

Relative Values: the artist Frank Bowling and his grandson Frederik, his web and social media manager



Anna Batchelor for The Sunday Times Magazine, courtesy The Sunday Times

The pair on Frank's wild youth partying with David Hockney, and the joy of painting together.

Frank

When my grandson Frederik finished school and was figuring out what to do, I invited him to the studio to help with one of my paintings. I named it Fred's Touch because he had such a delicate and precise way of putting paint on the canvas. Now we work together nearly every day and we've made some of the most wonderful things.

I was raised in New Amsterdam, a town in Guyana. I had a difficult relationship with my father, who worked for the police and was a violent man — he used to stomp on my hands, among other things. I got on better with my mother, a dressmaker who owned a shop: Bowling's Variety Store. I worked for her as a huckster, selling her wares along the Guyanese coast. Eventually I was able to save enough money to earn my passage to London. I was 19.

When I got to the UK I found out I'd be called up to do national service, so to get it out of the way I signed up to the RAF. Strangely enough, I was introduced to all these artistic types, who asked me to sit as a model. The consensus was that I had a good head, so I decided to try to paint myself.

At first I did it clumsily with my fingers and was shy about my work because I was convinced it was awful. But I got better and ended up going to the Royal College of Art. I thrived there, drinking around town, sparring with other artists like Francis Bacon, David Hockney and Tony Caro. I was certainly rambunctious and became a part of

the culture. It was a huge contrast to the RAF, where I was treated as a lesser, running after people — I had to peel potatoes, pick up after the pilots and the rest of it.

My first significant show opened in 1962 to critical acclaim. My career seemed to be on the cusp of really taking off, but I sensed that there was no room in Britain for an artist like me. Everything seemed to stall. America was calling me — I was totally focused on painting and I wanted to be part of the civil rights movement, so I moved to New York in 1966.

By then I'd had three sons by three different women. I left the boys behind — Dan, Sacha and Benjamin, Frederik's father. Being on the other side of the Atlantic meant that I couldn't be much of a father. I hid from it. My own dad had been such a brutal and unloving man that I was scared of becoming the same sort of dad.

In the early 1980s I returned to London to reconnect with my sons. We managed to get along quite well, so I began shuttling back and forth between London and New York. I also settled down with Rachel, my wonderful wife, a textile artist from London.

I still feel the need to go to the studio every day. I've set out on a quest to explore the possibilities of paint, and I find myself making something new every time. The things that paint can achieve are so vast and diverse that I don't think I'll ever be done with it.

When I was introduced to baby Frederik in 1995, he looked up at me with amazing curiosity. He was always doing something, nothing could distract him. When he trained his eyes on me, I had a feeling he

was sizing me up, like this stranger had walked into his home and was taking up all the space.

I properly woke up to the fact that I was a grandfather when Frederik's parents dropped him off with me in London on the eve of the millennium so they could celebrate the new year. Frederik was four and already loved to sew. He quietly worked away until bedtime. Rachel and I put him to bed next door and went to sleep ourselves. Before dawn I was startled to find that this little boy had crept into our bed and nested snugly between us. I was so alarmed that I leapt out of bed and had no idea what to do!

Frederik

I went to all of Frank's shows in London as a child, but it wasn't until I was 20 that I first saw him at work. I helped him on a painting he called Fred's Touch. Our minds work in a very similar way, so I can interpret what he wants me to do: pour this here, paint this blue.

Frank's wife, Rachel, is an avid knitter and when I was growing up she would give me these squares of material to sew into a patchwork. I would sit in the corner and focus on that. Everything else was a side story.

In the past year it's been brought to my attention that I might have autism spectrum disorder. I don't understand how emotions work like other people do. I'm much more self-involved and enjoy deep diving into things I'm interested in. I think that's where me and my grandad are similar. He can totally focus on the paint and that's all that goes on in his mind — how it works and flows. Everything else becomes secondary.

Now I see my grandad about five times a week. I run his Instagram, do bits for his website, help him paint. I live in his old studio in Pimlico, just behind Tate Britain.

I think my dad is glad my grandad and I have such a good relationship. He sees it as a calming force in Frank's busy world. I love to hear my grandad's stories of what he was doing in the 1960s. He was a bit of a wild child. But some of his stories aren't so pleasant — they're often to do with being discriminated against. In the 1980s, while he was standing at a urinal, he was arrested for public indecency. I try to record pretty much every conversation because his memory is still so precise.

I've struggled with depression since university. I went through a patch of really not enjoying having an evolved social life. I preferred to hang around alone. I felt no happiness, but at the same time I didn't really feel sad. I was in this emotionless existence where you're in the world, but not taking part. Managing it is tough and the biggest help has been my grandad. He'll ask me to go to the studio or help him with something and I snap out of my mood and go. It gives me purpose.

Frank Bowling at Tate Britain, London SW1, runs to August 26

STRANGE HABITS

Frederik on Frank: He eats pig's trotters. I go and get them for him from the butcher. They're cooked and chopped up and he has them as a snack

Frank on Frederik: He is very honest. He sees when I cross the line and is the only one to really say something about it