

FRANK BOWLING

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Frank Bowling

MARC SELWYN FINE ART

"Cooking," he calls it, but there are other words that come to mind when describing Frank Bowling's restless, wildly inventive painting practice: *spilling, smearing, dripping, brushing, raking, flicking, sticking, foaming, cutting, stitching, and pasting*, to name a few. And waiting. Bowling often works on the floor, flooding canvases with vivid washes of acrylic and oil, letting the paints pool, settle, and dry before staining them again. He applies thick, gestural curls of impasto that sometimes take weeks to harden into crunchy corrugated surfaces. He embeds tiny objects and pigment into thick laminar flows of pearlescent foam and wax. Within these frozen streams, delicate veins of color catch the eye and hold it. The expansive paintings that emerge from this diverse, improvisatory repertoire of techniques demand to be seen in person. They are huge, mercurial things—numinous and aerial, submarine and liquid, spiky and fractious.

The earliest works in this exhibition dated from the late 1960s, when Bowling moved to New York from London. His departure from the UK coincided with a shift in his work away from the figurative, Pop-

View of "Frank Bowling," 2015. From left: *Schlesingerblue*, 1968; *Dragon Overhand for Verity*, 2013; *Mel Edwards Decides*, 1968; *Mother's House Dot Dot Com*, 1966-99.



influenced style he had developed earlier in the decade as a student at the Royal College of Art and toward formalist abstraction. *Mother's House Dot Dot Com*, 1966-99, exemplifies this transitory stage in Bowling's practice: From the neck down, it's a hot haze of atmospheric pinks and saffron yellows; silk-screened above in gray-on-orange ground is the faint, dreamlike "mother's house," an image of the general store Bowling's mum owned during his childhood in what was then British Guiana. The motif recurs in *Mel Edwards Decides*, 1968, from Bowling's "Map Paintings" series, 1967-71—an enormous, enigmatic work rendered in spectral stains of goldenrod yellow, and a highlight of this survey. Across the painting's top third, the distinctive outline of the house is repeated three times, side by side. Below it, Bowling has added the contours of South America, again repeated three times; below these marks is a set of three additional map outlines, this time of Guyana. The painting's serial repetitions, shadowy blankness, and inscrutable presence collectively resist easy interpretation. Viewers are left to sift through the work's complex underlayers and suspended light.

Another painting from the "Map" series here on view, *Schlesingerblue*, 1968, was included in a major solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971; soon thereafter, at the encouragement of Clement Greenberg, Bowling abandoned his use of motifs entirely. *Looking at Barney & Mark* and *Yonder II*, both 1972, track this shift, as do the translucent vertical washes of color in *Breeze*, also 1972, one of Bowling's first purely abstract paintings. Geometric, Color Field-like abstraction was a style the artist quickly mastered, grew tired of, and, in typical Bowling fashion, put aside: By 1973, he was already at work on his "Poured Paintings," using an adjustable board and gravity to manipulate streams of paint into astonishing, hypnotic icons. Bowling's poured paintings, which employ a process that the artist's longtime friend the critic Mel Gooding has described as "controlled automatism," pushed the hands-off post-painterly approach of fellow Greenberg protégés to its perverid, machinic limit. *Moondan*, 1976, on view here, hinted at this technique's possibilities.

More recent pictures are a product of the heterogeneous, hybrid style of painting that Bowling devised in the late '70s after reestablishing his primary studio in London. *Makonaima*, 2009, is a tall, narrow, textural canvas bisected by a messy, riverine sweep of red and green pigment with sharp stabs of cobalt blue. The title in full refers to a god revered as the Creator by Guyana's native Arawak people; its second half, *naima*, echoes the name of a ballad recorded in 1959 by John Coltrane, whose work is a key source of inspiration for Bowling. The painting's composition, bifurcated but with its border permeated from both sides, exemplifies the push and pull in Bowling's work between abstract washes and virtuosic gestures, experimentation and control. Its effect is to stop you, and make you look.

—Alexander Keefe