



Frank Bowling
Make It New

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Alexander Gray Associates

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September 6 – October 13, 2018

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Spencer Richards in Conversation with Page Benkowski

New York, NY, August 15, 2018

Page Benkowski: When you met Frank Bowling, it was the start of a long and rewarding friendship and professional relationship. Like Bowling, you grew up in Guyana, and you've been the artist's studio manager for decades. How did you first meet him? What initially attracted you to his practice?

Spencer Richards: I first met Frank in 1994–95. A friend of mine, Skoto Aghahowa, had a gallery on Prince Street, and he was planning a show of Frank's work. Skoto and I were fast friends. We would spend a lot of time on Friday nights talking about how we were going to shake up art and the world, all that ambitious stuff. Anyway, Skoto was showing Frank alongside a Nigerian sculptor. When he was going to Frank's to select works for the show, he invited me to come along. Up until that point, my conversations with Skoto had centered on Nigerian art. My interest in art was a string I was following in my personal labyrinth of identity—you know, being born in Guyana and now living in the United States? Anyway, I thought visiting Frank's studio was a golden opportunity.

I had heard of Frank. Before becoming involved in the art world, I spent my time photographing musicians. Those people would always ask me if I knew Frank when they heard my accent. I actually first saw Frank's work in 1988 in an exhibition, and then in 1994, when I traveled to Guyana searching for God knows what, Frank's name kept coming up. There, it seemed everyone was saying I should see his paintings. So when Skoto invited me, I jumped at the chance to go to his studio. When I was leaving, Frank asked me when I was coming back, and that was it. That was it, you know?

PB: So your interest in Bowling's practice was because of your shared connection to Guyana?



Painted window frames in Frank Bowling's Brooklyn loft.

SR: I think so. Frank didn't leave Guyana to become an artist. He went to England with ambitions of being a poet and then he finally ended up at art school. That, to me, signaled a real difference. His entire sensibility as an artist was formed by English institutions. It still fascinates me.



Frank Bowling and Spencer Richards, 2016.

I've told him that he can be any kind of English artist he wants, but I'm still claiming his ass for Guyana.

PB: You're actively involved in helping Bowling create his paintings, he directs you how and where to pour paint. Can you expand on what your relationship with the artist entails?

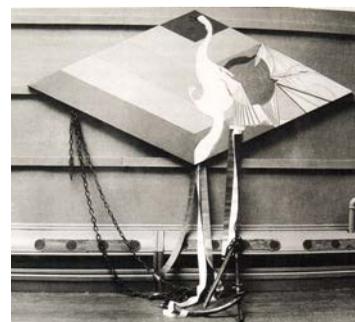
SR: I've been very involved in the production of Bowling's paintings since 2009. Up until that point, Frank did everything. He painted, he stretched, he framed. Then he needed more help and I got more involved. He began to say, "Take that brush and do something." Initially, I was scared out of my mind—completely terrified. Actually, I'm always terrified, but the thing I quickly discovered was that he would use whatever I did, even if it was a mistake, as a starting point for a painting.

Everything he does is always about paint and painting and color. All Frank needs is a space and some paint. I've seen him work over the years. All he needs are those two things. There's this whole thing about New York pictures and London pictures and the different sensibilities between the two. To me, there's no such thing. Frank arrives at either location with paintings rolled up in his duffel bag. He moves between studios. It's seamless. He pins up canvases and starts to work. He doesn't even take off his hat. The studio is a space in his head. It's not a physical space.

PB: Let's talk about Bowling's use of collage and personal narrative.

So many of Bowling's works seems to incorporate autobiography into their compositions, whether it's through their titles or their use of materials—diabetic needles, small toys, etc. I'm thinking in particular of a quote by Bowling in an interview in which he says, "I don't think what you see or feel in the world when you open your eyes for the first time ever leaves you. ... Historical memory is hardly ever erased."

SR: You know Frank has been collaging materials onto his canvases for decades. His *Swan* series from the 1960s have feathers and chain attached to the canvas. As a student at the Royal College of Art, he was experimenting with using sand. Collage has always been there.



Swan II, 1964, at the London Group exhibition, Society of Watercolour Painters, Piccadilly, 1966

PB: Bowling's titles are often poetic and evocative, inviting content and narrative into the work. How do you view them in relation to the formalism of his paintings?

SR: Titles are his poetry. They're his ambitions as a poet. What happens is the picture gets finished. Rachel, his wife, will say, "Oh, leave it, Frank!" Then it gets finished, and then he just names them. Sometimes names reflect Frank's family, journeys he's taken, or Guyana. We don't make a meal out of titles, but we talk about them and the work a lot. Frank's work is multi-dimensional.

One day we were talking in his studio and the radio was tuned to Radio 3, London, a station that plays classical music, and the tuner slipped, so in the midst of this Beethoven thing came out this Reggae baseline. Frank and I just burst out laughing. It was an audio confirmation of what we had been talking about. The slip captured Frank's practice and approach to titling—this synthesis of ideas, influences, and places.

Anyway, I was at Frank's studio one day and we're talking and he's working. He tells me he's going to call a painting *Rosignol*. Rosignol is a place in Guyana opposite New Amsterdam, where Frank grew up. When I left the studio, I thought I've got it figured. I know what's he doing. In Frank's work, you can't think of things as being a logical progression. His painting practice is no such animal. Rosignol is on the west bank of the Berbice River in Guyana and New Amsterdam is on the east bank, so the picture Frank made is full of rum reds, yellows, things like that. Looking at the picture, I said to Frank, "If you're calling it Rosignol, you're still in New Amsterdam." For me, when one leaves one doesn't leave, you know?

PB: These new paintings build on and synthesize Bowling's established modes of working. The compositions seem to be in dialogue with his 1960s screen printing work, the formalism of Color Field painting, the gesture and dynamism of his *Poured Paintings*, and the material accretion and collage of his 1980s reliefs. How do you locate this new work?

SR: In the new work, Frank is moving to and through periods. It seems he starts in one period and literally ends in another.

When I watch him work, I'm always thinking, "What's he going to do with this thing?" He's too conceited of an artist—I use that word purposely—to make a painting that's just aping something that has come before. When we work, we use paint and mix it with gel and water and pearlescent and shake it up like a James Bond martini. The usual M.O. is we lay the canvas on a table and pour different colors sequentially on the canvas.



Bowling mixing paint, 1981. Photo by Marcia Scott.

Frank tells me what color to put. He's always got an idea in his head. At the bottom of the table is another piece of canvas and on each side of the table are more canvases. When the canvas on the table is lifted and made vertical, the paint runs down the surface and drips onto the canvases on the floor, which are the beginnings of other paintings.

PB: That gesture expands on Bowling's 1970s *Poured Paintings*.

SR: Yeah, but the emphasis in the *Pours* was on the pour, but it is basically the same. It's spilling, throwing, brushing, and dripping—everything. I remember once that I had observed this process enough that I thought I knew what I was doing. I started to direct the paint, and Frank stopped me. He said, "No! Don't draw it! Throw it!" There's a difference, you know? I'm not a painter and I don't interpret what he's doing.

PB: There's a productive tension between structure and gesture in Bowling's work. He constantly looks to reinvent and expand understandings of abstract painting. His drips and swaths of paint appear totally informed by chance, yet he insists, "Everything is structured, I know what I'm doing." With your insight into Bowling's way of working, in your opinion, what role does chance play in his practice?



Tony's Anvil, 1975

SR: It's willed chance. When Frank gets a surprise, he just runs with it.

In every painting, a different activity is going on. Frank's traveling very rapidly through his life and his mind. In a single painting, you can see him improvising like a jazz soloist, making it up as he's going along. He's constantly breaking his own rules.



Fred's touch, 2015

PB: In his new work, Bowling uses fabric—both cloth and canvas. The canvas I believe comes from Bowling's friend, Arlington Weathers. What led Bowling to decide to incorporate strips of Weathers' canvases into his own paintings?

SR: Using Arlington's canvases was a challenge. Arlington is big with computers. He printed these large canvases with stripes of color on them and sent them to Frank. Frank had told him to send some canvas, but I think Frank thought he was just going to get scraps, not these elaborate things. That was a challenge. And Frank? Frank just danced on it. The ground for his

paintings became these striped works and then he layered his gestures on top. They became Bowlings.

PB: It's almost a call and response.

SR: Yeah, you see the ghost images of these stripes remain in subsequent works before they fade away. Frank's work is a palimpsest. I might ask, "Why put an image down to erase it?" But, for Frank, the hidden image is never truly gone.

PB: To return to my previous question, could you speak about Bowling's use of cloth in these new works? The fabric is printed with images and patterns that recall Africa. How does Bowling approach this material?

SR: Cloth has a history in Bowling's work. Any material that goes on the surface of his paintings is carefully chosen. His grandson, Samson, who's an engineer, went to Zambia and brought the cloth back for Frank. Everyone brings stuff back for Frank. You know Paul [one of the owner's of Hales Gallery in London, which also represents Bowling] gave Frank silk. Frank made paintings using that material. How he used the silk was often so subtle—just a little line of color. Anyway, Samson brought him these piece of fabric from Africa. Although this fabric is sold in Zambia, it's made in China or Malaysia.



Bowling in his London studio, 2017.

PB: Finally, Bowling calls painting a “first order activity,” and he maintains a rigorous studio practice even today into his 80s. You’ve had the opportunity to observe and participate in his process. Can you share your impressions of watching him work?

SR: Frank’s work is always rules based. There are always rules he’s messing with. He looks at limitations and figures out how he can overcome them. All the time, he’s studying his paintings, seeing what’s problematic. That’s what’s so exciting about watching him work. People will ask me what my favorite Bowling picture is and I always tell them, “The next one.” It’s wonderful to see that moment when he solves a compositional problem, or creates another one you know he will solve down the

line. Frank pushes the limits of his practice; he challenges himself. As he always says, “Make it new.”

Ultimately, my relationship with Frank has been a wonderful journey. It’s not just about art, it’s about philosophy, history, and life. To be there in the studio listening to him think—seeing him think—is a trip. In Frank’s work, there’s this quality you can’t quite identify. There are days when I come out of that studio, days when the paint and magic is really flowing, and find myself standing outside on the street asking myself, “What just happened?”



Frank Bowling and Spencer Richards in Bowling's studio, 2017.
Photo: James Proctor.



Frank Bowling and Rachel Scott in Bowling's studio, 2017.



Drift I, 2017



Drift II, 2017



With Reference to Barbados, 2018



Hothead, 2016



Nesting, 2017



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2018



Full Face, 2017



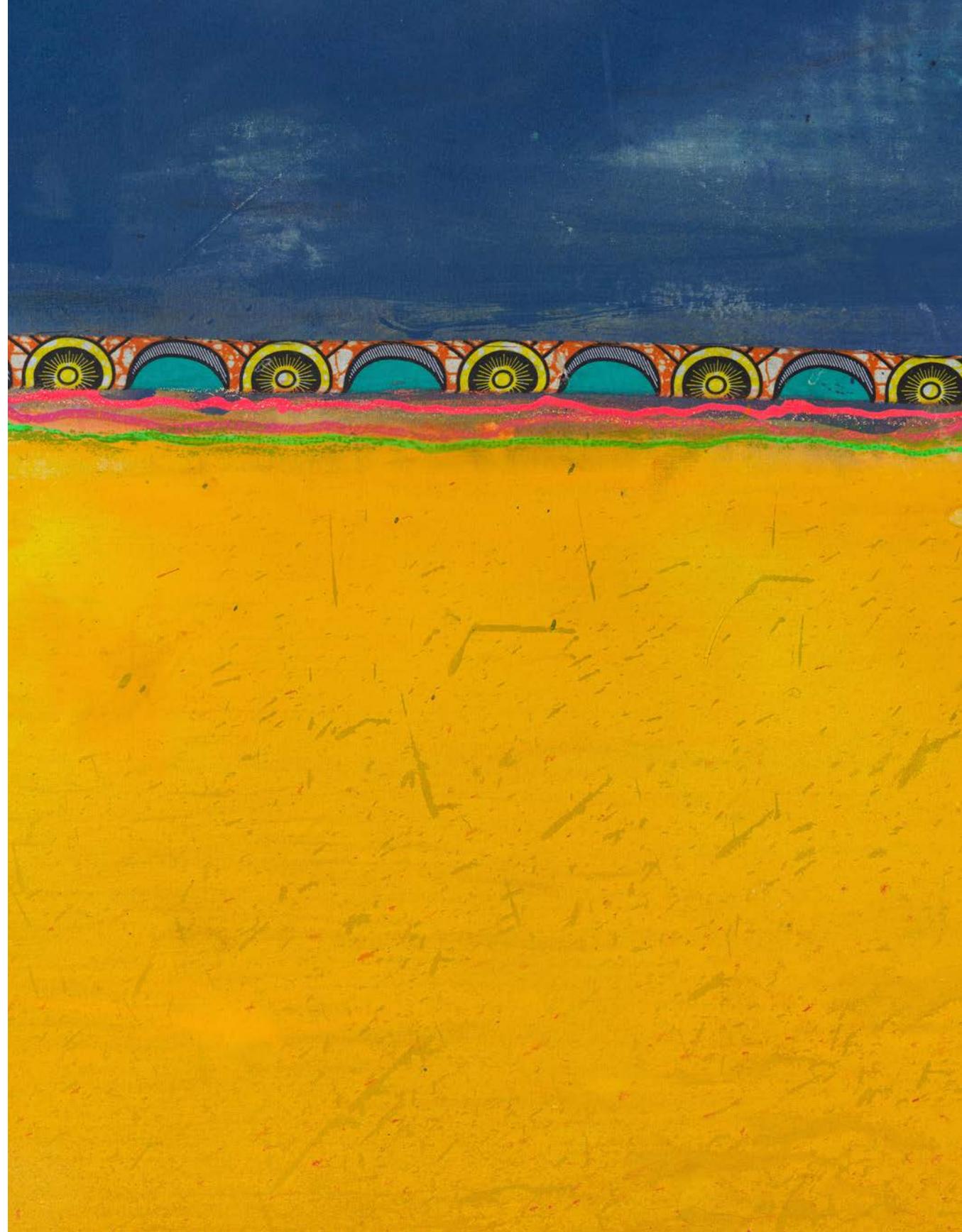
The Maid's Garden, 2017



Frank Bowling in his studio, 2017



Elder Sun Benjamin, 2018



Elder Sun Benjamin, 2018, detail



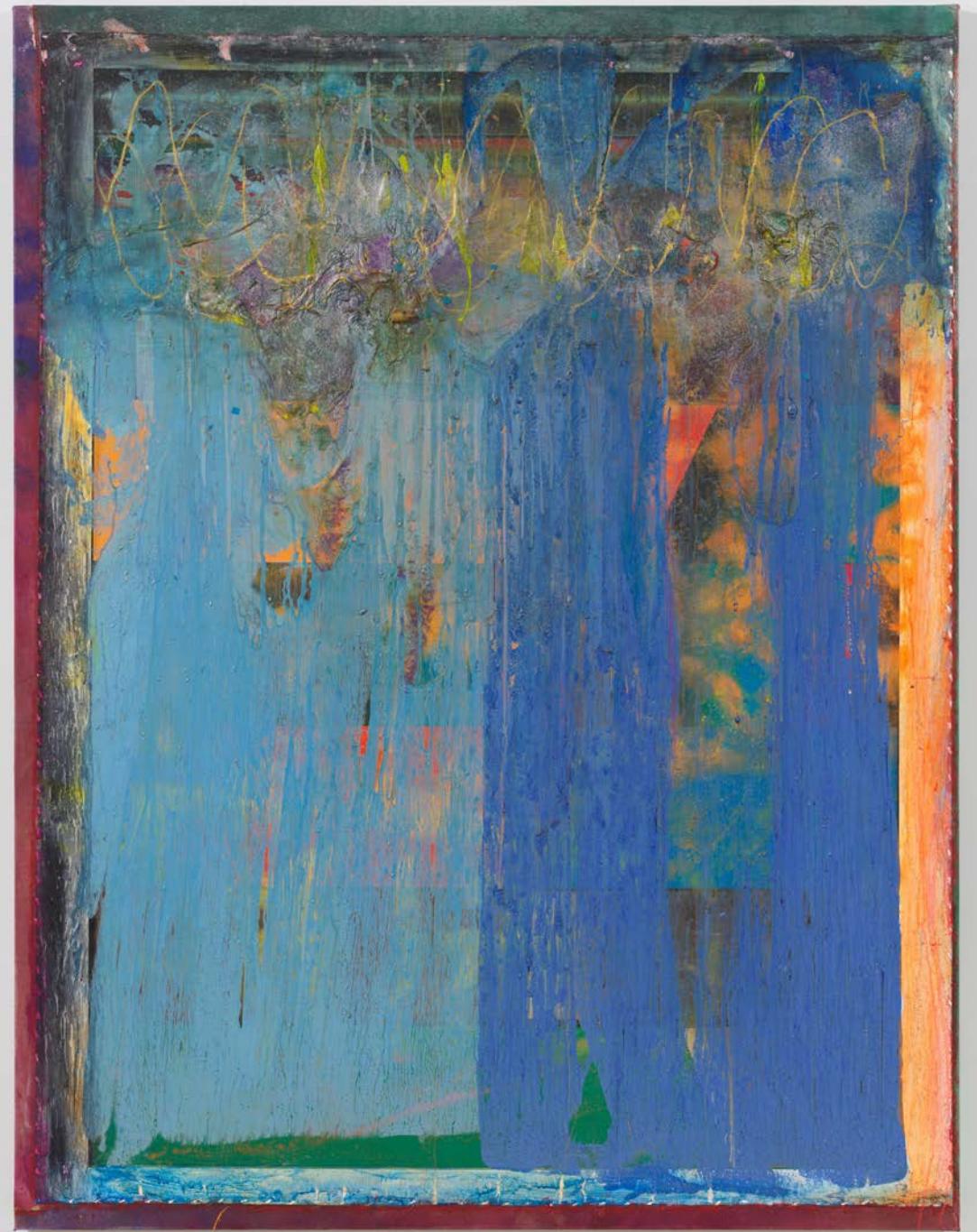
Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2018



Regatta, 2017



Regatta, 2017, detail



Two Blues, 2018

Two Blues, 2018, detail





Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2018



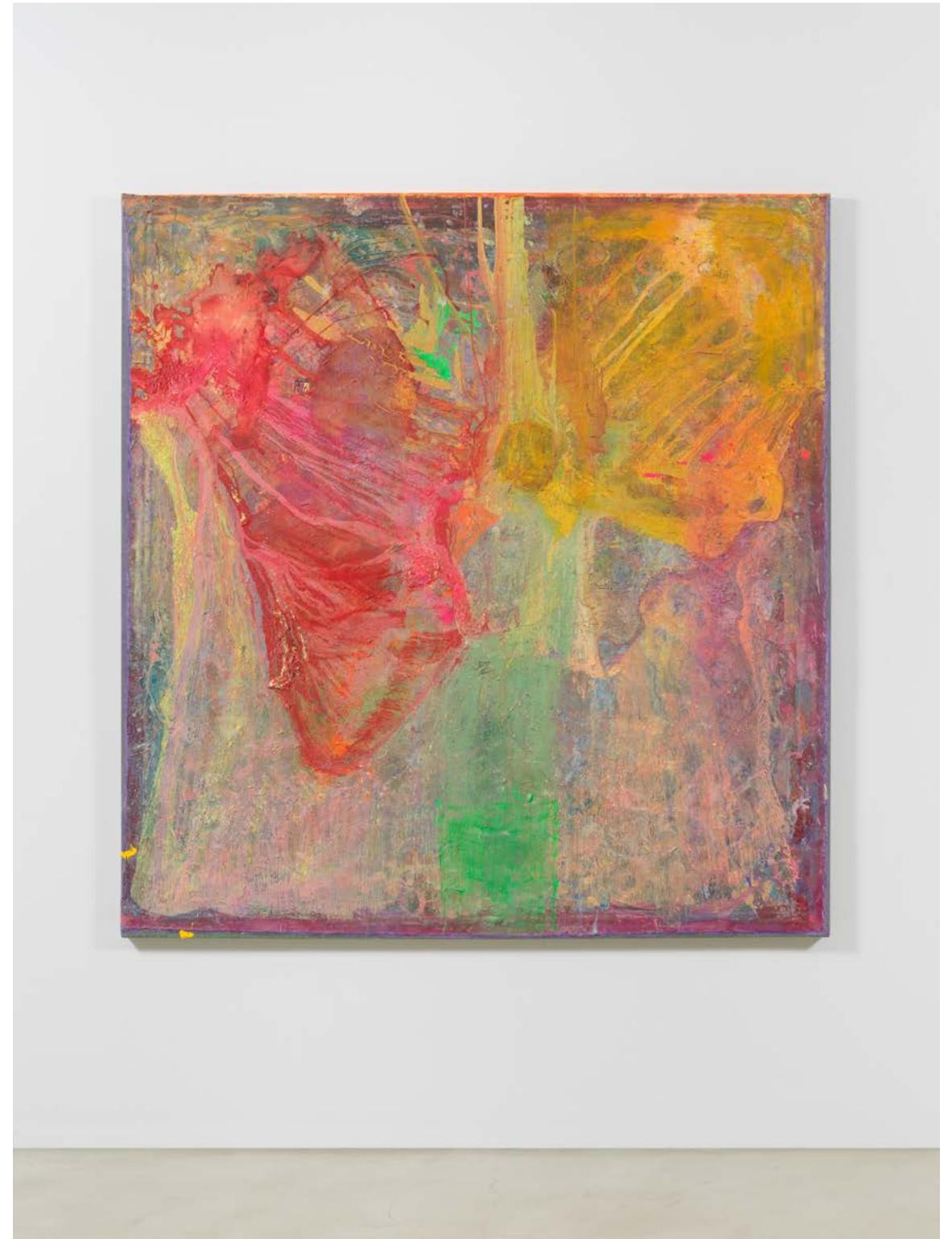
Paul Hedge's Gift of Unraveling Silk, 2017

Scatter, 2017





Anne & Frank, 2017



Another Morrison As In Stuart, 2018



Another Morrison As In Stuart, 2018, detail



Installation view, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, 2018



Frank Bowling, 1997

Frank Bowling: Selected Chronology

- 1934 Born in Bartica, British Guiana on February 26, 1934.
- 1940 Moves to New Amsterdam, British Guiana with his family. His father becomes paymaster of the local police district and his mother opens a small dressmaking and millinery shop before expanding the business into a general store.

New Amsterdam for me is... apart from London, which is more important in my life than any place else I've ever been in... the most important place, and it reappears all the time, even in my quiet moments it reappears. It's a town that was full of terror, at the same time, it was marvelous, marvelous... it was open and easy to negotiate.¹

- 1953 Leaves British Guiana for London. Registers to study at Westminster College.

The moment I arrived in London, I knew I was home.²

- 1953–56 Regular serviceman in the Royal Air Force (RAF). Befriended by the artist and architect Keith Critchlow, a fellow member of the RAF.

[Critchlow] introduced me to the museums and galleries. We used to visit galleries in Cork Street and then go to the National Gallery, the Tate—which is now Tate Britain—and I was very struck by the British painters like Constable, Turner and Gainsborough, whose marvelous touch I was very engaged by. And the painters who were around at the time: Leon Kossof, Frank Auerbach, people like that, I felt a kind of affinity with. I was very keen on writing because I kept hearing from people that I had a story to tell. ... But once I started visiting the art galleries, I got hooked on painting.³

- 1958–59 Student at Chelsea School of Art and City and Guilds School, London.

- 1959–62 Studies painting at the Royal College of Art, London.

I was there working at the same time with all the people who emerged from Pop Art. A lot of people painted things about Marilyn Monroe; but my emphasis, what I was painting, was the changing situation, and what was emerging from that sort of change, like the Belgians gave up Congo, and the British gave up Kenya, and places like that.⁴

- 1961 First visit to New York City with fellow Royal College of Art classmates David Hockney and Billy Apple.

- 1962 Graduates from the Royal College of Art. Awarded the silver medal for painting (David Hockney is awarded the gold). Befriends the American painter Larry Rivers, who would become a lifelong mentor, and Francis Bacon, an enormous influence on his early work. Participates in first major exhibition, *Image in Revolt*, at Gabrowksi Gallery, London.



Fig 1 Bowling's Variety Store, 1953
 Fig 2 Frank Bowling, *Cover Girl*, 1966
 Fig 3 Bowling with Michele, a receptionist for Vidal Sassoon, c.1966.

Fig 4 Bowling in the Life Room at Royal College. In the background one of the *Birth Paintings* in progress, c.1960.

Fig 5 Keith Critchlow, a good friend who Bowling met in the RAF.



Fig 6 Bowling in his studio at 535 Broadway in New York, 1970.

Fig 7 Catalogue for 5+1 exhibition curated by Bowling at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1969.

Fig 8 Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954-55, Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig 9 Bowling with Map Painting, 1970

Fig 10 Frank Bowling, *False Start*, 1970

Fig 11 Bowling in his studio, 1970.

On Francis Bacon: *I think he's one of the greatest painters of our time. Certainly the best painter on the English scene. He is a daring painter who really does push paint. ... It's not as though I am just doing bad Bacons. I wouldn't look to any modern painter for direction, even though I might admire their work.*⁵

1965 Returns to New York and has a studio visit with Jasper Johns.

*I think meeting someone like Jasper Johns made an enormous contribution to my development. ... I met Jasper Johns and he was instrumental in making me feel the situation of being an artist was not just a cul-de-sac, and that one was free to do what one liked. I was living at the Hotel Chelsea at the time and he came to visit me. I was freely drawing in map shapes at the time and was very shy about showing the work; he put me at ease by saying he didn't own maps, that I shouldn't think twice about going out and buying maps, cutting them up and putting them together again.*⁶

1966 Represents Britain at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. In June, permanently relocates to New York.

*New York beckoned and the toughness, competitive edge, and excitement drove me and my work to rise to new horizons. But for the strength gained in London, New York might have been forbidding. As it was it taught me much more about my grounding in British art and culture, that painting is a first order activity within which my daily life is spent.*⁷

1967 Awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Begins to create his series of *Map Paintings* (1967—1971).

*I was just laying the canvas on the floor and would then lay on the paint and start staining. I'd use color to follow the way the light moved across the room as the day went along. At one point the liquid paint started to form a pool in the shape of a head. ... But as the paint settled it looked ... more like a map of South America. I also recalled that as a child at school we were taught how to draw the map of Guyana. Larry Rivers suggested I use an overhead projector to get an accurate rendition of the maps of South America and Guyana. When I moved to a bigger studio in downtown New York I began cutting out these big thick brown paper stencils and started making the maps for real.*⁸

1969 Curates the exhibition 5+1 at the Art Gallery of the State University of New York, Stony Brook. The show features his work alongside that of five leading African American abstract artists: Melvin Edwards, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, Daniel LaRue Johnson, and William T. Williams.

Black art demands the same learning, knowledge, in-touch-withness as any art. Black art is not isolated by Africanisation with its implied stagnation. Two positive

virtues of Black art: (i) an awareness of the solid canons of traditional African artistic expression and thought (which have contributed to 20th century western art); and (ii) that powerful, instinctive, and intelligent ability which Blacks have shown time and again, despite inflicted degradations, to rearrange found things, redirecting the “things” of whatever environment in which Blacks are thrown, placed, or trapped.⁹

1969–72 Contributing editor and writer for *Arts Magazine*.

*Current art criticism is developing an attitude which threatens to consign the idea and fact of Black Art to the periphery of artistic events. ... Black art, like any art, is art. The difference is that it is done by a special kind of person.*¹⁰

1970 With Larry Rivers, co-curates *Some American History* at the Institute of the Arts, Rice University, Houston. Fellow artist Daniel LaRue Johnson introduces him to the critic Clement Greenberg, who becomes a mentor and close friend.

*On Greenberg: We were very close. When I met him, I was enlightened by a lot of stuff, in terms of career. He arrived in my life when I was very discombobulated and doing a lot of drinking and writing and doing a lot of work. He steadied me. What he did was, he came to my studio and found me a dealer. During the times I was disturbed, he would call me every morning and say, “How you doing? Want to meet for lunch?” He would come down and we would meet for lunch. We’d walk around and see the other studios. We would do it until he was not able to do it anymore. I consider him the guy who put me right on how to proceed in being an artist.*¹¹

1971 Solo exhibition of *Map Paintings* (1967–1971) at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. With the support of Clement Greenberg, fully embraces abstraction, abandoning the semi-figurative, autobiographical imagery that had characterized his practice up until that point.

*After leaving London to live in New York, I broke loose and began to get much more involved in pure painting, trying to fuse the kinds of things I was interested in with what could actually be upheld viably in a painting situation. I eventually found the most comfortable way of actually dealing with paint and structures from the outside was by leaning on ready-made shapes and photographs. The gradual turnover of rejecting what was too complicated led me to remove much of it entirely into another medium.*¹²

1973 Awarded second Guggenheim Fellowship. Begins his series of *Poured Paintings* (1973–78).

I moved into a studio in downtown New York and started working on a 30 ft. platform. I laid my canvases on it and worked at floor level, drizzling, dripping and spilling the paint. I mixed the colours in jars, then poured them on in a thick liquid

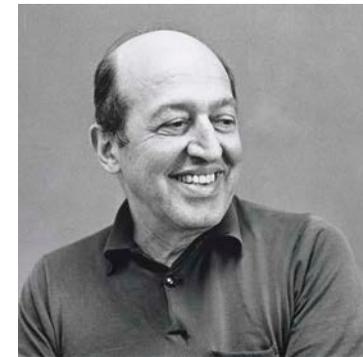


Fig 11 Clement Greenberg

Fig 12 Jack Whitten, Melvin Edwards, Frank Bowling, William T. Williams, 1983.

Fig 13 Frank Bowling, *Spreadout Ron Kitaj*,

1984–6, Collection Tate

Fig 14 Frank Bowling, *Bessboro'knights*, 1976

Fig 15 Installation view of Bowling's exhibition *Map Paintings* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971.

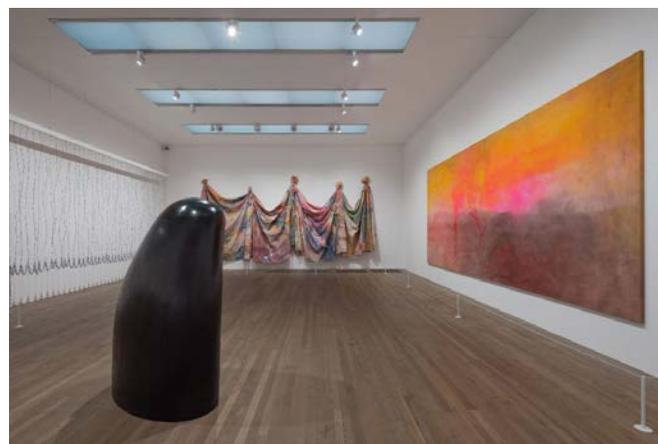


Fig 16 Frank Bowling in his studio.

Fig 17 Installation view of Bowling's exhibition *Mappa Mundi* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2018.

Fig 18 Frank Bowling, *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman*, 1968, Collection Tate.

Fig 19 Installation view of the exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, at Tate Modern, London, 2017.

Fig 20 Spencer Richards at Bowling's studio, 2017.

state. It was always the same process and the paint would spread and bleed. I would readjust the painting according to the geometry, or to Fibonacci and Jay Hambidge, or something like that, but sometimes chance played its part. I'm very open to accidents. I know they will happen, so I try to go along with them and see where they lead.¹³

1975–82 Moves back to London. Teaches at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts and Byam Shaw School of Art, London.

1977 Receives Arts Council of Great Britain Award.

1986 Solo exhibition of recent paintings at the Serpentine Gallery, London.

1987 The Tate Gallery, London acquires the artist's painting *Spreadout Ron Kitaj* (1984–86). It is the first work the museum purchases by a black British artist.

1989 Participates in the group exhibition, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, curated by Rasheed Araeen, at the Hayward Gallery, London.

1990 Establishes a studio in Dumbo, Brooklyn.

1992 Receives Pollock Krasner Award.

1994 Introduced to Okwui Enwezor, founder of the then new journal *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*.

1995 In New York, meets and becomes close friends with the Guyanese writer and photographer Spencer Richards. Since the mid-1990s, Richards has worked as the manager of Bowling's Brooklyn studio.

1996 Solo exhibition, *Frank Bowling: Bowling on Through the Century*, featuring paintings from the 1980s and 1990s, opens at the City Gallery in Leicester.

1998 Receives second Pollock Krasner award.

2003 *Map Paintings* featured in *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, curated by Gilane Tawadros, at the 50th Venice Biennial.

One of the most important artists of his generation, Frank Bowling created map paintings in the late 1960s and early 1970s which combine his investigations into the formal properties of picture making with his political preoccupations.¹⁴

2004 *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman* (1968) is included in the Tate Britain's exhibition, *This Was Tomorrow: Art in the '60s*, and subsequently acquired by the Tate in 2006.

I was engaged with all those people, especially Newman. He turned the Mark Rothko shape on its side. ... My poured surfaces didn't billow like Rothko's. Mine billowed like the kind of heat haze that you get in Guyana in the middle of the day. The sun is so hot that the water evaporates, rises and stays still: it is just there.¹⁵

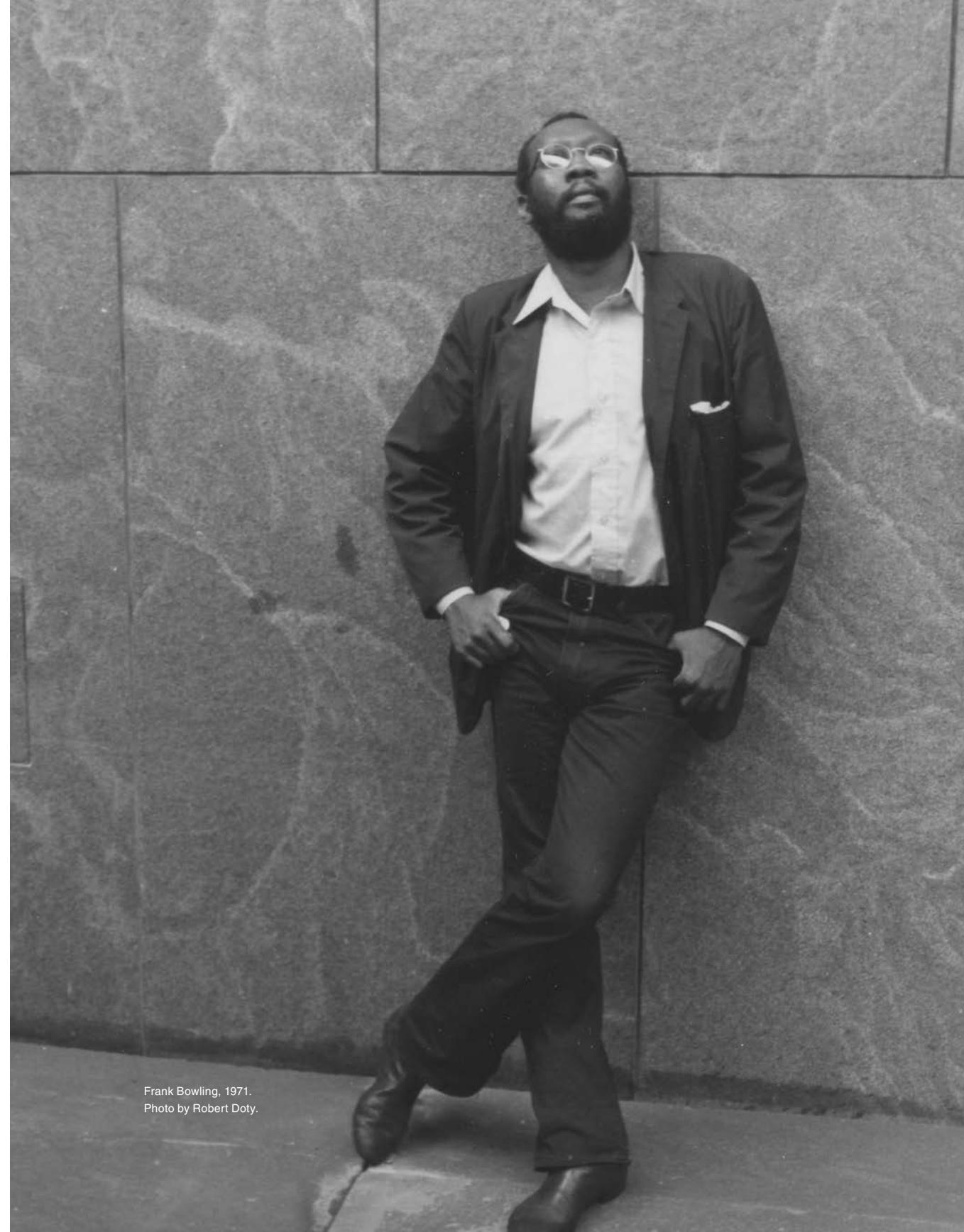
- 2005 Elected to the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Becomes the first black Academician in the organization's more than 200 year history.
- 2008 Made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE).
- 2012 Solo exhibition *Drop, Roll, Slide, Drip ... Frank Bowling's Poured Paintings 1973–8* held at the Tate Britain, London.

In my youth I tended to look at the tragic side of human behavior and try and reflect that in my work, but gradually as I became more involved in the making of paintings, I realized that one of the main ingredients in making paintings was color and geometry. And I found that this was the place that I felt the most comfortable. I have been going along that track ever since.¹⁶

- 2017 The traveling survey exhibition *Mappa Mundi*, curated by Okwui Enwezor with Anna Schneider, opens at Haus der Kunst, Munich. The show travels to the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin and the Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah.
- Two *Map Paintings* are included in the Tate Modern's group exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, co-curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, which travels to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR and the Brooklyn Museum, New York.
- 2019 Retrospective at the Tate Britain, London opens in May.

Notes

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- 2 Gooding, 18.
- 3 Amy Macpherson, "10 minutes with ... Frank Bowling," Royal Academy of Arts, September 22, 2014, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/10-minutes-with-frank-bowling-ra>, accessed August 23, 2018.
- 4 Okwui Enwezor and Olo Oguiibe, "Frank Bowling: A Conversation," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Spring 1996, 18.
- 5 Anthony Lewis Swift, "Profile Spotlights: Frank Bowling: The Birth of an Artist," *Chelsea Post and West London Star*, January 18, 1963.
- 6 Frank Bowling interview with Robert Doty, September 14, 1971.
- 7 Emily Steer, "5 Questions with Frank Bowling," *Elephant*, January 9, 2017, <https://elephant.art/5-questions-frank-bowling/>, accessed August 23, 2018.
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- 9 Frank Bowling, "Notes from a Work in Progress," in 5+7, eds. Lawrence Alloway and Sam Hunter (Stony Brook: Art Gallery, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1969).
- 10 Frank Bowling, "Discussion on Black Art III," *Arts Magazine*, December 1969—January 1970, 20.
- 11 Nadja Sayej, "The Unsung Art Star: A Phone Call with Frank Bowling," *ArtSlant*, November 11, 2014, <https://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/41286-the-unsung-art-star-a-phone-call-with-frank-bowling>, accessed August 23, 2018.
- 12 Bowling and Doty.
- 13 Frank Bowling, "Artist Frank Bowling on how he paints," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/sep/20/frank-bowling-guide-to-painting>, accessed August 23, 2018.
- 14 Gilane Tawadros, "Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes," La Biennale di Venezia, 50th International Art Exhibition, 2003, http://www.worldofartmagazine.com/WoA77woa_venezia50.htm, accessed August 23, 2018.
- 15 Courtney J. Martin, "The Middle of the Day," *Frieze*, May 1, 2012, <https://frieze.com/article/middle-day>, accessed August 23, 2018.
- 16 Mike McGee, "Evolution of Frank Bowling," *The Dallas Examiner*, April 6, 2015, <http://dallasexaminer.com/news/2015/apr/06/evolution-frank-bowling/>, accessed August 23, 2018.



Frank Bowling, 1971.
Photo by Robert Doty.

Frank Bowling OBE, RA (b. 1934) was born in British Guiana and maintains studios in London and New York. For over five decades, his distinct painting practice has been defined by an integration of autobiography and postcolonial geopolitics into abstraction.

Bowling moved to London in 1953, where he studied painting at the Royal College of Art from 1959–62. Emerging at the height of the British Pop movement, his early practice emphasized the figure while experimenting with expressive gestural applications of oil paint. In 1966, he moved to New York to immerse himself in Post-War American Art, and his practice shifted towards abstraction. As the art historian Mel Gooding remarked “for Bowling, the complexities and complications of New York art were compounded by the problematic issues of personal expression and public representation that much occupied the thoughts and discussions of his Black friends and associates in a largely segregated art world.” It was in this environment that he became a unifying force for his peers— he curated the seminal 1969 exhibition *5+1*, which featured work by Melvin Edwards, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, William T. Williams, Daniel LaRue Johnson, and himself. He was also a frequent contributor to publications, including *Arts Magazine*, where he was a contributing editor and wrote incisive texts on race and artistic production. His long friendship and intellectual sparring sessions with the renowned art historian and critic Clement Greenberg opened up further conversations about painting and politics.

Concurrent with his move towards abstraction, Bowling sought inventive ways in which to continue incorporating pictorial imagery into his work. In 1964, the artist began screen-printing personal photographs onto canvas, notably a 1953 image of his mother’s general store in Guiana, Bowling’s Variety Store. He would go on to create a number of these works in the following years, embedding personal narratives into the surface of his paintings. Subsequently, Bowling began his groundbreaking series of *Map Paintings* (1967–71). In these expansive, chromatic canvases, thin soaks of acrylic provide the ground for images of re-oriented continental landmasses spray-painted with stencils. As the curator Okwui Enwezor explains, “by staking a ground around the idea that abstraction need not be disunited from content, especially as it intersects cultural experience and historical subject matter, Bowling boldly experimented with diverse modes of building a painted surface.”

Since 1971, Bowling has abandoned his use of figurative imagery, and focused primarily on material and process. In place of the earlier map formations, geometry provides the foundation for his compositions. He begins with swathes of color and applies gestural drips otop, harnessing multiple techniques to create dynamic, yet unified surfaces. In this way, he inherits and interprets the multifaceted legacy of American abstraction—both gesture and field. His palette is vibrant and diverse, fluctuating between warm saturated tones and soft pastel hues, muddied textures

and sometimes shimmering surfaces. His body of *Poured Paintings* (1973–78), which he created by tilting the canvas and inviting the effects of gravity into his process, make clear his interest in experimentation and chance as necessary to innovation, opening up metaphors for shifting geographical orientations and movement across bodies of water. His approaches often include building up paint to emphasize sculptural dimensionality; since 1981, he has embraced pictorial depth further, using foam that transforms his canvases into reliefs with surfaces and colors that imply geologic strata. In more recent years, he has introduced collaged elements—including glitter, small toys, and needles—and “seam” imagery into his compositions in homage to his mother, who was both a dress designer and variety store owner. Bowling has described his embrace of pure abstraction as a process of “unlearning” his early techniques; at the same time, his evocative, personal titles reaffirm connections between the past and present.

A major retrospective of Bowling’s work organized by the Tate Britain, London, United Kingdom will open in 2019. His paintings have been the subject of numerous one-person exhibitions, including *Mappa Mundi*, curated by Okwui Enwezor, Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2017), traveled to Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland (2018) and Sharjah Art Foundation, United Arab Emirates (2018); Dallas Museum of Art, TX (2015); *Drop, Roll, Slide, Drip... Frank Bowling’s Poured Paintings 1973–8*, Tate Britain, London, United Kingdom (2012); *Frank Bowling Works on Paper*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2011); Serpentine Gallery, London (1986); *Frank Bowling Retrospective*, Newcastle up Tyne Polytechnic Art Gallery, Newcastle, United Kingdom (1978); and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1971). His work has been included in countless group exhibitions, including *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, Tate Modern, London, United Kingdom (2017), traveled to Crystal Bridges, Bentonville, AR (2018) and Brooklyn Museum, New York (2018); *Postwar-Art between the Pacific and Atlantic 1945–65*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (2016); *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, Perez Art Museum, Miami (2014); and *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties*, Brooklyn Museum, New York (2014). He has been the recipient of many grants and awards, including an OBE: Order of the British Empire (2008); Membership to the Royal Academy of Art, United Kingdom (2005); two Pollock Krasner Awards (1998, 1992); Arts Council of Great Britain Award (1977); and two John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowships (1973, 1967). His work is included in innumerable private and public collections, including the Arts Council of Great Britain; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; Menil Foundation, Houston, TX; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; National Museum Wales, Cardiff, United Kingdom; Royal Academy of Arts, London, United Kingdom; Tate Gallery, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Checklist

Drift I, 2017 *

Acrylic on printed canvas
65.31h x 34.37w in
(165.90h x 87.30w cm)

Drift II, 2017 *

Acrylic on printed canvas
65.31h x 34.33w in
(165.90h x 87.20w cm)

With Reference to Barbados, 2018

Acrylic and mixed media on collaged and
printed canvas
62.99h x 48.43w in
(160h x 123w cm)

Hothead, 2016 *

Acrylic on collaged canvas
24.61h x 27.68w in
(62.50h x 70.30w cm)

Nesting, 2017 *

Acrylic on collaged canvas
35.39h x 34.29w in
(89.9h x 87.1w cm)

Full Face, 2017

Acrylic on collaged canvas
14.02h x 14.06w in
(35.60h x 35.70w cm)

The Maid's Garden, 2017

Acrylic on collaged canvas
14.13h x 14.06w in
(35.90h x 35.70w cm)

Elder Sun Benjamin, 2018 *

Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas
119.29h x 203.54w in
(303h x 517w cm)

Regatta, 2017 *

Acrylic on collaged canvas
58.27h x 73.31w in
(148h x 186.20w cm)

Two Blues, 2018 *

Acrylic and mixed media on collaged and
printed canvas
67.09h x 52.13w in
(170.40h x 132.40w cm)

Paul Hedge's Gift of Unraveling Silk, 2017 *

Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas
52.20h x 69.25w in
(132.60h x 175.90w cm)

Scatter, 2017

Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas
72.05h x 32.28w in
(183h x 82w cm)

Anne & Frank, 2017

Acrylic on collaged canvas
57.32h x 73.31w in
(145.60h x 186.20w cm)

Another Morrison As In Stuart, 2018 *

Acrylic on collaged canvas
74.37h x 71.34w in
(188.90h x 181.20w cm)

* Included in the exhibition

Other Illustrated Works

Swan II, 1964

Oil on canvas
44h x 95.6w in
(112h x 243w cm)

Tony's Anvil, 1975

Acrylic on canvas
68.11h x 42.12w in
(173h x 107w cm)

Fred's touch, 2015

Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas
102.28h x 73.15w in
(259.80h x 185.80w cm)

Cover Girl, 1966

Acrylic, oil paint, and silkscreened ink on
canvas
57h x 40w in
(144.8h x 101.6w cm)

False Start, 1970

Acrylic and spray paint on canvas
87.80h x 210.24w x 1.97d in
(223h x 534w x 5d cm)

Bessboro'knights, 1976

Acrylic on canvas
52h x 31w in
(132h x 79w cm)

Spreadout Ron Kitaj, 1984–96

Acrylic paint, acrylic gel, foam, and mixed
media on canvas
90h x 113w in
(228.5h x 287w cm)

Who's Afraid of Barney Newman, 1968

Acrylic on canvas
93h x 51w x 1d in
(236.4h x 129.5w x 2.7d cm)

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Through exhibitions, research, and artist representation, Alexander Gray Associates spotlights artistic movements and artists who emerged in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. Influential in cultural, social, and political spheres, these artists are notable for creating work that crosses geographic borders, generational contexts and artistic disciplines. Alexander Gray Associates is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America.

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