

## FRANK BOWLING

Alex Farquharson, 'How Brexit would have ruined impressionism - The Tate Britain director talks snowmen, Frank Bowling, and art made from alligator blood', New Statesman, 4 December 2017



Frank Bowling, *Texas Louise*, 1971, (detail).

There's no getting away from Brexit in the news. It's a strangely apt backdrop for the opening of the new EY-sponsored exhibition at Tate Britain (where I am director), "*Impressionists in London: French Artists in Exile (1870-1904)*" – and one we couldn't have foretold when we embarked on the show a few years ago. The exhibition begins with Paris in ruins during the Prussian occupation and Paris Commune and ends with the Entente Cordiale, a deal with our neighbours across the Channel that promised stability in Europe. Thousands of French people came to Britain to escape conscription, persecution, hunger, or for economic opportunity. There were no restrictions on entry.

Among them were artists, including Monet, Pissarro and Tissot, who went on to create some of the most memorable images of late-Victorian London. The story of British art and culture has always been an international one: artists from the Dutch Republic dominated the first two centuries of the art history we cover at the gallery, and this year's Turner Prize is the most diverse and international to date. The country can feel very divided at times like this, but museums and galleries can serve as environments in which people can come together and explore their place in the world through inspirational works of art.

## Alligator blood

No sooner have we opened one show than we begin installing the next. It's exciting to see a new work by Marguerite Humeau coming together today. Marguerite, as it happens, is a young French artist living in London. It's challenging work to install, as it involves pumping fluids around the gallery – alligator blood and snake venom I'm told. The installation is a kind of semi-scientific, semi-mythical attempt to create an elixir of life.

Art has the power to take us outside our own experience. Many artists of Humeau's generation, influenced by how the world is being reshaped by the digital revolution, as well as the reality of accelerating climate change, are making work that seeks to reflect non-human perspectives on life. Marguerite is unusual in that she studied product design. Her smooth hi-tech-looking objects are like products from the future whose purpose is as yet unknown. They also hark back to prehistoric times and age-old indigenous beliefs. Wry humour runs through her out-there thinking.

## Mapping the Atlantic

The integration of British artists into an international story is something we do with colleagues at Tate Modern too. I went to see Frank Bowling's work in a commercial gallery show

# H A L E S

last night, where he is displayed alongside American abstract painters of the 1960s. He's an artist we have shown most recently in "Soul of a Nation", an exhibition that surveyed "Art in the Age of Black Power".

Frank, who was born in Guyana, lives just round the corner from Tate Britain, so he must be our nearest international artist (he has also kept a studio in New York since the late Sixties). Haus der Kunst, a major venue in Munich, has an impressive exhibition on at the moment of his seminal "map paintings" and works from the 1980s that evoke riverbeds. I'll be going later this month. In his maps, sprayed stencil outlines of the four Atlantic-facing continents appear over pools of hot and cool colour. They are often very large paintings and seem to encompass the experience and expanse of the whole Atlantic world.

Let there be light

Christmas advertising is already taking over the city on the commute to work. Tate's contribution to the festivities is to invite an artist to create a new seasonal installation each year. Traditionally this has been a tree, but this year we invited Alan Kane to light the outside of the building. His response was to adorn the classical portico of Tate Britain with a hundred kitschy Christmas-themed lights: Santas, reindeer, snowmen and so on.

We have just learned that Westminster has approved planning permission – what a relief! One of our contemporary curators is now buying the lights while the technicians are readying the mesh structure on which they all will be affixed to avoid any drilling into the Grade I facade. It should turn heads. Yesterday we also met to begin planning how best to use our outdoor spaces during the summer holidays – young people tend to want a more social and participatory atmosphere in museums.

Flight mode

In Terminal 5 at Heathrow I'm waiting to board a flight to Washington where I have meetings at the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum – the former is a partner gallery on our current Rachel Whiteread exhibition. I'm also looking forward, while I'm there, to seeing the new National Museum of African American History and Culture. Then it's on to New York for the weekend and the opening of the David Hockney retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The show originated at Tate Britain earlier this year, where it was seen by almost half a million visitors, making it the most successful exhibition by a living artist in Tate's history. It is

David's first retrospective in 28 years and I'm sure it will be as much of an event in New York. It was certainly a great privilege to open it in London. Time to board and switch this device to flight mode.

"Rachel Whiteread" runs until 21 January and "Impressionists in London" until 7 May, both at Tate Britain, London SW1