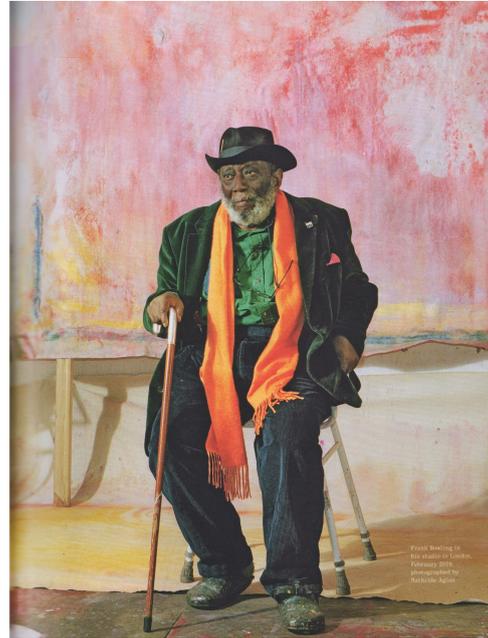


AWASH WITH THE COLOUR OF LIFE

Frank Bowling at Tate Britain

Matthew Collings | Summer 2019

The Guyana-born British artist studied alongside David Hockney and RB Kitaj in the early 1960s, before making a name for himself in New York as both a painter and art critic. Now based in London, Frank Bowling continues his visionary approach that fuses abstraction with personal memories. Ahead of his retrospective exhibition, a friend and former student pays homage to the artist who has spent a lifetime pushing the possibilities of paint



I had Frank Bowling (b1934) in mind when I came up with an almost monochrome painting in my last year at the Byam Shaw art school, where he was my tutor. When I first worked on the picture it was of a naked woman in a sort of pop art flat space, which, after a few weeks, wouldn't stop looking awkward. In an attempt to revise it, I painted over much of it with white, quickly washing and knifing on the paint, thinking I was about to redo the nude. But then I noticed a lot of elegant balances. It was a white abstract now. I didn't know what I'd done, but I thought: Well, this could be a painting if I think of some of the things Frank has said in tutorials.

The task of a tutor in those days was to pay occasional visits to students in their individual cubicles in the art school and improvise some helpful brief analysis. Once, we decided to do the tutorial in an exhibition instead, a survey of post-war British art at the Royal Academy that included one of Frank's paintings. After pints of Guinness for lunch we got the number 14 bus from Fulham Broadway to Piccadilly and, once in the show, he talked about qualities of surface, mark-making and pictorial organisation in paintings by figures who seemed awfully unglamorous to me. And, conversely, the ones I thought were great and wanted to emulate, he analysed with a cool objectivity. I was interested in a painting in the display by RB Kitaj, showing David Hockney as Superman. Frank pointed out the way free-flowing paint was manipulated to create a particular border between a space and an object: the contour of Superman's knee.

One painting was by the Royal Academician, Robert Buhler, who had taught Frank at the Royal College of Art. When I saw it again recently in a photograph online, the first

time I'd seen it since that afternoon at the Academy 40 years before, I found it to be incredibly subtle – a representation of trees and chickens, half its entire surface is loping, loose, horizontal washy strokes, practically abstract. Frank had pointed out the picture's sophistication, but I'd inwardly rolled my eyes, thinking it must be the work of a loser because it was merely a little yellow ochre landscape.

I recount this discussion about work by artists other than Frank, because he imparted to me an important lesson that took a while to absorb: that a painting has a format or a layout for a reason. It's what you see first and it's what causes the work to have, or fail to have, visual strength. I think of him when I think about composition and the overall logic and readability of a painting, whether abstract or figurative. You can overlook it because you're not mentally prepared, or you can open up to it.

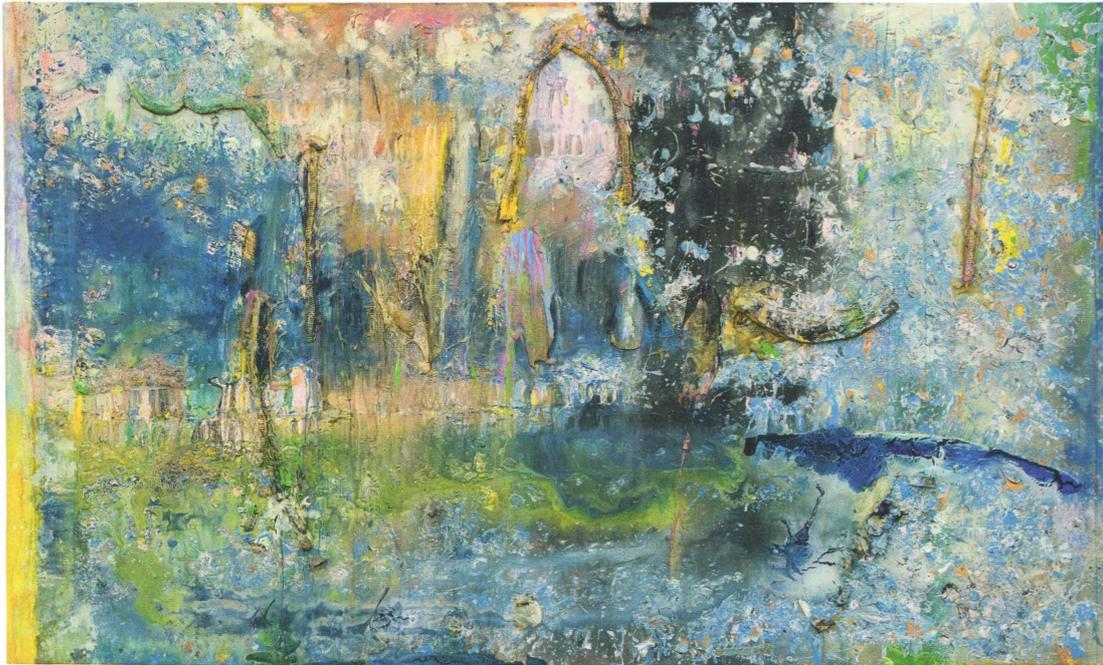
At the exhibition we had looked at his painting *Mirror* 1964–6, completed when he was 30, five years before he was awarded a solo show at the Whitney Museum in New York. On the way out of the show, he was dismayed not to find any publicity material in the lobby about his own career, where there was plenty relating to the other artists represented. His feelings were hurt, and I thought of the advice he often gave about toughness, both visual (how paintings work) and emotional (how a painter copes with worldliness). You had to make your work but also a career, treading these parallel paths with care.

I soon became aware of the role adversity had played throughout practically the whole of his 60-year (so far) career, purely because of his skin colour. But I was also impressed by his particular morality. He is true to himself when he paints,



Frank Bowling
Mirror 1964–6,
oil paint on canvas,
310 × 216.8 cm





Frank Bowling
Raining Down South
 1968, acrylic paint and
 spray paint on canvas,
 348.5 × 275.5 cm

Frank Bowling
Towards Crab Island
 1983, acrylic paint,
 acrylic gel, acrylic foam
 and other materials on
 canvas, 175.3 × 289.6 cm

but he doesn't convey egotism: he is thoughtful. He works by spontaneous improvisation but never makes a painting that is only a spectacle or a provocation. He thinks about painterly structures every moment of the day. He actually wakes up thinking about them.

If I think of a painting like *Towards Crab Island* 1983 I see the work of a painters' painter. The concept of a painters' painter is that some painters are appreciated by other painters because they, in particular, expose painterly operations: they make the medium into a subject. The wider public is quite understandably not so interested in technique, and more used to looking for what the technique is in aid of: the meaning or the story. Frank pushes meanings and stories away, essentially, but brings them back in, as hints, in his titles. Crab Island is known to him from his Guyanese background. He didn't set out to paint it, but it seemed vividly there once the painting was done.

The painting was done in the year I lent him *Heart of Darkness*, having just read it. We were each equally awed by the amazing scene Joseph Conrad describes of a man-of-war

anchored off the coast of the Belgian Congo, firing cannon shot into the bush every day, just out of random colonialist sadism. Why do I remember this? Conrad's book epitomising colonialism as horror obviously has a loaded meaning for an artist who has experienced racism as Frank has. On the other hand, he often feels suffocated by his background, dismayed that the art world might think only about his skin-tone. He says Guyana for him sometimes feels like the heavy rock Sisyphus is doomed to be forever rolling up a hill.

Contradictory as it might sound, I think that much of his painting sensibility is very English. He might rightly be considered international or Caribbean or global, or even a New York artist; he is all these. But it was in an English context that he was first formed artistically. He went to London art schools and the first serious art he saw was in London's National Gallery. When we think we see abstract expressionism in his paintings because they are large-scale, brightly coloured and mostly free of representation, we're really seeing two traditions. These are the broad, stark improvisations and



1971
First solo museum exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where he shows six large 'map paintings'; also exhibits in the group shows *Contemporary Black Artists in America* and the Whitney Annual; art critic Clement Greenberg visits Bowling's studio, marking the beginning of a long friendship and correspondence; his work moves towards pure abstraction; exhibits *Middle Passage* 1970 in *Some American History* at the Institute for the Arts, Rice University, Houston, a bold exhibition conceived by Larry Rivers about slavery and the Black experience in America, which drew some criticism because it was organised by a white artist

1973
Begins his 'poured paintings', building a tilting platform that enables him to pour paint directly on to the canvas from heights of up to two metres; marriage to Irena Bowling comes to an end

1975
Spends most of his time in London to be with his three sons, until 1990; regularly visits Tate as well as the National Gallery to look at paintings by Turner, Gainsborough and Constable; teaches at Camberwell School of Art and Byam Shaw School of Art, until 1982

1977
Receives the Arts Council of Great Britain Award; brief marriage to Jean Askew; reconnects with artist Rachel Scott (née Tripp), whom he met when they studied together at the RCA, and she becomes his life partner (*they marry in 2013*)

1979
Participates in several group exhibitions in the UK and USA, including the touring *British Art Show* and *Another Generation* at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York

1980
Exhibits four paintings in the Hayward Annual, curated by artist John Hoyland with a focus on British abstract painting

1982
Begins to incorporate three-dimensional materials into his paintings, such as acrylic foam and cardboard, to create heavily textured surfaces – as seen in works like *Towards Crab Island* 1983

1983
Moves to a flat in Pimlico, near Tate Britain, where he still lives

1984
Takes his first studio in a complex in south London; he occupies various studios there over the next three decades, until the present day

1986
Frank Bowling Paintings 1983–86 is held at the Serpentine Gallery, London, where he shows a number of large paintings; rents a studio on Cable Street, London, with a glimpse of the River Thames, where he creates many large works, including the *Great Thames* series 1989



1987
Tate acquires *Spreadout Ron Kitaj* 1984–6, its first purchase of a painting by an artist of Afro-Caribbean descent



1989
Initially sceptical about being categorised as an 'Afro-Asian' artist, Bowling is eventually persuaded to participate in *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* at the Hayward Gallery by the curator, artist Rasheed Araeen; following his mother's death in 1988, Bowling visits Guyana for the first time in many years, accompanied by his son Sacha, and makes a connection between the light in his paintings and the haze of Guyana – a moment referred to in the painting *Sacha Jason Guyana Dreams* 1989, now also in Tate's collection

1990
Takes a loft studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn and splits his time almost equally between London and New York, until 2008

1993
Makes first trip to Africa to attend *A/Cross Currents: Synthesis in African American Abstract Painting*, part of Dakar 1992–3; Biennale Internationale des Arts, Senegal; receives his first Pollock-Krasner Award (his second is awarded in 1998)

1996–7
Frank Bowling: Bowling on through the Century, an exhibition of paintings from the 1980s and 1990s organised by Eddie Chambers, tours to Leicester, Bradford, Bexhill-on-Sea, Bracknell, Birmingham and Coventry



2001
Death of his eldest son, Dan; Bowling paints a series of 'white paintings' as a memorial

2003
Exhibits a selection of 'map paintings' in the group exhibition *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes* at Venice Biennale

2004
Exhibits *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman* 1968 in *Art & the 60s: This Was Tomorrow* at Tate Britain; the painting is subsequently gifted to Tate

2005
Bowling becomes the first Black artist to be elected to the Royal Academy of Arts, London

2006
Participates in the group exhibition *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York

2008
Appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE)

2010
Participates in the group exhibition *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* at Tate Liverpool

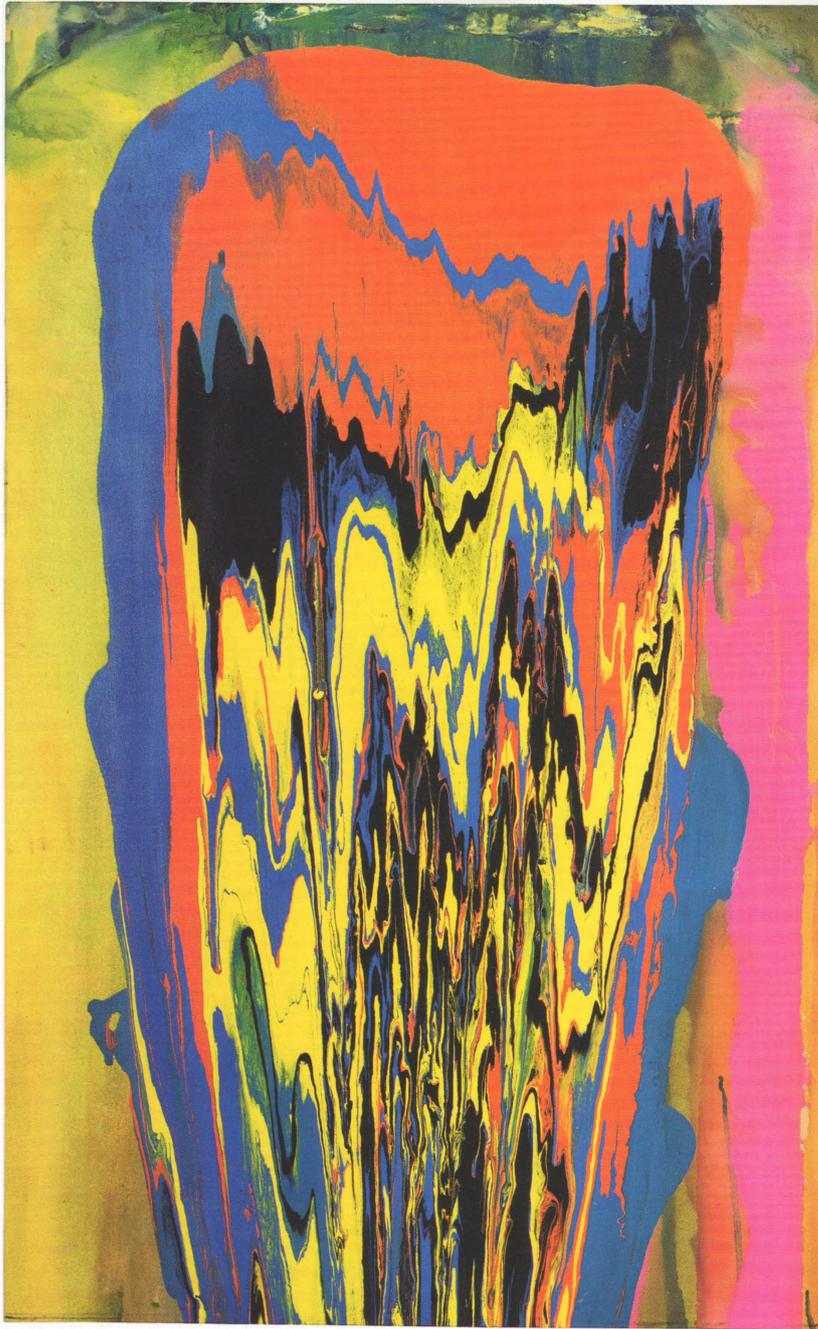
2011
First monograph on Frank Bowling's work, written by Mel Gooding, is published by the Royal Academy of Arts

2012
The display *Drop, Roll, Slide, Drip... Frank Bowling's Poured Paintings 1973–8* is shown at Tate Britain

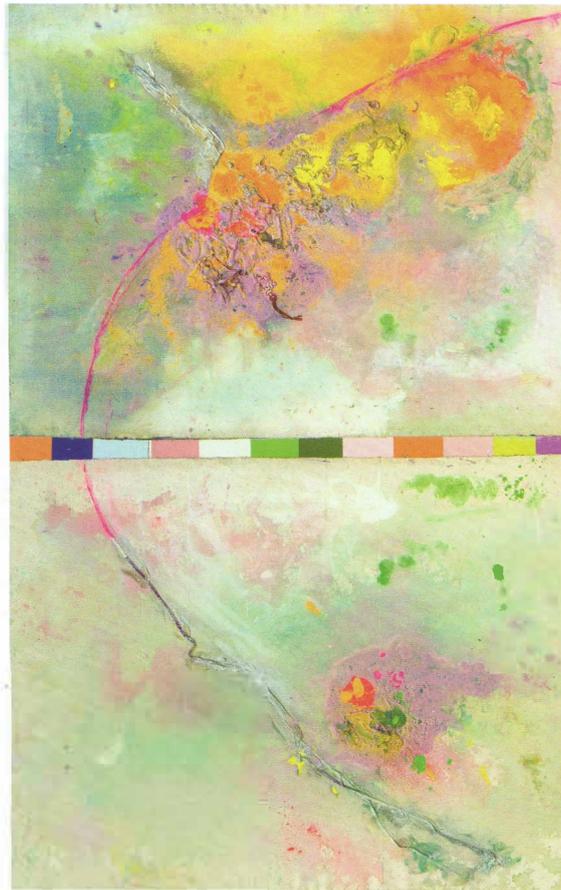
2015
The solo exhibition *Traingone - Paintings by Frank Bowling 1979–96* is held at Spritmuseum, Stockholm

2017
Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi, curated by Okwui Enwezor covering work from 1967 to 1989, is held at Haus der Kunst, Munich; shows 'map paintings' in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* at Tate Modern

2019
Frank Bowling, the first exhibition to cover the entirety of Bowling's 60-year career, opens at Tate Britain



Frank Bowling
Tony's Anvil 1975,
acrylic paint on
canvas. 173 × 107 cm



Frank Bowling
*Iona Miriam's Christmas
Visit To & From Brighton*
2014, acrylic paint and
plastic objects on canvas,
189 × 122.5 cm

inventions of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko; and the depths and transparencies – subtle mists and vagueness riding on submerged geometric structures – of the English landscape tradition, from Gainsborough to Turner.

He paints from a spirit of pleasure alongside one of enquiry, and gives both a context of toughness. He takes wild risks and fights his own abilities, so when he gets to a visual balance within a painting there is a surprise. *Towards Crab Island* has life's unexpected dynamism even though nothing is actually pictured. We see movements and atmospheres. Terrains. Gushes of energy. We enjoy light-filled pouring torrents, strange barriers and boundaries; strange because the whole point was to make something surprising, non-planned, using bizarre methods. Pouring; sticking things in; following the movement of the material that might be liquefied, thick, viscous, trickling or heaving.

Regardless of picturing things or not picturing, *Towards Crab Island* expresses what life has been like for its author. It suggests islands and water and mists, but it is also simply colour organised in a visual system that answers only to itself. He arrives unexpectedly at the visual equivalent of a novel or even a political tract through the richness of a treated canvas surface.

Frank Bowling, Tate Britain, 31 May – 26 August, curated by Elena Crippa, Curator, Modern and Contemporary British Art, Tate Britain with Laura Castagnini, Assistant Curator, Modern and Contemporary British Art, Tate Britain. Supported by AGC Equity Partners, with additional support from the Frank Bowling Exhibition Supporters Circle, Tate Americas Foundation, Tate International Council, Tate Patrons and Tate Members.

Matthew Collings is an art critic, artist, writer and broadcaster. He is currently writing a book on contemporary painting for Thames & Hudson.