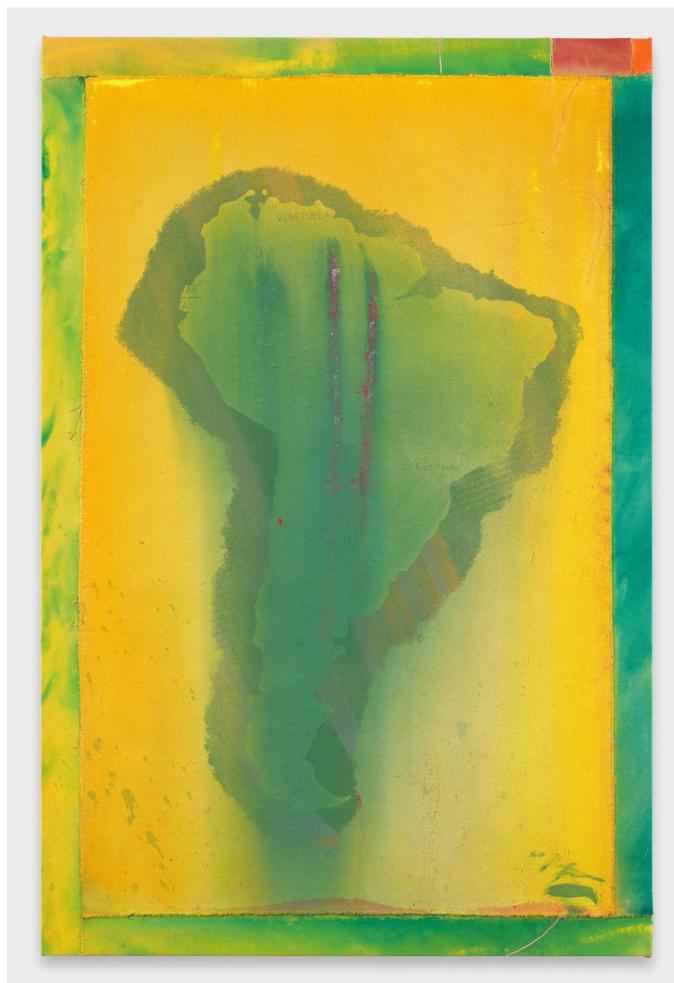


Frank Bowling: *Seeking the Sublime*

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

27 March 2026 - 17 January 2027



Frank Bowling, *Yellow Map*, 2025, Acrylic on canvas with marouflage, 161.5 x 107.3 x 4.5 cm. Courtesy the artist. Photographed by Anna Arca. © Frank Bowling. All rights reserved, DACS 2025

One of the most important British artists working today, Frank Bowling has, for almost seven decades, relentlessly pursued a practice that boldly expands the possibilities and properties of paint. *Seeking the Sublime* is a free display at the Fitzwilliam Museum that charts the evolution of Bowling's remarkable career, from figurative works of the early 1960s and poured abstractions of the 1970s to *Yellow Map* (2025), a major new painting shown publicly for the first time.

Born in Guyana (then British Guiana) in 1934, Bowling moved to London in 1953 at the age of nineteen. Initially aspiring to be a writer, he discovered the power of painting in his early twenties through visits to the National Gallery. From the outset, he recalls, “what I painted was human concern.” Driven by an intense desire to learn and a deep commitment to painting, Bowling secured a place at the Royal College of Art despite having little formal training. While studying there between 1959 and 1962, he formed a lasting friendship with fellow student David Hockney. During this period, a formative first visit to New York in 1961, exposed Bowling to Abstract Expressionism and the city’s dynamic artistic scene.

Seeking the Sublime includes key examples of Bowling’s early work alongside evidence of his close study of Old Masters such as Goya and Rembrandt. Through this engagement, he gained insight into how suffering might be conveyed through paint—a concern that becomes evident in works such as *4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1961), painted during his second year at the Royal College of Art. At this time, Bowling developed a deep fascination with the material properties of paint itself – its fluidity and viscosity, transparency and opacity – and its expressive potential. Influenced by Goyaesque figures and the visceral intensity of Francis Bacon, he employed thick impasto brushstrokes to heighten the emotional force of his paintings.

Feeling constrained and marginalised within the conservative British art scene, Bowling travelled frequently to New York during the early and mid-1960s, meeting artists such as Franz Kline, Sam Gilliam, and Larry Rivers. In 1966, he relocated there permanently, seeking the freedom to explore colour, geometry, and the materiality of paint fostered by Abstract Expressionism and Colour Field painting.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, Bowling began incorporating ‘found’ imagery into his work, including the structure of his mother’s shop in Guyana, Bowling’s Variety Store, in *Beggar No. 5* (1962-63), and the outlines of the world’s continents in the Map paintings. By the early 1970s, he moved towards what he described as ‘pure abstraction’, exemplified by works such as *Sentinel* (1976). Taking inspiration from jazz musicians, Bowling improvised his poured paintings of the mid-1970s, embracing chance, rhythm, and movement.

Bowling returned to London in the mid 70s to take up teaching roles at art colleges, while continuing to sustain a transatlantic practice for decades, working between studios in London and New York. From the 1980s onwards, everyday materials – including household objects and flora – entered his work, as seen in *Tracey’s Bouquet* (2011), which incorporated a gift from the artist Tracey Emin directly onto the canvas. Over time, Bowling came to recognise that, often unconsciously, his paintings were imbued with “the light and dark of the Guyanese landscape.”

Now in his nineties, Bowling maintains an extraordinary artistic drive, working in his studio every day. As he has reflected, even when he is dreaming, “as long as my mind is turning over, it’s about painting.” The display will feature previously unseen works made by the artist in the past five years, including *Swan Upping* (2020) and *Yellow Map* (2025).

The Fitzwilliam Museum’s collections offer a rich context for understanding Bowling’s practice and influences. Works by artists such as Titian, Millais, and Constable – figures Bowling has cited as formative – will be displayed in nearby galleries, inviting visitors to draw connections across centuries of artistic exploration. Bowling’s painting *Potoraspray* (1980) will be placed next to *Now and Coming Time II (Olmec-Maya and Now)* (1985), a work by his contemporary and friend, the fellow Guyanese artist Aubrey Williams in the Museum’s permanent collection galleries that was acquired by Bowling for the Fitzwilliam.

Frank Bowling said, “It is a great pleasure to have my work shown at the Fitzwilliam Museum. Cambridge has long been a place of inquiry and reflection, and I am delighted to be part of that tradition”.

Frank Bowling: Seeking the Sublime is curated by Habda Rashid, Senior Curator Modern & Contemporary Art at the Fitzwilliam Museum, and art critic Martin Gayford in collaboration with the Frank Bowling studio.

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Notes to Editors

Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

Open Tuesday–Saturday, 10am–5pm, Sunday and Bank Holidays 12–5pm

Frank Bowling: Seeking the Sublime is on view in Gallery 10, 27 March 2026 – 17 January 2027

This display is free to visit and there's no need to book

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About Frank Bowling

Born in Guyana (then British Guiana) in 1934, Sir Frank Bowling OBE RA arrived in London in 1953, graduating from the Royal College of Art with the silver medal for painting in 1962. By the early 1960s, he was recognised as an original force in London’s art scene with a style combining figurative, symbolic and collaged elements. After moving to New York in 1966, Bowling committed to modernism through a conscious turn to abstraction. An increasing focus on material, process and colour is evident in Bowling’s ‘Map’, ‘Pour’ and ‘Zipper’ paintings. In 2005, Bowling was elected as a Royal Academician. He received a Knighthood in 2020 and

was awarded the Wolfgang Hahn Prize in 2022. Bowling's work is represented in over fifty public collections worldwide. Recent significant solo presentations include the touring exhibition *Mappa Mundi*, curated by Okwui Enwezor (2017-19), a major retrospective at Tate Britain (2019) and Frank Bowling's *Americas* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (2022-3), which travelled to San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Today, Bowling's mastery of the painted medium and explorations of light, colour, and geometry incorporate the use of ammonia and multilayered washes. His restless reinvention of the painted plane endures in his current bodies of work which continue to break new ground through his use of thick impasto textures, acrylic gels, collage, stitched canvas and metallic and pearlescent pigments. Bowling works every day in his South London studio, forever driven by his fascination with exploring the vast and radiant possibilities of paint.

About the Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum is home to one of the world's most remarkable university art collections. We care for works of art and material culture primarily from Europe, North Africa and Asia that connect people across cultures and time. Since 1816 we've been a place for learning and discovery. Today, we use art, objects, spaces and experiences to inspire curiosity, reflection and creativity – opening up the past to transform our futures. As an internationally recognised centre for research and conservation, we work with partners across the world to explore how collections can be better understood, cared for and shared.

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