

FRANK BOWLING OBE, RA

Bonham-Carter, Charlotte, Frank Bowling: Drop, Roll, Slide, Drip, Time Out July 12th-18th 2012



Frank Bowling: Drop, Roll, Slide, Drip...

EXHIBITION OF THE WEEK



Tate Britain Major spaces
Hales Gallery Galleries East

A graduate of the Royal College of Art alongside David Hockney in 1962, British Guyana-born artist Frank Bowling hasn't enjoyed the same level of recognition as some of his peers. But in 2005, he was named the first ever black Royal Academician (itself a damning indictment of persisting hierarchies) and is finally the subject of some decent solo shows here, including a big room at Tate Britain. Is this renewed interest in Bowling an overzealous attempt to correct the injustices of art history? Is it just another case of the art world turning its whimsical fancy to an overlooked septuagenarian with an intriguing life story? Or, is Bowling's abstraction really worth the looking back?

Bowling's overriding concerns have always been colour and materials. At Tate, the display consists of his poured works in which the artist tips acrylic directly on to a painted canvas – a process he's tantalisingly called 'wet into wet' – before tilting the surface to guide the paint as it run downwards.



Details of 'Pandora's Box and Prometheus Bound' (right), 1974-75



He completed such vertiginous, upright pictures as 'Pandora's Box' and 'Prometheus Bound' (pictured) in the mid '70s while living between London and New York, where he came into contact with American artists such as Barnett Newman and, later, Larry Poons. Far from derivative, though, Bowling's surfaces struggle to contain their kaleidoscopic floods of paint and so conjure up evocative words like cascading, oozing, swirling and coagulating – all of which still fall short of capturing what the works actually look like. This feels like real art, the kind you have to see in the flesh and up close.

The works at Hales are all recent, the paint so thickly applied that it has captured sponges, cloths, fork heads and studio debris in pools of gathered material. The drips, drabs and brushstrokes consume the entire canvas, resulting in a more polished composition but one in which the physical presence of the artist, and his actions, are diminished in comparison to the glacial, dripping simplicity of the earlier poured paintings. Bowling is one of a lost generation of black British artists but what these two shows prove is that he's an undeniable master of his medium and that he hasn't lost it yet.

Charlotte Bonham-Carter

Art