6.
5. Frank Bowling quoted by Kobena Mercer in "Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling," in *Discrepant Abstraction*, Kobena Mercer, ed., (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2006) 203.
6. Draft letter from Frank Bowling to Clement Greenberg, May 1, 1974, published in *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2017) 226.
7. Letter from Clement Greenberg to Frank Bowling, May 14, 1974, published in *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2017) 227.