

FRANK BOWLING

Bridget Galton, 'Frank Bowling's New White Paintings reflect the Thames and new housing complexes', Ham&High, 28th October.2016.



Frank Bowling in his studio, 2015. Photograph by Charlie Littlewood.

The debut exhibition at Hampstead School of Art's new home is by an 80-year-old painter with 'a deep understanding of the power of colour'

Hampstead School of Art's first exhibition in its new home is by British Guyanan artist Frank Bowling, who in 2005 became the first black Royal Academician in its 200 year history,

Along with painter Alan Gouk, Bowling is the first artist patron of the school, since Henry Moore 70 years ago.

In the catalogue to New White Paintings HSoA principal Isabel Langtry tells how she first met Bowling while she was studying at St Martin's when she befriended his stepdaughter Marcia Scott.

She recalls visiting his studio: "The smell and visual impact are still logged somewhere in a cranial compartment and that sensory experience returns whenever I view his paintings."

Born in 1936, Bowling moved to London in 1953 and later won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art where contemporaries included Patrick Caulfield and David Hockney. Upon graduating in 1962 Bowling took the silver for painting while Hockney won the gold.

While his early work was figurative, often highlighting social, political and narrative themes inspired by his heritage, he found greater freedom in the 60s focusing on materials process and colour with more geometric, abstract work.

Moving to the US in 1966, he became a leading Color Field painter and according to Gouk "an important figure in the flowering of Afro-American art in New York."

In his catalogue essay, fellow artist John Bunker says: "Bowling would find real freedom of expression in the modernist syntax of medium innovation and experimentation prevalent in New York in the 60s and 70s."

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Remarking on his skill of paint handling and “the diversity and complexity of emotional registers inherent to a deep understanding of the power of colour” he says that “a sensuous apprehension of the world that can be achieved with paint remain Bowling’s gift to the medium.”

As spilling dripping and brushing became important working methods in the 70s, Bowling began referring to his large abstract works using bold, lyrical colour as ‘poured paintings.’

The New White Paintings sees Bunker reflect the Thames and the vast new housing complexes Bowling passes each day on the way to his studio.

Mixing basic decorator’s matt whites with expensive acrylic gels, pigments and chalks collected on his travels, with tiny toys and the paraphernalia of everyday life worked into the layers of paint, they catch the light in surprising ways.

He points out that they range from warm whites of “white heat” to cool tones of frozen wastes.

“None of these paintings are purely white...

“Their lightness and openness means they are sensitive to the subtle changes in the always moving light of the day around them”

Bowling he feels is “conscious of how the effects of daylight affects our moods.”

Langtry advises visitors to pause and give them a long look: “breathe it in, scrutinise the surface and be engulfed by its layers of light, subtle changes of tone or dramatic insertions of colour.”

While art critic Estelle Lovatt sees shades of Constable, Monet, Bonnard, Rothko Kline and Bacon in Bowling’s paintings which “spiritually communicate what being alive is all about; physically emotionally mentally, and how magnificent life is through the paintbrush.”

Frank Bowling ‘New White Paintings’ is at Hampstead School of Art Gallery, Penrose Gardens NW3 until November 11.