

GALLERY GUIDE (LARGE PRINT)

FRANK BOWLING: LAND OF MANY WATERS

At 87 pioneering abstract painter Frank Bowling's commitment to paint has not waned. From his vast stencilled 'map paintings' to the dynamic energy of his 'poured paintings', and later still, deeply textured surfaces embedded with



objects, collage, and a multitude of both accidental and autobiographical materials. His experimental ethos has shaped our understanding of the medium.

Born in Guyana (then British Guiana) in 1934, Bowling's life has been described through the crossing of waterways. From the 'mighty' Essequibo River of his childhood to the

vast Atlantic and his journey to Britain in 1953, and the transatlantic back and forth for many years between studios in New York and London. Still today in visiting his studio at Peacock Yard, Bowling traverses the meandering River Thames several times a day.

Land of Many Waters navigates the slip and slide of this watery world. It focuses on work made since 2011, exploring Bowling's visual language. Downstairs, earlier works, cast threads



back to pivotal moments in Bowling's long career and his relentless exploration of the painted surface. Whilst upstairs, newer works, create geographical associations through light and hints of landscape, with one gallery reflecting on the foundational role played by colour in Bowling's work.

Amidst these concerns are memories and mirages of Guyana – a name formed from the Amerindian word for 'land of water' – unravelling the myriad of ways in which Bowling's surfaces are both guided by, and physically made of, water. These surfaces ebb and flow between what lies above and below. They are active, animated, stained, encrusted, littered, and layered. Their expanded edges (stapled and gelled in place) both contain and strain under the weight of their materiality, hinting at a life beyond the work.

Weaving its way through this slippery terrain, *Land of Many Waters* suggests the numerous ways in which Bowling's work points both backwards and forwards. Moving between metaphors and autobiography, it circles back to the painted

surface and an exploration of material, colour and light.

‘MOVING TO AND THROUGH’

Bowling's practice mimics the fluidity of water. He moves 'to and through decades', mining past techniques and formal concerns for inspiration. The drips and splatters and splashes, edges building on edges, paint poured up and down and from side to side, are anchored only by Bowling's persistent ability to reinvent his visual vocabulary anew each time.

Works made from liquified paint (mixed with water and ammonia), such as *Ashton's Plunge* and *Skyla's Choice* make direct references to Bowling's 'poured paintings' from the 1970s, with their dynamic verticality.

In contrast *Remember Thine Eyes* suggests a different direction of travel. Horizontal hues of red, yellow and blue are half-hidden under watery rivulets. Whilst the surface is scarred by the circular memory of paint pots left to drip and drizzle, leaving their marks upon the canvas.

Elsewhere, surfaces are collaged and embedded with objects and 'charms' such as *Ella and her mum Zoe's visit* and *With My Russian Relatives*. These works become 'archaeological sites', ripe for excavation, as we search to uncover both content and meaning. Titles gesture to people and places, family and friends, often referencing those whose hands or belongings have played a part in their creation.

It is not only people and processes that infiltrate and connect the work. Many paintings share physical remnants, such as *Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To and From Brighton* and *Wafting*, which contain fabric bought by grandson Samson

on a trip to Zambia. These familial relationships are common throughout Bowling's practice, with several new works upstairs emerging from fragments (such as marouflage and masking tape) of another.

'THE PLACE IN WHICH I LIVED IN MY IMAGINATION'

The slippery relationship between form and content is explored in new works created between 2019 and 2020, in which colour and light (key components of Bowling's visual language) have a way of winding their way back to Guyana.

The 'tropical hues' seen here are reminiscent of the acidic pinks and burning yellows of work from the 1960s. They also suggest a link with pivotal works – such as *Sacha Jason Guyana Dreams* and *Chaguaramus Bay* – which were painted in 1989 following a trip to Guyana with son Sacha. During this visit Bowling remarked: 'this heat haze where everything looks flat, and with little depth, what I had been trying to do in my art...There it was, visible to any ordinary eye'.

Yet, Bowling has always maintained that his abstract works are more imagination than memory: 'the idea of a view' rather than the view itself. These new works let the light in and through; an effect that appears to preoccupy much of Bowling's work made last summer. Their surfaces are stripped back, simultaneously revealing and concealing. They sit somewhere between paint and wash, or land and water.

Many works began life as waterlogged strips of canvas, moving from wall to floor and back again. Paint is spilled back and forth, aided by Bowling's hand-held spray bottle, directing water to propel the paint. They bleed, and seep and swirl, as colour washes into colour, creating tidal lines across the canvas such as in *Oriented Light*.

These works are constantly shifting between what is seen and what is not.

A process that can be described as palimpsest (a term often applied to Bowling's work), in which something is altered but still bears traces of the original, visible beneath the surface.

'WHO'S AFRAID OF RED, YELLOW AND BLUE'

Bowling once stated that: 'colour affects the eye and heart, physically and metaphorically, more directly than any other single element in painting.'



His first encounter with colour theory was during a visit to Bristol (in the late 1950s) where he met student and colour scientist Paul Harrison. Bowling has since written extensively about the formal and emotional effect of colour in painting. For example, the essay 'Revisions: Color and Recent Painting' (published in *Art Magazine* in 1972) of which excerpts from typewritten and annotated drafts can be seen in the exhibition.

The work *Red, yellow and blue edge* acts as an introduction to Bowling's complex use of colour. It is reminiscent of a photograph of his New York studio in which the window frames are painted red, yellow, blue and green – although rather than framing the East River, here we can imagine our own view. In contrast the edges of *El Dorado with my shirt collar* contain a vast 'sea' of blue encircling the golden glow of a crunched-up and painted carrier bag, upon which is stencilled the outline of Guyana.

Despite its heavily collaged surface, *Witness* also began life as simple, geometric blocks of colour – similar to compositions used by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian (on whom Bowling wrote his thesis at the Royal College of Art).

In two works from Bowling's *Crossings* series, thickly textured bands of colour traverse the surface, splitting the canvas in two. Named after journeys across bodies of water, they are similar in form to a body of work referred to as the 'zipper paintings'. These works referenced a formal construct used by Colour Field painter Barnett Newman, whose series *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue* (1966-1970) inspired another work by Bowling called *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman* (1968), known for its vertical stripes of red, yellow, and green.

ABOUT FRANK BOWLING

Sir Frank Bowling RA OBE was born in British Guiana in 1934. He came to London in 1953 with aspirations to write, and after completing national service in the RAF he graduated from the Royal College of Art with the silver medal for painting in 1962, with a style combining figurative, symbolic and abstract elements. In 1966 he moved to New York abandoning figuration entirely by 1971 to focus on

material, colour and process, as seen in his iconic 'map paintings' (1967-1971).

In New York he was a contributing editor at *Art Magazine* (1969-1972), where his critical writing made a significant contribution to intellectual debates on 'black art', also



curating the important exhibition *5+1*, showcasing the work of five African American abstract artists as well as his own recent paintings. He continued his experimentation with paint, making a series of 'poured paintings' using a

tilting platform (1973-1978). Bowling returned to London in 1975 but continued to spend significant periods in New York, creating work with heavily textured surfaces, bringing together techniques such as collage, poured paint, stencilling, staining, and stitching canvases to one another.

He became a Royal Academician in 2005, was awarded the OBE for services to Art in 2008 and a Knighthood in 2020. His work is represented in 50 collections worldwide, and has been exhibited extensively, including the 2017-2019 touring exhibition, *Mappa Mundi*, and a hugely successful retrospective at Tate Britain in 2019. At the age of 87, Bowling continues to work in his South London studio, accompanied by his wife, Rachel, family members, and friends, forever driven by his fascination with pushing the vast and radiant possibilities of paint.

FIND OUT MORE

You can listen to audio descriptions of the work by scanning the QR code below.

Pick up a copy of our free *Feeling Guide* which includes sensory prompts to try when exploring the exhibition.

The exhibition's accompanying publication is available in the Arnolfini Bookshop for the special exhibition price of £20.

Visit the website at www.arnolfini.org.uk to find out more about associated events and workshops and join the conversation at @arnolfiniarts



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Essequibo Dawn Just Above the Equator, acrylic on canvas with marouflage. Photo: Sacha Bowling © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2021. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Witness, 2018, acrylic and acrylic gel with plastic objects on collaged canvas. Photo: Angus Mill © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2021. Courtesy the artist.

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