

## FRANK BOWLING

Lydia Figes, 'Frank Bowling: 60 years of pioneering colourful abstraction',  
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Frank Bowling, *Great Thames IV*, 1988, (detail)

Flecks of electric green. Hues of hot pink. These are the shades typically found in Frank Bowling's energetic colourful compositions that broke new ground for abstract painting half a century ago.

Born in Guyana in 1934, Bowling has lived and worked between London and New York since the 1950s, though he only came to international prominence in his 70s. Now 85, he still paints every day.

His works are being exhibited in a major retrospective at Tate Britain, 'Frank Bowling' (until 26th August 2019), a show spanning 60 years of his artistic production – and one that is long overdue.

Curated by Elena Crippa, the exhibition explores Bowling's endless desire to reinvent and expand upon the medium of painting, to 'make it new'. Widely respected for his bold and refreshing experiments with form, colour and process – from staining, dripping to pouring – his practice has resisted being framed by one interpretation.

Born in Bartica, Guyana (formerly known as British Guiana, a British colony), Bowling moved to England as a teenager in 1950. First joining the Royal Air Force, he left the military to embark on a fine art degree. He earned a place at the Chelsea School of Art, before winning a scholarship to study at the Royal College of Art.

To gain not only admission to the most elite art schools in the country – as a black artist without a private school education – was undeniably a huge accomplishment.

#### Early years

Graduating in 1962, the same year as David Hockney, and one year after R. B. Kitaj, Bowling's innovative approach to painting was clear while he was still an undergraduate. Initially called a 'Baconian', he explored figurative painting underpinned by dark narratives, often portraying the nude. Works such as *Birthday* (1962) clearly paid homage to the garish, sinister paintings of Francis Bacon.

At the end of his final year, he was awarded the silver medal, losing out on the gold to Hockney. Yet after graduating, Bowling was ostracised from group exhibitions taking place in London during the swinging 60s. In this era, London and the UK were becoming increasingly multicultural due to immigration – throughout the 1950s and 1960s the so-called 'Windrush generation' was arriving in Britain – yet the art establishment was still reluctant to embrace the work of black artists.

One particular exhibition intended to capture the 'spirit of the new era', was '*New Generation: 1964*' at Whitechapel Gallery, curated by Bryan Robertson. Yet Bowling – a promising young painter fresh out of art school – wasn't included alongside other graduates of the RCA.

Allegedly Robertson later commented: ‘England is not ready for a gifted artist of colour.’ Such endemic, institutional racism within the British art world meant that Bowling struggled for recognition and opportunities in the early years of his career.

Frustrated with being pigeonholed as a black or ‘exotic’ artist, Bowling manoeuvred himself consciously and tactfully. He deliberately chose not to join groups dealing with issues of race, such as the BLK Art Group, a movement that rose to prominence in Britain in the late 1970s.

In the BBC’s recent documentary *Frank Bowling’s Abstract World* with Brenda Emmanus, Bowling commented: ‘in order for people to feel comfortable they have to put you in a box.’ In equal measure, for many years Bowling has been at the mercy of audiences who have interpreted his interest in colour as a manifestation of his South American roots.

## Move to New York (1966–1975)

Realising that London’s art establishment was not going to champion his career, Bowling moved to New York in 1966. He took lodgings in the Chelsea Hotel, an iconic cultural landmark (sadly, it no longer exists) that once offered the most radical and free-thinking artists of the era a subsidised or free room in exchange for the products of their creativity. The year that Bowling took up residence, Andy Warhol shot his film *Chelsea Girls* (1966) in the hotel, around the same time that his muse, Edie Sedgwick set fire to her hotel room. Walking the halls of the Chelsea Hotel were figures like Jimi Hendrix, Willem de Kooning and Robert Mapplethorpe.

Bowling’s career took off quickly in New York, a city that was ready to embrace his visually complex, expressive approach to painting – ‘In America, there is no no-go area for anybody’, Bowling once recalled.

He set up a permanent studio in Brooklyn. Shortly after, he was granted two Guggenheim fellowships. He also developed his voice as a writer, publishing critical essays and articles in the *Arts Magazine*, many of which started to consider the emergence of the Black Arts Movement.

By the late 1960s, his work became increasingly abstract and larger in scale. He also began to experiment with collage, stencils, silk prints and fluorescent paint. This was most likely a reflection of his boosted confidence resulting from a sense of acceptance across the pond.

Large-scale works such as *Cover Girl* (1966) present an iconic image of the 1960s – a fashionable cover girl wearing Pierre Cardin is set against stencilled images of his former Guyana home. The overlapping of starkly contrasting images brought to the fore Bowling’s sense of displacement as an artist shifting between many geographical locations.

An even larger work, *Who’s Afraid of Barney Newman* (1968),

paid homage to American abstract expressionist Barnett Newman – who had titled his own series *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*. But Bowling’s work comprised three vertical strips of green, yellow and red – the colours of the Guyanese flag. Faint outlines of the maps of Guyana and South America can be detected beneath layers of paint.

## The ‘Map Paintings’ (1966–1971)

Bowling developed his ‘map paintings’ in the early 1970s, exhibiting them for the first time at The Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971.

The large-scale works ostensibly explored trans-Atlantic cultural hybridity and African diasporic identity. The repeated motif of Guyana on a map strengthened the autobiographical element, which encouraged new readings of his work.

Although Bowling was working in the USA during and after the crescendo of the Civil Rights Movement, he was reticent about joining the discussions and movements of politically motivated black artists. However, for years his work has been interpreted through the prism of postcolonialism, black oppression or seen as an investigation of sovereignty and state borders. As a transnational artist, the ‘map paintings’ arguably reflected Bowling’s sense of displaced yet fluid identity between many cultures and geographical locations.

## The ‘Poured Paintings’

In the early 1970s, Bowling debuted his visually seductive and spontaneous ‘poured paintings’, works that rapidly propelled his fame and signalled a dramatic stylistic shift in his practice.

*Ziff* (1974) is monumental in size and presents a kaleidoscopic colourful explosion of violet, mauve and bright orange. Like some of his earlier works, the title pays tribute to Newman’s 1940s ‘zip paintings’. Conceptual in method, Bowling’s ‘poured paintings’ introduced an element of chance. He poured, dripped and splattered paint directly and haphazardly onto an angled canvas, allowing the liquid to bleed and free-fall to the bottom.

In the 1970s, Bowling returned to London to be closer to his family. The following decade he created his monumental ‘Great Thames’ series, created in a studio by the Docklands. By including dregs and debris from the river in *Great Thames IV* (1988), the tactile work collapses present and past – at once referencing modern-day London, while referring back to the murky yet sublimely, vibrant colour palettes of J. M. W Turner – an artist Bowling revered as a young man when walking through the rooms at The National Gallery.

An ambitious overview of a life’s work, Tate Britain’s exhibition serves to rectify a history of discrimination against Bowling’s spectacular artistic evolution. His long career, characterised by a journey that swings backwards and

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forwards across the Atlantic – between London and New York – has consistently evoked his memories of Guyana. Yet to this day, he resists framings of his work that focus on his personal story, heritage or race. Instead, he maintains that his works are open-ended, and should be analysed first for their formal characteristics.

On the other hand, Bowling has undeniably shattered barriers for black artists. He is celebrated for being the first black artist to be elected a Royal Academician, in 2005, two centuries after the institution's foundation. Let's hope that Bowling's long-overdue recognition by the establishment is a sign that things are changing in the art world for artists of colour.