

FRANK BOWLING

John Yau, 'Frank Bowling, or the Odd Man Out', Hyperallergic, 8 September 2018



Frank Bowling, *Elder Sun Benjamin*, 2018, (detail). Photo by Damian Griffiths.

I first began following Frank Bowling's work when he was showing at Tibor de Nagy in the 1980s, and reviewed his work for *Art in America* in 1983. Born in Guyana in 1936, Bowling had a one-person show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971. He was a contributing editor to *Arts Magazine* (1969-72); the first living black British artist to have a work acquired by The Tate Gallery in London when the museum added "*Spread Out Ron Kitaj*" (1984-86) to their collection; and the first black British artist elected to England's Royal Academy of Art in 2005. (There are 80 members.)

Bowling's career started out strong in America, but after some time his work began to be overlooked. He was included in the exhibition *5 + 1* at the Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, which ran from October through November of 1969, curated by Lawrence Alloway and Sam Hunter. The title referred to the five Black American artists in the show: the sculptors Mel Edwards and Dan Johnson and the painters Al Loving, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams. The Englishman Bowling was the "+1." After starting out as a figurative artist, he began pouring paint in 1973; he has always been the + 1, the figure who doesn't fit.

Bowling is an unacknowledged progenitor. His painting, "*Who's Afraid of Barney Newman*" (1968), with its outlines of

Guyana and the subcontinent of South America stenciled in white over three vertical stripes (green, yellow, and red), anticipates Kerry James Marshall's recastings of Newman's painting by more than 30 years. His collapsing together of politics and abstraction is just one of the advancements he made in painting. I mention this because the contributions that black artists have made to abstraction — in terms of innovation, challenge, and subversion — have yet to be comprehensively addressed by the art world.

This is one reason why I was especially interested in seeing the exhibition, *Frank Bowling: Make It New*, at Alexander Gray Associates, his first show with the Chelsea gallery. The exhibition consists of nine paintings of varying sizes, including one, "*Elder Sun Benjamin*" (2018), that is monumental, measuring nearly 10 feet high by nearly 17 feet long. "*Elder Sun Benjamin*" undoes the rigor we associate with the tight field of Barnett Newman, the set motif of Jasper Johns's "*flags*," and the horizontal bands of Brice Marden's "*Grove Group*" paintings.

One way that Bowling undoes geometric abstraction is by collaging. He has affixed a large canvas, defined by three horizontal bands of color (blue, yellow and red), onto a slightly larger, stretched canvas, whose edges peek through. Along the seam separating the yellow and blue band he has

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collaged a narrow strip of printed fabric, whose patterns are typical of African or Dutch wax prints. As in “*Who’s Afraid of Barney Newman*,” Bowling brings an autobiographical element into the painting that reaches back into history, recalling colonialism and the interaction between white and black cultures. The uneven, cut edges of the large, collaged canvas; the stenciled, decorative, and star-like shapes on the blue band; the trail of gel-like material running along the seam between the red and yellow bands; the unevenness of each band’s color; and the speckles of red paint on the yellow band undo the pristine perfection we associate with geometric abstraction. It is as if the gritty reality of the world had crept into the painting.

Bowling’s method of constructing the painting contributes to the meaning. If pouring and staining are assumed to have helped drive content out of painting and push the work toward the purely optical, the artist has aimed process in a different direction. Through collage and cutting, as well as the use of gels and other materials, he introduces different strains of meaning — from the overtly autobiographical evocation of cutting (his mother was a dress designer and embroiderer), to a CD wrapping, to the use of printed fabric — which inflect his abstractions as well as widen our experience from a purely formal to a multilayered one.

Bowling’s paintings might be placed in a pristine exhibition space, but their ragged edges, the gels on their surfaces, the threads visibly embedded in the paint and gel, remind us that there is a world outside the gallery and we should not think art is separate from life or history. When he pours paint onto a printed surface, as he does in “*Drift I*” and “*Drift II*” (both 2017), the gorgeous effects he achieves are not all that we should be inspired to consider. Bowling has brought together geometry and pouring, the machine-made and the body’s actions — the divergent sides of Abstract Expressionism and of Modernism. The collision of pouring and geometry evokes the meeting of order and eruption, with the latter overwhelming the former.

The horizontal stack of geometric stripes, whose colors recall Gene Davis’s paintings, is literally set on its side (Davis’s stripes were always vertical). With his gels, metallic tints, and saturated colors, Bowling has a wild color sense that is pretty much unrivaled. His combination of different materials and processes shakes things loose. It occurred to me that the worn surfaces, which look like they have been left out in the rain or in the corner of the studio for years, share something with Joe Bradley’s *Cave* canvases. The difference is that Bradley’s paintings comes across as arch, staged, the latest example of an artist thumbing his nose.

That works for some people, but I am more interested in Bowling’s project, which is about history and the history of abstraction in a wide and deep sense. Oscar Murillo, of course, tried to imbue his forlorn abstract paintings with a similar quality by placing them unstretched on the floor. When I called Bowling a progenitor, I did not mean that all the artists who came after him were nearly as superior (the one exception being Kerry James Marshall).

By using collage, and paintings he seems to have worked on earlier in his career, Bowling destroys something to — as the title of his exhibition conveys — “make it new.” I think it is time the American art world look again at the trajectory of Bowling’s career, stretching out across the last century.

Frank Bowling: Make It New continues at Alexander Gray Associates (510 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 13.