

Six Decades of Color: First Major Retrospective of Frank Bowling Opens at Tate Britain in London

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Jun 1, 2019 • 7:58 am



FROM ONE DECADE TO THE NEXT, one can never guess where **Frank Bowling** will take his painting. Where ever he goes, somehow it always looks like Bowling. Whether he is sewing silkscreen images of his mother's house to canvases, stenciling silhouettes of Africa and South America against fields of color, or relying on gravity to propel a multi-hued pool of poured paint—color is foremost, experimentation is visible, and the pursuit of the new is ever-present.

Tate Britain is presenting the first major retrospective of Bowling, 85. The London exhibition spans his six-decade career and is the first to consider the full scope of his practice.

Early 1960s figurative works that invoke elements of pop and color field painting are featured with his iconic Map Paintings (1967-71), Poured Paintings (1973-78), textured works from the 1980s embedded with foam and everyday objects, 1990s works that further embrace and explore abstraction, and more recent collaborative paintings that build on Bowling's career-long commitment to experimentation and innovation.

Showcasing major series and rarely seen works, 59 paintings are on view dating from 1962 to 2018. The exhibition officially opened May 31.

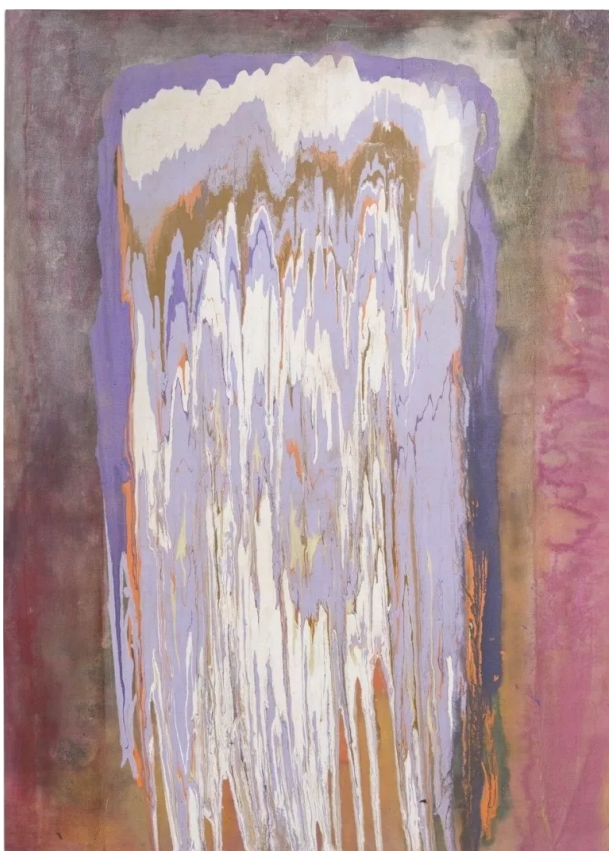
BORN IN BARTICA, GUYANA, Bowling grew up in New Amsterdam, one of the largest cities in the South American nation. He arrived in London in 1953 when he was 19 and served in the Royal Air Force before graduating from the Royal College of Art (1962).

Bowling moved to New York in 1966, where he made a transition from figuration to abstraction. From the mid-1970s to 1990, Bowling was based in London. Since then, he has split his time between studios in London and Brooklyn, N.Y.

"In my youth I tended to look at the tragic side of human behavior and try and reflect that in my work, but gradually as I became more involved in the making of paintings, I realized that one of the main ingredients in making paintings was color and geometry. And I found that this was the place that I felt the most comfortable. I have been going along that track ever since," Bowling said in a [Tate interview](#).

"At about the time that I left to go and live in New York, the concerns with color deepened, and in New York I found ways of proceeding to deepen my investigations in that area. And what I found in New York made me feel that this was a place where the energy and the drive was."

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FRANK BOWLING, "Ziff," 1974 (acrylic paint on canvas, 2010 x 1460 x 50 mm). | Private collection, London, courtesy of Jessica McCormack. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

BOWLING WAS THE FIRST black artist elected to the [Royal Academy of Arts](#) (2005). When the Tate purchased Bowling's "[Spread Out Ron Kitaj](#)" (1984-86) in 1987, it was the museum's first acquisition by a living black British artist. Now the Tate has [four of his paintings](#) in its collection (all of them featured in the retrospective), including "[Mirror](#)" (1964-6), which Tate curator Elena Crippa, who organized the retrospective, calls Bowling's early masterpiece.

Bowling has exhibited widely in New York, London and around the world, where his work is represented in public and private collections. He has had numerous gallery shows and participated in important group shows, including the 1971 Whitney Biennial and "Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes" at the [2003 Venice Biennale](#).

Key museum exhibitions include "[Mappa Mundi](#)" (2017-18) organized by Okwui Enwezor at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany. The show traveled to the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin, and the Sharjah Art Foundation in the United Arab Emirates. "[Frank Bowling: Map Paintings](#)" was on view at the Dallas Museum of Art (2015). He's also had solo shows at the Royal Academy of Arts in London (2011) and Serpentine Gallery in London (1986).

A full retrospective, however, had eluded Bowling until the current Tate Britain show was announced last year.

"Why hasn't 85-year-old Frank Bowling been honoured with lots of big museum shows before now?" Jonathan Jones asks in his review of the retrospective [in The Guardian](#). "...Bowling's neglect...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."

Jones continues: "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."

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— Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian*



Installation view of "Frank Bowling, Tate Britain, London, May 31-Aug. 26, 2019. Shown, from left, "Dog Daze" (1971), "Bartica" (1968-69), and "Raining Down South" (1968). | Photo by Matt Greenwood, Courtesy Tate Britain

A COMPREHENSIVE CATALOG has been published to accompany the retrospective. Fully illustrated, the volume includes a pair of essays by Crippa, who edited the catalog, along with contributions by British artist Sonia Boyce, a professor Middlesex University and the University of the Arts London; Courtney J. Martin, the former deputy director and chief curator of the Dia Art Foundation, who was recently appointed director of the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Conn.; and Chris Stephens, director of the Holburne Museum in Bath, who led the early organization of the retrospective when he served as curator of modern British art at Tate Britain, among others.

Seven essays explore Bowling's fascinating practice, expansive oeuvre, and multifaceted biography—an artist born in Guyana with roots firmly planted in specific histories of the art scenes in New York and London.

Martin considers Bowling's Map Paintings, his first mature series. She writes that his maps "situate his extensive career around three process concerns that can be reduced to a trio of word-concepts: social, material and otherness." Under this premise, "social" refers to the Bowling's longstanding connections with British and American artists and art styles. "Material" means both the ideas the fuel the works and the physical paint with which they are made. The term "otherness" also takes on a double meaning.

"Bowling used and reused a silkscreen of his family home in Guyana in a number of paintings. Later, he would add relief (tape, sutured canvas and debris) to the flat media of stencilling, screenprinting and tracing," Martin writes.

"These additive features gave his canvases multiple layers of colour, shape and—most useful to Bowling—meaning. Bowling calls this meaning 'otherness', a term that applies equally to the compositional devices and to their results on the surface of his canvases."

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— Courtney J. Martin, Yale Center for British Art

MATTHEW COLLINGS, a British artist and critic, writes about Bowling in the studio. He details his additive and collage techniques and how objects such as his wife's keys and his stepdaughter's plastic bangle bracelets found their way into paintings. Collings also explains some of Bowling's many titles referencing peers, family members, and the likes of John Coltrane and Toni Morrison.

With age now presenting physical challenges and limiting Bowling's mobility, his latest work is the result of collaboration, usually with his wife, Rachel Scott, a textile artist, or his longtime studio assistant, Spencer Richards, who is also from Guyana.

Under Bowling's direction, "...they deliver color to the canvas in the way he has done it for decades, by pouring and throwing, and occasionally using a brush," Collings writes. "Collaboration for Bowling is of a peculiarly joyous kind, compared to how it works for many artists today, in that almost anyone who steps into the studio might do it."

A New York Times reporter was tasked with applying blue paint to a canvas, according to Collings. The daughter of friends affixed letters and diary pages to "Witness" (2018). Bowling's London dealer and New York dealer collaborated on the painting, too, together dropping a bunch plastic spiders and Christmas cracker gifts into the gel covering the surface of the painting.

Collings emphasizes Bowling's positive temperament in the studio: "Something I've often heard him say, but which in my view tends to be missed in articles about him, is that he thinks you should have fun making art. He paints from a spirit of pleasure and experiment."

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— Matthew Collings, Artist/Critic



FRANK BOWLING, "Sacha Jason Guyana Dreams," 1989 (acrylic paint and resin on canvas, 1780 x 1360 mm). / Tate. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

ALEX FARQUHARSON, director of Tate Britain since 2015, wrote the foreword to the catalog. (In his official museum photo, he stands before Bowling's "Who's Afraid of Barney Newman," a map painting produced on a narrow canvas defined by vertical fields green, yellow, and red.) In the catalog, Farquharson outlines the arc of Bowling's career. He writes in part:

Since the early 1960s he has lived in Pimlico, near Tate Britain (then the Tate Gallery), and for several years also had a studio on Marsham Street immediately behind the museum. The Tate collection has been a constant source of inspiration; Turner, Constable, Blake and Caro being among those he has always admired. It is especially meaningful, then, for the artist and for us that his retrospective should be presented at Tate Britain.

It is sixty years since Bowling began studying painting at the Royal College of Art, where he joined what would become one of the most successful cohorts any British art school has had, among them Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty, David Hockney, Allen Jones, R.B. Kitaj and Peter Phillips; the generation who would become synonymous with British pop art.

Arriving in New York in the mid-1960s, Bowling met and befriended artists from different generations, including Larry Rivers, Jasper Johns, Melvin Edwards and Al Loving, as well as the towering critic of the day, Clement Greenberg, with whom he had a long correspondence. As a contributing editor for the Arts Magazine between 1969 and 1972, he played a leading role in debates around 'Black Art' and has been influential in championing the rights of artists to engage in any form of artistic expression, irrespective of their identity and background.

Despite early successes, with a few exceptions Bowling's work has not received the recognition it deserves. At Tate, we acquired our first work by the artist in 1987. In more recent years it has been joined by three further paintings, including his early masterpiece 'Mirror' (1964–6). (Two of the paintings, "Mirror" and "Who's Afraid of Barney Newman," among his more significant works, were donated by the artist and his family. The other two, the museum purchased.) In 2012–13 we presented a one-room exhibition of his poured paintings from the 1970s, curated by Courtney J. Martin (called 'Drop, Roll, Slide, Drip... Frank Bowling's Poured Paintings 1973–8'), and in 2017 Bowling was a key figure in 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power' at Tate Modern.

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— Alex Farquharson, Director of Tate Britain

It's a gracious overview that states recognition of Bowling has fallen short, without acknowledging any missed opportunities on the part of the museum. Bowling has been vocal about the oversight and open about wanting to get his just due at a major institution.

In 2012, Bowling [told the Guardian](#): “We’ve been trying—not just me personally, but my friends, to talk the Tate into giving me a retrospective. They say they can’t, because we can’t guarantee 80,000 pairs of feet crossing the threshold. My friends think they can; so this show is a sort of compromise.”

The London-based newspaper said it reached out to Tate and confirmed that there were no plans for a retrospective, but the museum pushed back on the theory that attracting a certain amount of visitors was at issue.

Two years later, Bowling reiterated the desire to be recognized with a full survey. “The big show I’m waiting for is a proper survey of my achievements in somewhere like the Tate,” the artist [told ArtSlant](#). “I feel this is an important step. My dealer feels the same way.”

Long overdue, Bowling’s proper survey has arrived at Tate Britain. The museum’s galleries have come alive with his masterful paintings, rich with color, autobiography, and distinguishing techniques. They’ll be on view through Aug. 26. **CT**

“Frank Bowling” is on view at Tate Britain in London, May 31-Aug. 26, 2019

“[Frank Bowling: More Land than Landscape](#)” (May 10-June 22, 2019), a show of new paintings at Hales Gallery in London coincides with the Tate retrospective.

IMAGES: Top of page, FRANK BOWLING, “South America Squared,” 1967 (acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 2430 x 2740 mm). I Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019; Top right, Frank Bowling in his London studio, April 2017. I Photo by Alastair Levy, Courtesy Tate Britain

BOOKSHELF

Widely distributed in September, “[Frank Bowling](#),” was published to accompany Frank Bowling’s career-spanning retrospective at Tate Britain and is available now directly from the [museum’s store](#). Authored by Zoé Whitley and illustrated by Hélène Baum, a new children’s book, “[Meet the Artist: Frank Bowling](#),” has also been published on the occasion of the retrospective. “[Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi](#)” documents the traveling exhibition organized by Okwui Enwezor at Haus der Kunst. In addition writings by Enwezor, contributors include curator Zoé Whitley and artist Lynette Yiadom Boakye. The fully illustrated volume also includes 21 letters dated 1973-1995, from critic Clement Greenberg to Bowling, correspondence initiated shortly after the artist’s Map Paintings debuted at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971. (They met in 1972 and the first letter is dated 1973.) Another publication, “[Frank Bowling](#)” by Mel Gooding, is described as the artist’s first comprehensive monograph.

Frank Bowling | Trailer



Trailer for “Frank Bowling” at Tate Britain. I Video by Tate



Installation view of "Frank Bowling, Tate Britain, London, May 31-Aug. 26, 2019. Shown, from left, "Yonder" (1976), "Trampoline" (1976), "Kaieteurtoo" (1975), "Ziff" (1974). | Photo by Matt Greenwood, Courtesy Tate Britain

Bowling's Early Masterpiece

Chris Stephens provides an in-depth discussion of "Mirror" in "Image in Revolt: Bowling in London 1959-66," his catalog essay. "Mirror 1964-6 is the masterpiece of the first phase of Frank Bowling's career (p.85), the culmination of his years of development in London and made just before he decamped to New York, where his art would change radically. It is a painting that encapsulates Bowling's situation in a variety of ways. The central motif is the spiral staircase that led from the painting school at the Royal College of Art (RCA), London, up towards the Victoria and Albert Museum above. It is a painting about transition and emergence from one world into another. Bowling himself appears twice: at the top of the stairs, he swings out into the void, his legs dangling down with anticipation, a vulnerable yet disruptive and challenging presence in what approximates a heavenly realm beyond the ceiling; and at the foot, a fragmentary, ghost-like figure, emerging into the quotidian world of contemporary art and design. In between is the figure of Paddy Kitchen, the wife from whom Bowling would soon be separated; the shadowy form of a chair in the bottom right-hand corner is a reference to an affair she had had previously with its designer, Charles Eames," he writes. "The painting seems to capture an idea of Bowling as repeatedly caught between personae, located in the interstices between alternative worlds: a child of the Commonwealth trying to make it in the capital of empire; an aspiring writer recast as a painter; an artist negotiating the territory between representation and abstraction, commitment and autonomy, London and New York; a confident and established figure, and yet one who seems only half there."

WATCH Frank Bowling talk [about his early masterpiece](#), the painting "Mirror" (1964-66)



FRANK BOWLING, "Cover Girl," 1966 (acrylic, oil paint, and silkscreened ink on canvas, 1448 x 1016 mm). / Private Collection. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

Mother's House

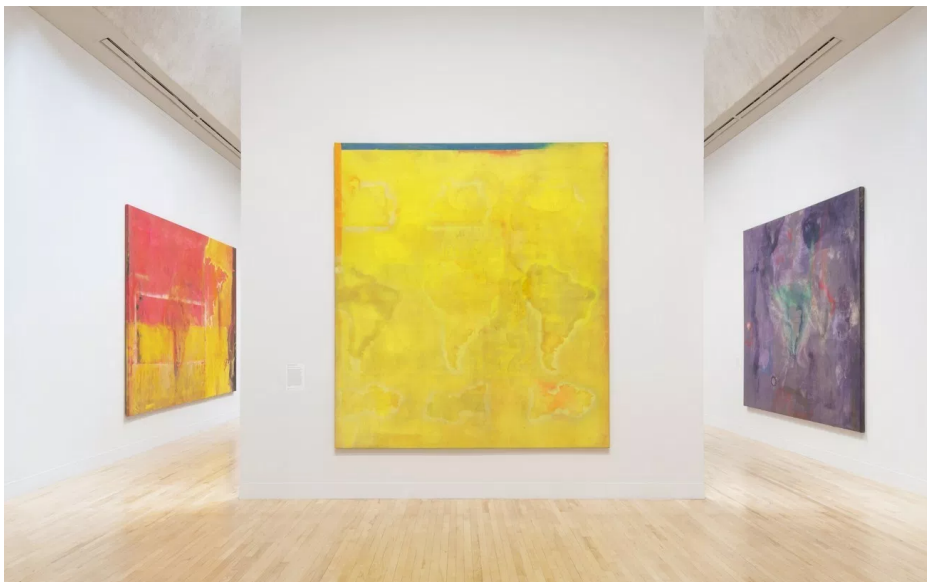
Bowling's father was an accountant and then a teacher before working for the police service in New Amsterdam, one of the largest cities in Guyana, where the artist grew up. Bowling has described him as uncommunicative, hardhearted, and violent, according to his annotated biography by Anna Schneider in the catalog for "[Mappa Mundi](#)." By contrast, his mother was an enterprising dressmaker. She opened a shop offering seamstress and dressmaking services, along with saris, hats, and dry goods. The family lived above the store. Screen printed images of Bowling's Variety Store appear in the artist's paintings dating from the 1960s. "Using the image of his mother's shop, Bowling produced a series of works which continued to explore the themes of post-colonial, post-familial displacement, balancing personal and global politics with an ongoing movement between and within different visual vocabularies," Chris Stephens observes in the exhibition catalog. Among the paintings in the retrospective, the image of his "mother's house" is incorporated in "Cover Girl" (1966), "Mother's House with Beware of the Dog" (1966), "My Guyana" (1966-67), "Mother's House Overprinted x 3" (1967), "Mother's House on South America" (1968), and "Middle Passage" (1970).

Cover Girl

"Cover Girl" is being exhibited in the UK for the first time since Bowling made it in 1966. In his catalog essay, Chris Stephens discusses the symbolism of Bowling's use of the image of his mother's house in the early figurative painting. "He first deployed one of these screenprints in Cover Girl 1966, in which the juxtaposition creates a theme of anxious contrast (p.86). The eponymous girl, with a fashionable Pierre Cardin dress and Vidal Sassoon haircut, is the Japanese model Hiroko Matsumoto, and her image was taken directly from the cover of the Observer magazine (see p.187). The new Sunday color supplements were as much a part of the vibrant London scene as Quant, Sassoon and pop art. Bowling, however, sets this embodiment of new youthful affluence against the backdrop of memories of his family home, beneath threatening clouds, and, perhaps, the fragmentation of the colours of the flag of the newly independent Guyana," Stephens writes. "In Cover Girl, then, we see an image that encapsulates the fashionable London in which Bowling was a disruptive presence, the idea of a newly independent nation that perhaps seemed unsettling to an absent child of the old British order, and, in the screenprint of his mother's shop, an emblem of home and of displacement, of an umbilical tie and irreparable separation."



FRANK BOWLING, "Barticaborn," 1967 (acrylic paint, spray paint, and oil wax on canvas, 2340 x 1224 mm). | Lowinger Family Collection

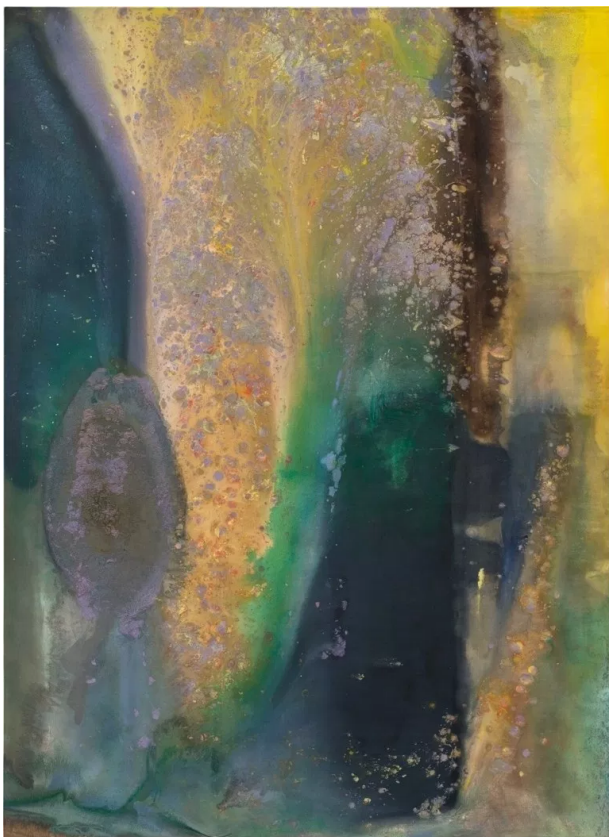


Installation view of "Frank Bowling, Tate Britain, London, May 31-Aug. 26, 2019. Shown, center, "Mel Edwards Decides" (1968), background, from left, "Dog Days" (1971) and "Polish Rebecca" (1971). | Photo by Matt Greenwood, Courtesy Tate Britain

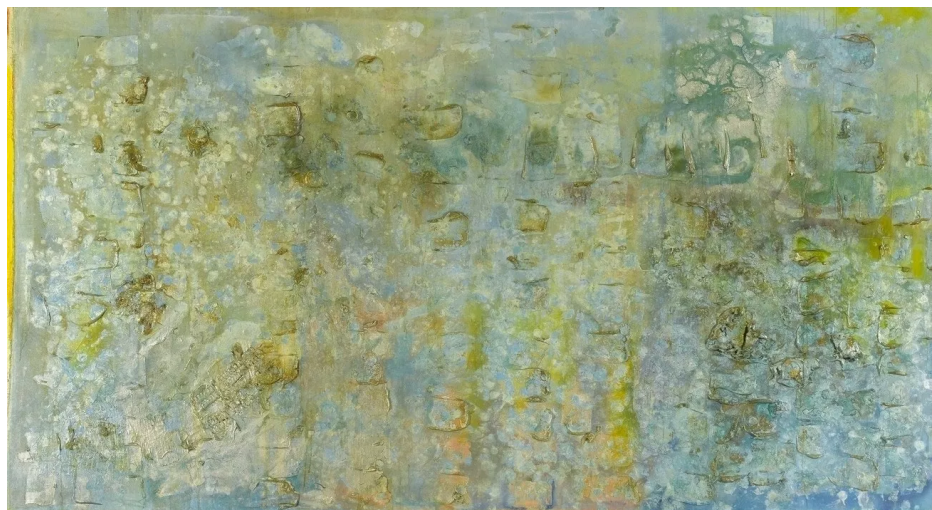
Map Paintings

Tate Britain has brought together 10 of Bowling's Map Paintings for the retrospective, including "Barticaborn" (1967), "South America Squared" (1967), "Who's Afraid of Barney Newman" (1968), "Mel Edwards Decides"

(1968), "Middle Passage" (1970), and "Polish Rebecca" (1971). Considered his first mature body of work, the paintings were first exhibited in a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1971. The Map Paintings feature stenciled maps of Latin America, Africa, and Australia superimposed on dramatic fields of color. Tate calls them "ambitious and timely works examine a sense of place, displacement and identity in the wake of major geo-political changes that characterized the dissolution of the European colonial empires." Courtney J. Martin, who curated [an exhibition of the artist's Poured Paintings](#) at Tate Britain in 2012, writes about his Map Paintings in the exhibition catalog. In "Social, Material, Otherness: Bowling's Map Paintings 1966–71," Martin notes that Bowling completed the works on the walls and floors of his SoHo loft and draws attention to a critical focus that characterizes the map series "as biographical and political, rather than material or compositional." She concludes the essay by citing the significance of the paintings: "Despite the presence of new works and new ways of making in his practice, the map series has held sway as a definitive moment in Bowling's career."



FRANK BOWLING, "Ah Susan Whoosh," 1981 (acrylic paint on canvas, 2415 x 1750 mm). | Private collection, London. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019



FRANK BOWLING, "Great Thames IV," 1988-9 (acrylic paint on canvas, 1810 x 3210 mm). | Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019. Frank Bowling, 2017 ©



FRANK BOWLING, "Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton," 2017 (acrylic paint and plastic objects on collaged canvas, 1890 x 1225 mm). | Courtesy Frank Bowling and Hales Gallery, Alexander Gray Associates and Marc Selwyn Fine Art. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2018



Frank Bowling in the Tate Britain galleries where he retrospective is on view, May 2019. Shown, "Wafting," 2018 (acrylic paint on canvas, 183.7 x 245). | Photo by Matt Greenwood, Courtesy Tate Britain