

ART

## Historical Memory Haunts Frank Bowling's New Paintings

Now 84, the renowned abstract artist reflects on his Guyanese upbringing and the legacy of colonialism in a striking new series of paintings.

Zachary Small    October 1, 2018



Frank Bowling "Elder Sun Benjamin" (2018). Acrylic and mixed media on collaged canvas, 119.29h x 203.54w in (303h x 517w cm) (all images courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York; Hales Gallery, London. © 2018 Frank Bowling)

Frank Bowling spent his formative years criss-crossing between three continents and running into everyone from [David Hockney](#) to [Jasper Johns](#) and [Clement Greenberg](#). But long before joining this elite crowd of Anglo-American abstract expressionists and modernist myth-makers, he was simply a boy from New Amsterdam, a coastal city located on the northeastern edge of [Guyana](#) in South America. There, his father was a paymaster of the local police district, and his mother ran a small dressmaking and millinery shop, which she later expanded into a general store.

And although Bowling has called London home for the majority of his lifetime — he moved to England at 15 — something is pulling him, now 84, back to his old Guyanese neighborhood. In a [recent series of paintings](#) currently on view at [Alexander Grey Associates](#) in Chelsea called [Frank Bowling: Make it New](#), the artist mixes lyrical abstraction with elements of personal history and memory. The bold, bright color fields of these works signpost the artist's position within a rapidly changing world just starting to grapple with the socio-economic legacy of colonialism.

As a Black artist born in a South American British colony, Bowling uses painting to investigate how state borders can shape an individual's identity. After all, he was an expat living in New York when he began writing about the emergence of the [Black Arts Movement](#) of the late sixties and early seventies for the now-defunct [Arts Magazine](#). Contemporaneously, Bowling was exploring the shape of sovereignty in his "Map Paintings," arguably his greatest contribution to the modernist canon, which debuted at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971. Bowling's transnational image of modernism allowed him to center the Black experience within a visual language that often ignored — or otherwise whitewashed — its existence from the historical record.



Frank Bowling, "Nesting" (2017). Acrylic on collaged canvas, 35.39h x 34.29w in (89.90h x 87.10w cm)

Perhaps this is why he traces the outline of continents like Australia and North America in his "Map Paintings" with flag colors typically associated with the African diaspora: yellows, reds, and greens.

"Historical memory is hardly ever erased," Bowling once said in an [interview](#). Although many abstract expressionists used modernism as a new beginning, Bowling was intent on capturing the lineage of its idiom. Initially, though, he was apprehensive about pursuing abstraction because it was a tradition that had often excluded Black artists. As Bowling recalls, Clement Greenberg was ultimately the person who convinced him to pursue his passion. "In America, there is no no-go area for anybody," Bowling once [recalled](#) the king-making art critic telling him.



Installation view of Frank Bowling: *Make It New* featuring "Drift I" and "Drift II" (2017)

Icons of personal history dance through Bowling's new paintings. He has always been a rule-based practitioner, but what makes the longevity of this artist's career so interesting is his ability to constantly push the boundaries of his own framework. Paint is never simply pigment. Bowling mixes it with gel, water, and pearlescent in what his long-time assistant Spencer Richards calls a "James Bond martini." He layers colors sequentially onto the canvas, which he then lifts vertically so that paint drips down the surface and onto the floor. This process is most evident in the artist's "Drift" (2017) paintings, which line the galleries first few walls. There's a clear joy for the craft here. The marbled smears of paint that run down the

canvases overtake the regimented rectangles of bold colors behind them. Any chunky glops of pigment that remain on the smudge are exalted, glorified by a gold-tinged outline that almost feels like a reference back to the faint boundaries of the "Map Paintings."



Frank Bowling, "Regatta" (2017). Acrylic on collaged canvas, 58.27h x 73.31w in (148h x 186.20w cm)

What strikes me about Bowling's latest works is how he cradles imperfection. If Jackson Pollock introduced detritus (and even squashed flies) to the canvas picture-plane, then Bowling has sorted through the trash in an organized fashion. Works like "Regatta" (2017) feature one line of crumpled green gum-like polygons that split an otherwise serenely colored canvas. One grey squiggle sneaks up from the painting's bottom. Hints of red upside-down graffiti hover behind the green mystery mounds. (This is a running motif through the artist's new work. It's also seen in another similarly-hued painting, called "Anne & Frank" [2017].) Another notable pattern

seen in “Regatta” is Bowling’s idiosyncratic sewing of the canvas to its frame. Here, as with most paintings seen in this exhibition, Bowling stitches the canvas together on the very edges of its border, creating an artificial frame.

Through the destruction of the natural picture-plane, Bowling allows himself to reconstitute new boundaries of creativity. This strategy is clear in “Elder Sun Benjamin” (2018) wherein the artist divides the canvas into thirds with two strips of patterned cloth. Bowling is a very careful artist, meticulous about whatever materials appear on the surface of his paintings. The exhibition’s catalogue mentions how the artist’s grandson returned from Zambia with silks that Bowling would later incorporate into his new paintings — but these fabrics were actually made in China or Malaysia. Their inclusion conceals a compound meaning; it’s an obvious reference to the artist’s grandson, but a more subtle gesture to Bowling’s dressmaking mother. Emblematic of a globalized political economy, the fabric also points to how the fashion market obscures international state boundaries and theories of identity.

The culmination of a life’s work, Bowling’s new paintings testify to the melding of memories; they calcify an understanding of how interconnected personal history, materiality, and international politics combine into a better understanding of one’s place in the world, and one’s ability to make sense of it all.



Frank Bowling, “Hothead” (2016). Acrylic on collaged canvas, 24.61h x 27.68w in (62.50h x 70.30w cm)



Installation view of *Frank Bowling: Make It New*

Frank Bowling:  
Make it  
New continues  
through October 13  
at Alexander Gray  
Associates (510 West  
26 Street, Chelsea,  
Manhattan).