

Frank Bowling, Tate Britain, review: how did we miss this master for so long?

Alastair Sooke, 31 May 2019



Frank Bowling, *Great Thames II*, 1989

Don't bother lingering in the early stages of Frank Bowling's new retrospective at Tate Britain: many of his busy, brightly coloured paintings – made a decade after he moved to London in 1953, aged 19, from Guyana (then British Guiana) – suggest indecision, as he responded, often in the same hodgepodge composition, to various modish influences, from Francis Bacon to hard-edged abstraction to Pop.

Rather, head straight for the artist's ravishing Map paintings, which he started producing after relocating to New York in 1966. Together, they constitute, surely, the room of the season. Here are 10 vast canvases, up to 23ft long, as grand and impactful as anything by the Colour Field painters Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman (whom Bowling namechecks, in one title). Characterised by blazing hues, as well as subtler, mother-of-pearl sheens, they are overlaid with stencils of southern-hemisphere landmasses, chiefly the continents of South America and Africa.

The pick-and-mix tendency of Bowling's earlier work has disappeared. In its place is a new self-confidence, an autonomy, which feels both of its moment (the cosmic perspective was surely influenced by Nasa's space-age photography) and completely contemporary. This is what it looks like when an artist hits the sweet spot.

Consider *Bartica* (1967) – Bartica is the town where Bowling

was born, the son of a policeman and a milliner, in 1934 – which is reproduced on the cover of the catalogue. Two ghostly outlines of Africa float against a dreamy, translucent background of washes and stains of liquid paint, all purples and blues. Along the top edge, a band of green hints at land discovered after an arduous sea voyage. From the bottom, incandescent streaks of neon pink thrust upwards, animating the entire composition.

What are these radiant, mysterious forms? An aircraft's vapour trails? High, wispy cirrus clouds illuminated by the setting sun? Bowling – who once had ambitions as a poet – would never be so literal. Rather, there is something richly suggestive about this soaring, transcendent work, which distils the condition of globalisation, and rockets us into an empyrean, stratospheric realm of inspiration and the imagination, high above mundane reality.

Of course, Bowling, who studied alongside David Hockney at the Royal College, wasn't the first artist to be fascinated by maps – a few years earlier, Jasper Johns had started his own of North America. But he did break ground by challenging the conventions of Western cartography, to evoke a new postcolonial world order. And his sensuous manipulation of colour – often spraying paint, so that it has a hazy, vaporous quality, like a fine, sugary mist – proves delicious and compelling.

Bowling followed his Maps, in the Seventies, with a series of equally resplendent, now wholly abstract, "poured" paintings, for which he used a tilting platform that caused acrylic paint to slip-slide down his canvases, as if by chance.

Some see, in these cascades of luminous colour, melting ice cream. To me, they have the aspect of sublime, wondrous rock faces: Ansel Adams's breathtaking visions of Yosemite given a magical, carnivalesque makeover.

In the Eighties, Bowling – a natural-born innovator – changed tack once again, as he began experimenting with acrylic foam and gel, slathering his surfaces with dense, sticky textures. Now, his ambitious paintings have a sludgy, gloopy quality: we have plummeted from the lustrous sky of the Maps and crash-landed in a mangrove swamp – or, in the case of Bowling's Great Thames series (made shortly before Michael Andrews's late Thames paintings), a silty, sun-dappled riverbed.

In truth, I find all the shiny, pearlescent gel slightly repellent and dated – to me, it feels as Eighties as bouffant hair and shoulder pads – but, in the show's second half, there are still several substantial hits, including, gloriously, *Wafting* (2018), which incorporates slash-like swatches of polka-dotted fabric.

Bowling's weakness is, perhaps, that he is too interested in process, mark-making, and technique (hence his reputation as a painter's painter). Often, in the hope that something will stick, he throws at his canvases everything but the kitchen sink – even buckets, which leave behind circular imprinted traces, like memories of full moons. Bowling's alchemy can't always fuse together all these disparate elements: beside the fluid poured paintings, *At Swim Two Manatee* (1977-78), for instance, feels awkward and clogged.

But, for other artists, this "weakness" of ceaseless experimentation (stitching and stapling together canvases, embellishing surfaces with feathers and fluorescent chalk) would be a strength. Which serves to remind us how staggering it is, reprehensible even, that this is the first major retrospective for Bowling, who is now 85.

Leaving aside the obvious – cruelly, his skin colour counted against him, especially earlier in his career – how did we miss him for so long? This is an astonishing retrospective, ranging across entire continents of abstract colour.