

All things bright and beautiful: Frank Bowling at Tate Britain review

Nancy Durrant, 31 May 2019



Frank Bowling, *South America Squared*, 1967

A retrospective of the work of the painter Frank Bowling at Tate Britain is long overdue.

Considering he is 85 years old, this new Tate Britain exhibition — the first large-scale retrospective for Frank Bowling, the abstract painter — is long overdue. And looking at these big, bright and often beautiful paintings, you do wonder why you haven't seen much of him before. As the artist Sonia Boyce asks in her fascinating personal essay for the exhibition catalogue, remembering her time at art school: "Why was Bowling not on the list of canonical artists to be revered and studied?"

One reason may be that after studying at the Royal College of Art (RCA) from 1959 to 1962 (he had arrived from British Guiana, now Guyana, in 1953, aged 19) alongside David Hockney, Derek Boshier, RB Kitaj and the like, in 1966 he upped sticks to move to New York for a decade. Another reason may be, as Bowling himself knew perfectly well and pointed out in a series of essays on the subject of "black art", that critics' judgments "tend to stress the political over the aesthetic" — to be limited by their preconceptions of what an artist ought to be making work about. If there is one thing that bothers Bowling, who is still painting like a boss at his London studio (as the final room of energetic canvases in this exhibition attests), it is being pigeonholed as a black artist. The curators of this show are at pains not to make that mistake.

The effort is absolutely right and proper because, although his Guyanese heritage seeps into his early work in the form of overpainted, screen-printed photographs of his family and of his mother's house

and general store in New Amsterdam, in his 1960s work, and in the form of the outline of South America or Guyana in his series of Map paintings moving into the 1970s, it becomes rapidly irrelevant. Soon he pushes himself and his work farther into the realm of abstraction — a space in which he has played ever since. Bowling's painting is all about painting. It is about colour, texture, composition, form, space, depth, fluidity. And, at its best, it's beautiful.

Nine rooms (finally, Tate seems to be coming round to the idea that its standard 14-room show is too much of a good thing) tread a chronological path through Bowling's career, starting with early works from the period just after his graduation from the RCA. Through these you can clearly see him grappling with the many different forms of abstraction, while also clinging to figuration, with particular influence of Francis Bacon (*Birthday*, 1962, is a very clear example of this, though imbued with a sense of empathy for the woman giving birth, rather than being an expression of the violence of the process). The figures — and any kind of intentionally recognisable objects — don't last long though and, by the fourth room (and soon after he arrived in New York, the home of abstract expressionism), they have faded from his canvases, never to return.

Not that he gets stuck in any kind of rut. Bowling is a relentless experimenter and, once he gets his teeth into it, it becomes a real joy to see his delight in trying new techniques. He spent much of the 1970s pouring paint on to his canvases from a height to enable a looser, more spontaneous structure, while still exploring the possibilities of colour. He began to embrace accidents and the element of chance (and still does — "When Frank gets a surprise, he just runs with it," says his long-time assistant Spencer Richards), such as the imprint of

a bucket left on a drying canvas. He also became excited by texture, adding chunks of acrylic foam to his canvases and letting them slide around until they adhered, manipulated by the weight and viscosity of the paint.

Bowling also began to enjoy the unexpected effects his paintings had on the viewer. He welcomed the interpretations and responses, though they had nothing to do with his own intentions, which were entirely formal. It is nice to know this because it frees the viewer to allow their imagination run with what could otherwise be rather opaque images. Three bright pink paintings made between 1978 and 1980, *Bartica Bressary*, *Mazarunitankfeat* and *Devil's Sole*, hung together like a triptych, resemble a hazy, brilliantly coloured impressionist garden. *Moby Dick*, painted in 1981, couldn't be more like an underwater scene; *Ah Susan Woosh* and *Vitacress* evoke aerial views of a tropical coastline or the edge of a desert; *Traingone (Mahaicony Abary)*, from 1996, looks very much as if you are observing the edge of a woodland, perhaps from a river.

Probably the closest Bowling's later paintings come to depicting anything are four 1989 canvases made in his east London studio, near the Thames, and shown together in a room titled "Water and Light". They were inspired, we are told, by English landscape painting (he is a great admirer of Turner, Constable and Gainsborough) and capture the play of light on water, combined with his memories of the light and haze of Guyana. Overall, however, you are free to see and feel what you want — it is down to you and he doesn't mind a bit. It's just nice to be given the opportunity; it's about time.