

Frank Bowling: Seeking the Sublime

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Frank Bowling

Frank Bowling was born on the edge of the Amazon rainforest in Guyana (then British Guiana) in 1934. He journeyed to London in 1953, originally hoping to become a writer, but it was the power of painting at the National Gallery that captivated him.

Immersed in the vibrant London art scene, he forged connections with artists including Francis Bacon and David Hockney.

Fuelled by a deep passion for

paint and an insatiable desire to learn, Bowling, with little formal training, earned a place at the Royal College of Art in 1959.

Feeling restricted and overlooked by the conservative British art scene, Bowling turned to New York. His first visit was in 1961 and he eventually moved there in 1966. In New York he found the creative freedom to explore colour, geometry and the material qualities of paint. This approach connected with the

city's Abstract and Pop art scenes.

By the mid-1970s, Bowling returned to London to strengthen family ties while maintaining artistic connections in New York. This transatlantic position shaped his work's blend of English and American painting styles. By the mid-1980s, he had established a South London studio, where he has worked for over forty years. In 2005, he became the first Black artist elected to the Royal

Academy of Arts and in 2020,
Bowling was knighted.

Seeking the Sublime

Pursuing what he describes as 'the possibilities of paint', Frank Bowling (born 1934) has always pushed the boundaries of technique and style. This room begins with an early painting from 1961, made while at the Royal College of Art, and ends with a work completed in 2025.

From the outset, Bowling recalls, 'what I painted was human concern', with his recurring

portrayal of suffering shaped by his close study of historical paintings. Alongside this emotional register, Bowling has always been fascinated by the material qualities and expressive potential of paint, experimenting with its fluid and viscous states as well as its transparency and density. Over time, he came to recognise that his paintings were often unconsciously infused with 'the light and dark of the Guyanese landscape.'

From the 1960s, Bowling incorporated imagery and found

objects, including stencils of maps and personal items. By the early 1970s, he embraced 'pure abstraction', creating improvised poured paintings often associated with the dynamism of jazz music. Even now, in his nineties, Bowling returns to the studio every day, continuing to explore paint with the same energy and passion that defines his career.

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Frank Bowling

4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse

1961

A Bowling was given the Bible passage of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Conquest, War, Famine and Death — as a subject while studying at the RCA. This painting is built from a dense mass of near-abstract paint strokes.

Screaming heads and a prone body emerge within a dark landscape, which echoes the artistic style of his friend and mentor, Francis Bacon. The painting was also a raw response to the murder of the Congolese

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politician Patrice Lumumba by the Belgian-backed opposition earlier that year.

Oil paint on linen

Courtesy of the Frank Bowling

Frank Bowling

Beggar no 5

1962–63

A ragged figure in a striped shirt stands before Bowling's Variety Store, the shop run by Bowling's mother, Agatha, (known as Chrissie) which also served as the family home. In an act of Christian charity, Chrissie regularly took in and fed beggars. As a child, Bowling was required to wash their feet before he could eat, an experience he described as 'a trauma to me as a young boy.' This unsettling memory became a recurring theme in his early 1960s paintings. Here, the

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figure is set against the store's
geometric forms, revealing Bowling's
emerging dialogue between
representation and abstraction.

Oil paint on linen

Courtesy of the Frank Bowling Foundation

Frank Bowling

Swan

1964

In 1964, Bowling produced a series of swan paintings in which struggling or dying birds suggest inner conflict, symbolising the complexities of his life at that time. This work continues Bowling's interest in abstraction through the geometric blocks of pure colour, reflecting his study of the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian while at the Royal College of Art. To depict the bird soft and atmospheric paint strokes are used, which led to Bowling's 1970s explorations into

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American Colour Field abstraction, a style characterised by the emotional or meditative power of colour and paint.

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of the Frank Bowling Foundation

Frank Bowling

Swan: Geometric Observation 1 2022

This work is part of a series of prints to which Bowling added annotations and experimental paint marks, recording his thought processes. The annotations include personal notes, as well as mathematical and geometric equations reflecting efforts to achieve a considered balance and harmony in the compositions. This approach differs from the spontaneity and chance in Bowling's later works. The interplay between the swan and diamond motifs connects closely to

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his Swan paintings of 1964 displayed nearby.

Lithograph with pen and pastel annotations on paper

Courtesy of Frank Bowling Foundation.

Frank Bowling

Swan Upping

2020

Exhibited for the first time, this work takes its title from the annual ceremony on the River Thames, where swans are counted, marked and released. Bowling's life-long fascination with these birds began in the early 1960s, when he saw a swan coated with oil flailing desperately beside the river. Some sixty years later, Bowling returns to the subject, here abstracting the swan form in rich green tones and showing his continued experiments with paint

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and composition.

Acrylic paint on canvas

Courtesy of the Frank Bowling Foundation

Frank Bowling

Sentinel

1976

In the mid-1970s, Bowling developed a painting process based on pouring and staining techniques, first explored by American artists such as Helen Frankenthaler. He attached unstretched canvases to a movable board and poured liquid paint onto them, pivoting the surface like a seesaw. Using gravity to guide the work, he maintained some control while also allowing the paint to behave unpredictably. Here, streaks of red run down a field of blue, while the title

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playfully nods to the work's
uprightness with its association to the
steadfast posture of a soldier on
guard.

Acrylic paint on canvas
Courtesy Frank Bowling

Frank Bowling

Lenoraseas

1976

This poured painting is titled after Bowling's friend and fellow artist, Lenore Goldberg. Leonora is also the name of a village on the coast of Guyana, where the great Essequibo River meets the Atlantic Ocean.

Runnels of white, green, ochre, and pink cascade down the canvas, suggesting water in continuous motion and evoking the rivers and waterfalls of Guyana. They are framed by a border of solid vibrant hues of oxidised orange and red, which emphasise the vertical orientation of

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the central pour and highlight its
luminous, fluid style.

Acrylic paint on canvas

Courtesy of The Frank Bowling Foundation

Frank Bowling

Pondlife (After Millais)

2007

Bowling often creates dialogues with historical painting traditions. Here referencing *Ophelia* (1851–52) by the Pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais, who depicts Shakespeare's doomed heroine floating in a river strewn with wildflowers and lush with aquatic plants. Growing up in Guyana, the 'Land of Many Waters', Bowling's abstract works frequently allude to states of water and their reflective surfaces. In *Pondlife* a luminous yellow zone glows amongst bands of orange and brown, while found

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objects lie embedded beneath the surface, undisturbed, like dormant life.

Acrylic paint, acrylic gel and found objects on canvas with marouflage

Courtesy of the Frank Bowling Foundation

Frank Bowling

Tracey's Bouquet

(At Swim Two Birds)

2011

When Bowling was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE), his friend and artist Tracey Emin sent him flowers, fragments of which are embedded in this painting. The materials interact to create a rusted, textured surface — acrylic gels rise from the canvas and iridescent paint shimmers beneath. In the early 1980s, Bowling began stitching strips of fabric around the edges of his canvases to protect and preserve them, a process known as marouflage.

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Later this technique evolved into collage. Here the textile additions evoke fabrics sold in the shop owned by Bowling's mother — connecting memory and material.

Acrylic, acrylic gel on collaged canvas with marouflage

Courtesy of the Frank Bowling Foundation

Frank Bowling

Yellow Map

2025

This map's stencilled outline of South America, which includes Bowling's birthplace, Guyana, reflects the artist's fascination with the continent's shape, merging formal qualities with geography and personal history.

Bowling began his series of epic map paintings while living in New York in the 1960s. This recently completed smaller-scale map work is exhibited for the first time. Its sun-bleached yellow was achieved by spraying water onto the canvas, letting the paint flow and dilute, while washy

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greens and blues evoke water and
rain.

Acrylic on canvas with marouflage
Courtesy Frank Bowling