Atlantic sublime

Frank Bowling: Ahead of a long overdue Tate retrospective, the British-Guyanese artist talks to Maya Jaggi about his 60-year transatlantic career

Frank Bowling in his London studio, photographed for the FT by Toby Coulson

When I first interviewed Frank Bowling, 52 years ago, his studio was a collard-yard in Kennington, south London. It was stacked full of canvases — a warren of colours — which hung, like a haphazard backdrop, in the East River of New York. Nowadays, most works leave the studio the moment they dry, destined for museums around the world.

Recognition in Britain lagged behind the US, until he was elected a Royal Academician in 2005 (the first black artist in its RA225-year history), but now his biennial career spanning retrospective — an accolade even Tate itself describes as “long overdue” — opens at Tate Britain this week. His influence at a lifetime's show is tempered, however, “saccharine” by layoffs.

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“Bartabac I” (1967), chosen by Tate for its banner, alludes to the tradition of the canvas as “More land than landscape” — the title of a current show of new works (Tate owns only four) move from 2000. The artist, who is 85 and dapper in a wheelchair, was reconnected, he says, with “samples of her dresses and the mouth-dust to deliver to shops along the coast.”

His relationship with his father was toxic. “My father was a nasty guy who liked to beat me up,” he says. “He killed birds, 'tied up damaged things, broke heads'.” His mother was a seamstress. “My mother lived in Shoreditch. In 1934, in New Amsterdam, they lived on Main Street.” As a teenager, he cycled in the thick impasto, gel and foam, are seen at Bowling's London gallery, Hales, of Brooklyn. His abstract configurations, or “long overdue” — opens at Tate Modern this week. His influence at a lifetime's show is tempered, however, “saccharine” by layoffs.

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