

Frank Bowling at London's Tate Modern



Frank Bowling. Photo: Standard

Arts

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Now 85, the current exhibition at the UK's Tate Britain is Bowling's first major retrospective in a career that spans 60 years. It is preceded by a major museum exhibition titled, *Mappa Mundi*, drawing from the works he made from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. It was curated by Okwui Enwezor and Anna Schindler and has toured in Ireland and the United Arab Emirates.

Born in 1934 to Guyanese parents, the young Frank moved to London in 1953 where he served in the Royal Airforce and considered a career as a writer before turning to paint. He maintained studios in both England and the USA, taught university students in both countries and has since settled in the English capital. This retrospective at Tate Britain occupies 9 halls and is in a chronological order that charts his influences as a student at the Royal College of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, leading up to Bowling's recent works made in 2018.

Two is better than one as is proven in *Big Bird* 1964, the most visually interesting of the lot in Room 1 and in this nascent period of Bowling's visual language which was keen on combining abstraction and figuration. The big white bird is captured in mid-flight doing a gymnastic whirl. Its flapping wings are indicated by spreading whooshes that bring dramatic flair to the static and orderly in the multi-coloured square and rectangle blocks. Being a diptych, any physicality, flair or tension in one, is doubled.

In-Room 2, a silk-screened image of a provisions store belonging to Bowling's mother in Guyana is the subject of several paintings that combined autobiography and geometry. In *Cover Girl* 1966 and *Mother's House With Beware Of The Dog* 1966 – with some degree of colour harmony found in *My Guyana* 1966-7 – the image of the house occupies the top half of the painting while blocks of colours with prominent dividing lines take up the lower half. If both panels fit, it is not a flush. And any disharmony which makes the works look like two halves is multiplied when the lot of them are hung next to each other or when viewed in the exhibition catalogue.

of the artist's family emerges out of hazy yellows toned by reddish-orange in most of the painting and by olive green on the lower end.

The silk-screened images of Bowling's mother's house, in most cases, remains at odds with whatever it has beneath it whether it is the figure of a woman or the figure of a woman in a wheelchair or the lines of abstractions that look no more than colourful graphs. In later works like *Middle Passage* 1970, any personal narrative is foregrounded but unforced. This is even more resonant once one is informed that the figures in the image are Bowling's own children.

By the mid-1970s, Bowling appears to have let go of the cohesion he had fought hard to achieve. *Tony's Anvil* 1975 is bold and unpleasant. Squiggles of heavy orange, blue, black and yellow take on the cartoon impression of a decayed tooth or squashed, sickly ice cream. It is as though buckets of paint were simply poured on the canvas and left to settle where they may. *Ziff* 1974, made just a year before, is a similar image but less disinviting on account of the easy pleasure of whites and lilacs.

Bowling's incorporation of disparate found objects in the early 1980's started by accident when a set of keys, lost in an untended bucket of gel, is found sticking on a canvass. This inspired further experimentation with cardboard and egg boxes, glitter, foam and metallic pigments in *Sand Circle* 1983 and *Towards Crab Island* 1983. The most arresting is *Wintergreens* 1986 whose deepening shades of green is intensified by the composite of objects and loose grids held together with thick, slimy gel. It seems to live and breath, an undisturbed thicket in the nook of a forest.

In Bowling's recent works, he appears to recapitulate his older ideas which may signify exhaustion or perhaps, it is an attempt to see what new spin the advantage of time and distance could bring to them.

In *Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To and From Brighton* 2017, the different coloured blocks could have come from *Big Bird* 1964; the textured impressions could have been inspired by the bucket impressions of *Polish Rebecca* 1971; and the contrasting definition brought by the narrow length of fuschia pink in *Penumbra* 1970 is mirrored in the green on the borders of the one made in 2017.