

## How painting saved Frank Bowling's life



'Let the material flow': Frank Bowling in his studio

By **Matthew Collings**

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Ask Frank Bowling what he wants viewers to get from Tate Britain's [exhibition](#) of his paintings, spanning 60 years of work. His answer is a modest proposal that belies wildly eccentric procedures. "I want the materials to speak to people, as intensely as possible."

To make his paintings work he throws and pours paint, only sometimes brushes it, and gets others to throw and brush too. He encourages children to chuck plastic toys into colour bulked up with thick acrylic medium. When grandchildren write him illustrated letters from their trips to Guyana, lovingly following the trails he used to go down on a bicycle in the Forties, he sticks their pages on to canvas, treating them as a kind of material equal to paint itself.

He has been known to toss colour from a pot over his shoulder at a painting, as he leaves the studio at the end of the day. The mess on a canvas laid on a table over which he's been working on one painting, he frequently makes into the beginnings of another painting, using the shape of the table as the first lines of his new layout.

But he's a joyfully subtle composer, ultimately, not a mere shocker or provocateur. The impression made on Bowling by early encounters in the National Gallery with English landscape art of the 18th and 19th centuries never faded. He learnt to recognise that Gainsborough, Turner and Constable organised depictions of misty depths according to elementary geometric shapes. This is the subliminal armature of classicism and he always returns to it.



Towards Crab Island (1983) by Frank Bowling

Born in Guyana in 1934, Bowling moved to England 19 years later as part of the Windrush generation. Encouraged by a cultured friend in the RAF, when doing National Service, he went to art school.

Before that point he had to struggle with racism. In the RAF, upper-echelon recruits were trained to run with their kit bags to the planes to get in the cockpit and take off, discarding the bags as they went, while he, as their inferior, was trained to pick them up.

He didn't find the same attitudes in the art world. It was a haven. "The people in it were curious-minded, the opposite of racists. If I hadn't got into painting, I would have died, I would have killed myself by some accidental act of daring."

I first met him in the Seventies at the Byam Shaw School of Art where I was a student in the painting department and he was a regular visiting lecturer. We all liked his voice, melodiously booming round the studios as he gave students impromptu tutorials, the accent mid-Atlantic.

We were amazed to have a teacher who spent so much time in New York, had even lived there, and knew all the artists we read about in magazines. Gods to us, he referred to them by their first names and nicknames: "Larry" (Rivers) and "Jap" (Jasper Johns). He advised us to think about the best modernists and not to be afraid of paint: we should let it flow and improvise imaginative ways to structure the results. We learnt that he'd been figurative but was now abstract and had been for years. —

By then he was in his early 40s. His initial style was generated two decades earlier, when he was at the Royal College. He won medals and scholarships for self-portraits and pictures of women, beggars and babies being born. He had a message of social protest and comment.

This is the story with which the Tate show begins, a time when he still oriented his paintings around a recognisable subject. It might be women he knew, having a nightmare during a nap on a couch, or the assassinated first prime minister of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba. We think it is the subject that engages us – a poor man to whom life has dealt a rotten hand; a fashion model whose beauty none of us can approach – but really it is the whole painting, with its dynamic balances, its colourful mists turning into architectonic lines.



South America Squared (1967, detail) by Frank Bowling

Bowling is a painter who thinks of a pictured scene and an abstract design layout as one and the same, interdependent. Knowing that prepares you for what is to come in the Tate show. Pure abstraction.

He turned to it gradually, from the late Sixties to early Seventies. I ask why, once he got to it, 50 years ago now, he never again veered from it. "I felt it was deeply full of substance, and potential. And I increasingly got to feel that, if I let the material flow, if I allowed myself to feel moved to chuck in acrylic-based detritus, and watch it swim and settle, I would always get to a whole vision of what I've passed through in life."

The first experiments were shimmering clouds of colour organised around giant contours of maps, either South America or Africa. Later in the Seventies, he simply poured liquid material in different hues and consistencies on to tall, narrow canvases. If nothing is pictured nothing seems exactly lacking either, because the arrangements are so visually witty, the variegated surfaces so touchable.

In the Eighties, Bowling worked his way into a new kind of abstraction, full of a sense of landscape and light. An improvised bit-by-bit structured shaping of colours and textures makes you think of rivers, galaxies, foliage, aerial photos, of dawn and clouds. The most complex and dense mix-ups of associations can arise in the same painting, the horrible, the nice and the soaringly lovely; the other side of the world, and the light of the Thames.

In many works from that decade he glued Styrofoam strips to canvases and created encrusted expanses of weird matter over the top, the final surface oozing with varnishing mixtures and sliding-down gloops of paint. Light-emanating paintings, from the last five years, like *Wafting*, *Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton*, and *Remember Thine Eyes*, all have a carried-over artistic theme from those Sixties semi-depictive pictures featuring map contours. There is a double-register. You see colour vibrations that make you feel uplifted the second you take them in, and you gradually make out wonderfully finessed underlying structures.

Nobody has to be educated in art to get it. And you can always find out what kinds of thoughts went into each work, to satisfy curiosity about what is attractive anyway in the first place.

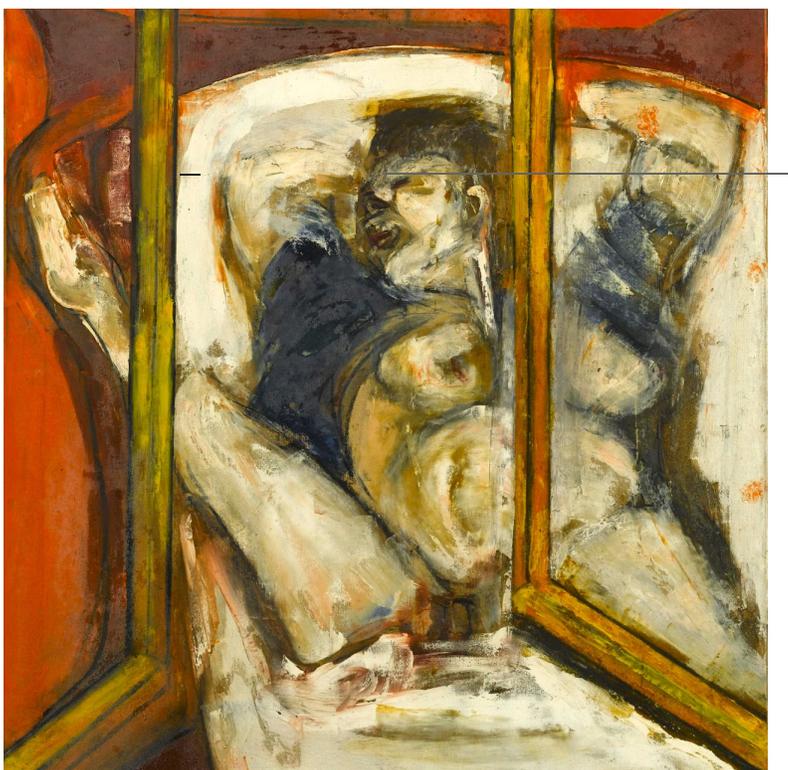


Cover Girl (1966, detail) by Frank Bowling

We're talking in Bowling's studio near Elephant and Castle, in south London, sitting in front of a new painting done too late for the Tate. It can be seen in an exhibition running at Hales, his London gallery (he has another one in New York). Entitled According to Lorca, it has a strip of bright blue next to another of cadmium yellow, running down one outer edge of a wide area of canvas, most of which is delicate tones of light mauve. The contrast between bright and muted-dusky is dramatic.

He said he got to a certain point, then knew he wanted something to be in the painting from Federico Garcia Lorca, the Spanish poet murdered by fascists: a line about "grey rains falling down to the sea". That was when the painting acquired an all-over veil of drips, and a set of thin lines, hardly seeable at first, drawn in coloured chalk.

Bowling says some of the juxtapositions in his paintings have the drama of everyone's struggle to cope with existence – with politics, society, the difficulty of living with others. What he used to spell out as social comment he now suggests by visual poetry. He points to the flash of bright colour against the pale haze. "Paint takes over and does things. It can internalise this spiritual jumping about, where people are continually dodging away from disaster, coming into contact with each other, backing up and dancing away."



Birthday (1962, detail) by Frank Bowling

I suggest people still think abstract means no picture and no meaning either. "Both assumptions are wrong," he says. "Life is pictured, and the sinews of hard and fast juxtapositions that light up the surface of the painting with colouration from hot to cool, provide meaning."

Anyone who sees the Tate show will recognise these feelings in it. Bowling is restrained in his language about painting, while the show, with its mesmerising variety of texture and moods, is a stunning model of why it is that young artists keep coming back to this medium, which, what with all the other stuff art can be now, you'd imagine might have had its day.

**Frank Bowling is at [Tate Britain](#) from Friday until Aug 26; Frank Bowling: More Land than Landscape is at [Hales London](#) until June 22**