

Apocalyptic visions from a shunned giant of British art – Frank Bowling review

Tate Britain, London He is up there with Turner, Rothko and Pollock. This magnificent show, which swings from joyous foam-filled works to serious meditations about slavery, is long overdue

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Thu 30 May 2019 04.00 EDT

Why hasn't 85-year-old Frank Bowling been honoured with lots of big museum shows before now? Born in 1934, in what was then British Guiana, he studied at the Royal College of Art alongside David Hockney and Patrick Caulfield. Yet many of his 1960s paintings were so undervalued they have long since vanished, including a self-portrait as Othello. Bowling's neglect, however, is not just because he is black. It also has to do with the deeply unfashionable character of his painting for much of his career. His sin was to be an abstract expressionist in the wrong time and place.



Slave theme ... a detail from Middle Passage, 1970. Photograph: Courtesy the Artist/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017



Exuberant works ... Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit to & from Brighton, 2017. Photograph: Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2018

In Britain, abstract art is rarely the public's cup of tea. In 1966 Bowling moved to New York and his great paintings of the early 70s are completely American in vision: you'd think he went to college with Mark Rothko, not Hockney. But he took up abstract expressionism just as it was being repudiated by postmodernists who dismissed it as pompous, macho or even American imperialist. Bowling saw something else: its moral and intellectual strength, its potential for history painting.

Bowling's work *Penumbra* is a fine example. It is nearly seven metres wide and more than half of it has been swallowed by night. Out the velvety darkness the continent of Europe materialises, as if seen from space. Bowling painted this epic in 1970 when the Apollo moon landings were in full swing and images of the earth from space were becoming familiar. Yet the satellite of his mind's eye sees time as well as place. The yawning shadow that swallows up Africa and the Atlantic Ocean is the melancholy echo of slavery still scarring the modern world.

Middle Passage is the title of a similarly grand canvas, this one nearly three metres square. It makes that tragic theme explicit, referring to the journey across the Atlantic endured by Africans crammed in mostly English slaving ships in the 18th and early 19th centuries. How do you represent such suffering in art? Bowling does it with colour. Yellow, orange and red blaze over misty green. If these colours don't immediately conjure up the horrors of the slave trade, just

compare it to JMW Turner's 1840 masterpiece *Slave Ship: Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying*. Turner too shows a fiery red and gold sky over a sickly sea. Bowling has removed the sharks and corpses to tell history with colour alone.

These are great works of abstract art. Artists have been painting abstractions for a long time now - the first to do so was, arguably, Turner himself in late works that he exhibited without even trying to make their suggestive clouds of light look "like" anything. Yet abstract art comes in many varieties. It can be decorative and silly, like a Damien Hirst dot painting. Or it can be overwhelming in its seriousness, like Rothko's Seagram murals at Tate Modern. Bowling has pursued his own idea over a long and still creative life - the last room reveals exuberant works done in the last few years - and it is up there with the giants.



Glorious dapple of silvery blue ... *Great Thames IV*, 1988.
Photograph: Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

How incredible that in 1988 - when history books tell us the only important thing happening in British art was Hirst's *Young British Art* exhibition *Freeze* - Bowling, back in London, was painting a series of tremendous abstract canvases inspired by the Thames. In *Great Thames IV* (1988-9) the river is transfigured into a glorious dapple of silvery blue. But if this seems an optimistic vision of the urban Thames, step closer. The congealed surface is infested with the kinds of stuff you can pick up by the Thames: I swear I saw a used condom. Other objects include bracelets that might be 3,000 years old, or from Accessorize.

The glimmering surface of this riverine work is created, like many of Bowling's later paintings, using not just paint but acrylic gel and foam. Turner's ghost is still in the building: he was accused of throwing mustard and curry powder at his canvases. Maybe he too would have squeezed gel and foam everywhere if he'd had the chance. Bowling can be tremendously grave. But he is joyous, too. So many paintings here share the sheer fun and freedom of being in a studio with a big canvas and as many squeezable sloppy substances as you need, and no rules. Bowling is a true heir of Pollock's drip method. In a wondrous group of 1970s paintings that seem to subvert the political sobriety of his global maps, he cascades acrylic paint in gooey towers of melting colours that run lusciously into each other. They look like apocalyptic ice cream cones.



Subverting his sobriety ... Ziff, 1974. Photograph: Damian Griffiths/Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

Bowling uses colours that Rothko would never have dared to because they don't seem serious. Lurid violet and lime slide about in his 1974 painting Ziff. In later works, the plasticky addition of those gels heightens the disco glamour, yet meaning clogs the surfaces. Philoctetes Bow is a fire of rust in ocean depths. Go up close and you find real rope embedded in the matted colours. If colour is feeling, texture is truth. In the legend of the Trojan War, the Greek heroes abandoned Philoctetes because he had a rotten foot then tricked him out of his bow. This is an abstract history painting about war, theft and betrayal.

There is not a dull painting in this exhibition. Nor is there a stupid one. Bowling's art is sensual yet hefted with truth. It is a sea you can swim in with pure pleasure, until you see the shadow in the water.

At Tate Britain from 31 May to 26 August.