

ART REVIEW

# A Trans-Atlantic Artist, Recognized at Home, at Last

An exhibition at Tate Britain suggests the breadth of the painter Frank Bowling's career, which has spanned half a century, and an ocean.

By Jason Farago

July 10, 2019

LONDON — It's been a long road, in one sense, for the painter Frank Bowling, who has netted his first major retrospective in Britain after a half-century at work. In another, he has walked one of the shortest roads of all.

Mr. Bowling, born in Guyana 85 years ago, has lived for more than five decades in the London district of Pimlico, and he always came back to the Thames-side neighborhood even after setting up a studio in New York. For a while, he also worked from a studio behind the Tate Gallery, and learned by heart its collection of British landscapes and society portraits.

Now, that museum (renamed Tate Britain in 2000, after Tate Modern opened) has given over its galleries to Mr. Bowling's abstract paintings, some runny and mucky, others alive with lambent color. For all the show's momentousness, it's too small and narrow to assess his Atlantic-spanning career — and a bit too eager to inscribe Mr. Bowling into a British practice of low-risk, landscape-fixated, not-quite-abstraction.

Certainly this show is less globally engaged than the survey of Mr. Bowling's work that opened at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2017, which was organized by Okwui Enwezor, the museum's former director, who died in March.

Yet the 59 paintings at Tate Britain, the oldest from 1962 and the newest completed last year, do suggest the breadth of Mr. Bowling's career and its gyrations of style and orientation.

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Ten of Mr. Bowling's renowned "map paintings," painted in New York in the late 1960s, are presented at Tate Britain. Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Tate Photography; Matt Greenwood

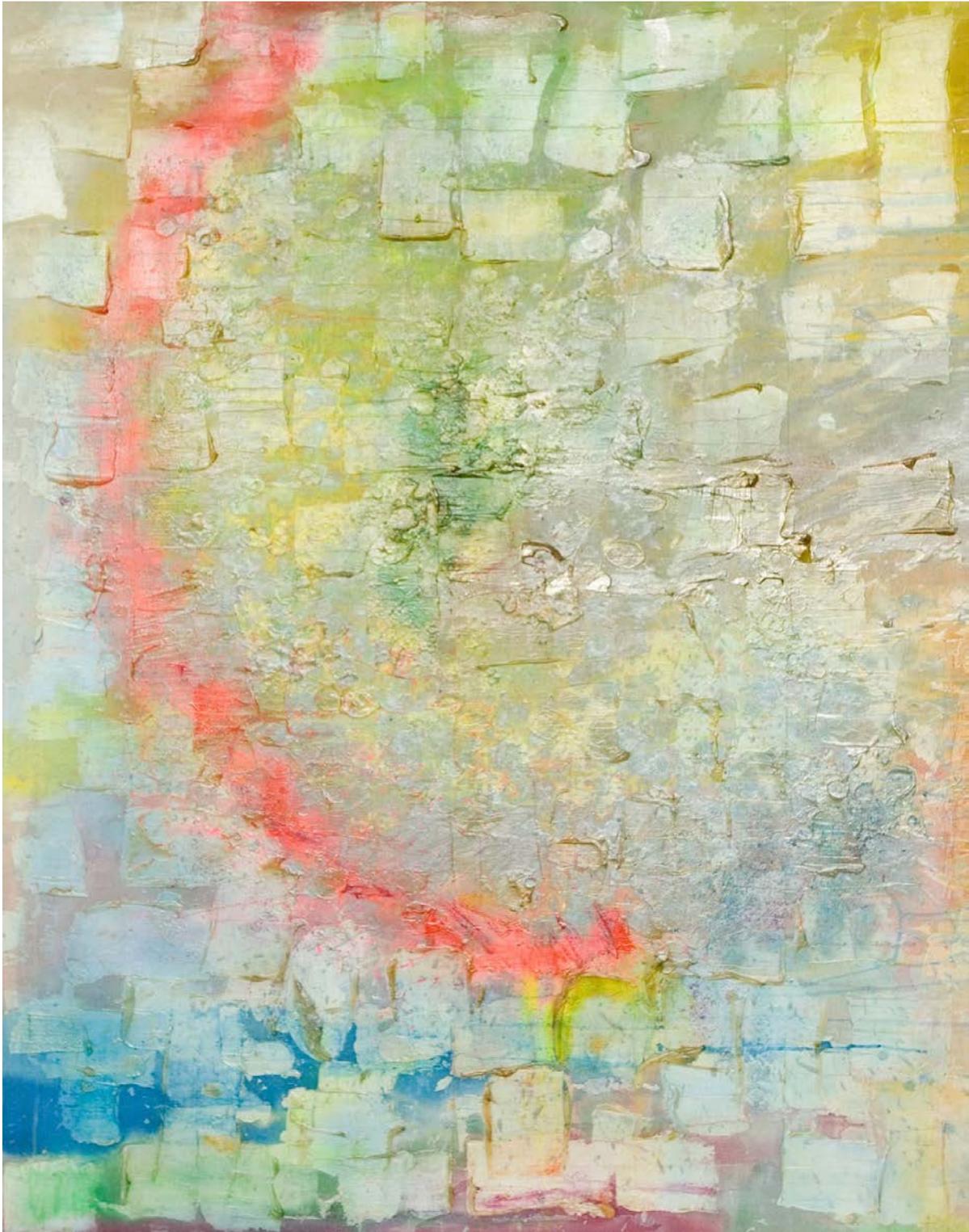
It is worth seeing merely for the climactic gallery of 10 of his renowned "map paintings": washy, absorbing color-field abstractions overlaid with stencils of the continents, painted in New York in the late 1960s. The map paintings are late-modernist masterpieces, and represent a major missing link in the story of postwar art — roiling, epic works scarred by the history of three continents.

Mr. Bowling was born in Bartica, a riverside town in what was then the colony of British Guiana, on the South American mainland, but culturally part of the Caribbean. At age 19, he traveled via Trinidad and Martinique to Britain, arriving just as the country was experiencing a surge of immigration from the West Indies.

Mr. Bowling immediately knew that London was his home. He studied English, joined the Royal Air Force, worked as a model and enrolled at the Royal College of Art, where his fellow students included David Hockney and R.B. Kitaj.

This show's unexpected first gallery includes some of Mr. Bowling's early, syncretic experiments. Figures with contorted heads, rendered in thick swabs of gray and black paint, display the heavy influence of Francis Bacon on the young artist. Yet these tortured men

float against hot rainbow-colored backgrounds that recall the first days of Pop — a style that arose first in London in the 1950s, long before its American heyday.



Mr. Bowling's "Sacha Jason Guyana Dreams" from 1989.  
Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London

These promising but confused early paintings offer some context for Mr. Bowling's decision to cross the Atlantic again in 1966, looking for, in his words, "that American thing." London may have been swinging, but New York offered a chance to reinvent himself.

He moved into the Chelsea Hotel, absorbed the color field painting then in fashion as well as the earlier example of Barnett Newman, and began making stained, watery, all-over abstractions without evident brushwork.

One day in 1967, spontaneously tracing a shadow cast by his studio window, he found that it resolved into the shape of South America. He'd stumbled upon a compositional tool, and began using a lantern projector to trace onto the canvas outlines of the continents — as well as Guyana, which had won its independence in 1966.

The resultant map paintings hit you here with the force of a thunderclap. The richly colored, soft-edged abstractions can be woozy and disorienting, as in "Raining Down South" (1968), a predominantly pink painting with cloudy, gray underdrawings that could be South America or Africa.





Mr. Bowling's "map paintings" are roiling, epic works scarred by the history of three continents.  
Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Tate Photography; Matt Greenwood

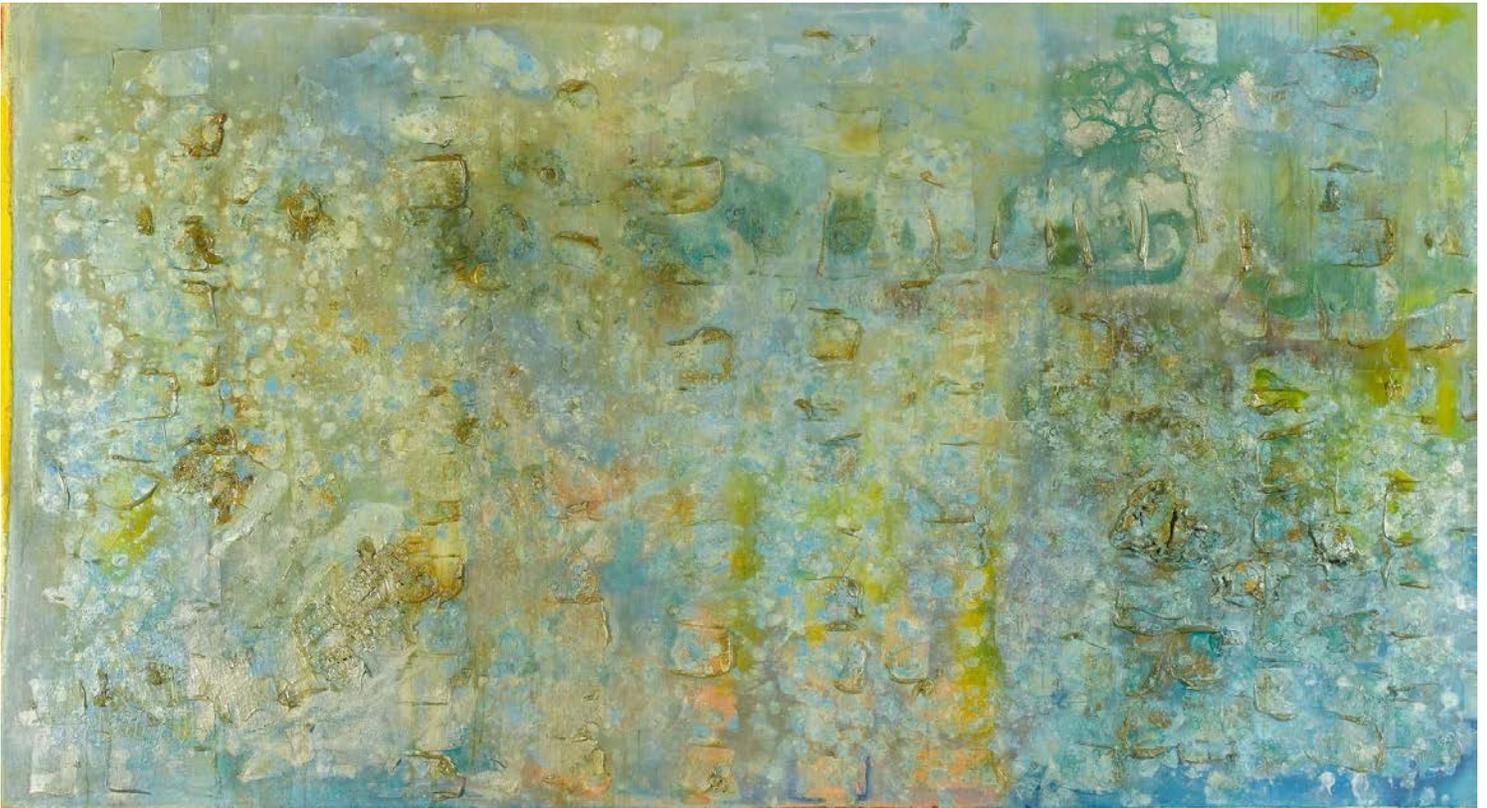
Or they can be boldly assertive: You'll have to stand back to take in the full somatic force of "Penumbra" (1970), nearly 23 feet across, in which halos of North America and the Eurasian landmass glow in a spray-painted field of violet, navy and hunter green.

The maps never predominate these heroic abstractions, and often appear in muddled, indistinct outlines. In "Mel Edwards Decides," painted in 1968 and named after the great African-American sculptor, cloudy outlines of South America stutter across the center of the yellow canvas, while Guyana appears three times in three different orientations.

These maps are not representational in any proper sense, but serve instead to structure and syncopate Mr. Bowling's washes of color across immense painterly acreage. Yet the continents are hardly any old shapes. The southern hemisphere predominates — South America, Africa and Australia — and the sometimes flopped orientations map a new, fuller modernism in which Europe need not sit at the center.

Mr. Bowling is also a writer: a pugnacious one. While making the map paintings, he served as a contributing editor of *Arts Magazine*, and inveighed in a yearslong debate among black artists whose work foregrounded their racial identity and those, like Mr. Bowling, who insisted on a formal freedom independent of race. (That debate lies at the heart of the exhibition "Soul of a Nation," first seen at Tate Modern and now on view at the Broad in Los Angeles; the show includes two of Mr. Bowling's paintings.)

Mr. Bowling had no time for what he dismissed as "Black Art," by which he meant art with thematic imagery and clear political intent. Rather, he advocated for painting and sculpture whose formal innovations were enhanced by a black artist's lived experience, but which always exceeded discourses of ethnicity or persona.



Mr. Bowling's "Great Thames IV" from 1989.  
Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London

Blackness, for Mr. Bowling, was inherently trans-Atlantic. It was therefore modern, and required a modernist articulation — one that he found in the art of his colleagues Jack Whitten, Al Loving and William T. Williams, and to which the map paintings also aspire. As he wrote in an article from 1969: “What informs black artists’ works is the black experience, which is global.”

That modernist claim to universality could account for his decision to step back from the map paintings in the early 1970s. The results were iffy at first. He started making kludgy abstract works by pouring paint down an inclined platform, which exhibit far less command and sophistication. Marbled abstractions of the early 1980s, with spatters of white, gold and rust, are pretty at first glance, but unrewardingly dainty at second.

By the late 1980s, Mr. Bowling was bulking up the surface of his paintings with acrylic gel, foam or beeswax. A painting like “Great Thames IV” (1989), for instance, captures the light on London’s river through spumes of teal and mossy green, built up with squares of acrylic.

It’s a handsome but conservative painting, unbothered by conceptualist challenges to the medium, offering the eyes too much and the mind too little. It fits quite comfortably into his neighborhood museum; at Tate Britain, these midcareer paintings fall right into place behind Turner, Constable and the Victorian landscape tradition.





Mr. Bowling's "Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton" from 2017.  
Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Hales Gallery

These excessively literal riffs on landscape can seem a world away from the commitments of the map paintings, which reach historical gravity through abstraction alone. But they are the work of the same artist, one radically committed to his own aesthetic freedom. You don't always get it right, but you don't give up; Mr. Bowling is still in the studio, and one of the newest paintings here reaffirms how color and form are enough to conjure a whole world in motion.

It's called "Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton," it dates from 2017, and it's thrilling. Purple and orange splotches explode like land mines against a backdrop of whispering gray. A fuchsia parabola whips from the top right corner down and back, transmuting as it descends into a gray scar.

Sewn across the canvas is a strip of multicolored fabric that divides the composition in two. It slashes across the painting like an equator: the line between continents that is always imaginary.

**Frank Bowling**

Through Aug. 26 at Tate Britain, London; [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk).

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