

Strange enigma of abstract artist Frank Bowling

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Artist Frank Bowling with Isabel Langtry at his Tate Britain exhibition on Thursday

WHO is Frank Bowling? Unless you are an art lover you are not likely to know. But he is now being compared to such household names as Turner, Rothko and Pollock.

But it is only this week that public recognition is pouring in as his first big retrospective is being held at Tate Britain – at a time when he is 85 and confined partly to a wheelchair.

Thus, a mystery – at least for me – hangs over a man who is unquestionably a great abstract painter but who has been in the shadows in Britain for decades, though he is more of a public artist in New York.

Shadows or not, the art world is beginning to evaluate his work – recently one of his paintings sold for £1million!

Isabel Langtry, principal of Hampstead School of Art, is in no doubt about his genius as a painter. Yet, when she rang me on Thursday to invite me to a preview of Frank Bowling's exhibition at Tate Britain I expected 50 or, maybe, 100 guests. Imagine my surprise as nearly 1,000 people turned up including

family, artists, friends who had flown in from New York – all complete with a jazz band, and lots of men with arty hairstyles, some in party jump suits decorated with exotic motifs. There were so many guests it was difficult to move around the halls, with their enormous canvases, some 15 or 20-ft long, carrying stunning colours, some layered and sculptured with odd materials that makes him stand out as one of Britain's great artists.

I confess I have never been drawn to the abstract world but this exhibition drew me into.

Why has he been undervalued? Because he is black? It's possible. He was not made a member of the Royal Academy until 2005 – 20 or 30 years after he was feted in New York.



Sue and Jonathan Hitchin with the painting bought for her 60th birthday

He was born in British Guiana, now Guyana, in 1934 where his mother ran a shop and being religious used to feed starving beggars but only after Frank was made to wash their feet while his father used to beat the “devil” out of him. If he is a “special” artist, is this because he was born with a caul (a membrane) which, according to African folklore, says the child will be possessed with visions? All this is narrated by him in a film accompanying the show.

Like many Afro-Caribbeans he came to these shores, studied at the Royal College of Art in the early 1960s and later moved to New York where he worked with several black artists – and all this at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the emergence of the Black Panthers and Malcom X.

A thinking artist, he wrote about art in US magazines – and kept on asking: What is art?

Hence, the constant experiments among which are “map” works showing Latin America – and making reference to the assassination of Congo's liberation leader, Patrice Lumumba.

Though he is still working in his east London studio his wife apologised and said he was “too tired” to talk to me as the week had taken its “toll” on him.

Even so, it is not difficult to judge a man by his actions – and the way he has helped the Hampstead School Art, which is singularly run as a cooperative, part founded by Henry Moore, gave me a sense of what makes him the man he is. The school has made him one of its patrons.

Always willing to help an art school that sets out to help the underprivileged, he has funded an annual bursary of £7,500 at the school for the past four years (see page 3) for a deserving pupil, as well as making a donation to the school of one his paintings which was bought for several thousand pounds by Jonathan Hitchin, a lawyer, for his wife’s 60th birthday. His wife Sue told me: “It is an acrylic painting named Yonder, part of what Frank calls his pour series where he pours paint onto his canvas.”

Did recognition in Britain elude him because he was black – or because he devoted himself to abstract expressionism at the wrong time? America opened its arms to him.

He doesn’t make a great play of being black.

But there is no doubt that apart from being a singular artist he is also a distinctively generous man who feels drawn to those who need help. Was this foretold by his mother as she looked at his caul at the time of his birth?

• ***The exhibition runs until August 26 at Tate Britain.***