

# Frank Bowling cements his status as a modern master with Tate Britain retrospective

After six decades, the British artist is finally getting his dues as a gently dazzling survey of his paintings opens in London



Installation view of 'Frank Bowling' at Tate Britain. *Photography: Matt Greenwood, Tate Photography*

**F**rank Bowling has been at it for a while, six decades to be precise, which might make you wonder why you haven't heard much about him before. While his canonic contemporaries David Hockney, Pauline Boty and Patrick Caulfield were parting the waves in Britain, Bowling's singular approach to painting was overlooked – arguably one of the most heinous artistic oversights of the last century. At long last, London's Tate Britain is giving Bowling his due. The Guyana-born

artist's first retrospective is a nine-room whopper taking us phase by phase through an enormous body of work that, according to the show's curator Elena Crippa, 'holds an overwhelming feeling of vitality and openness to all the possibilities of life'.

Bowling landed on British soil as a teenager in 1953. Back then poetry was more on his agenda than art, but after some convincing by artist and friend Keith Critchlow, Bowling took up studies at the Royal College of Art. It soon became clear that the British art scene was leaning towards figurative, narrative-laden painting, whereas Bowling favoured shapes, structures and colour. This might be one reason why he was snubbed at the time.

He moved to New York in 1966 drawn by rumours of a peculiar movement called abstract expressionism stirring across the pond. He was met with garish colours, gestural improvisation and new dilemmas: as the civil rights movement intensified, artists of colour began to feel pressure to rank politics above aesthetics. This created tension between what Bowling 'ought' to be making work about, and what he wanted to create; to embody the sadistic horrors of black oppression, but avoid a scenario where, as an artist, his ancestry became his defining characteristic.



*South America Squared*, 1967, by Frank Bowling, acrylic and spray paint on canvas. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

His seminal essays were a backdrop to his artistic sentiments: 'By a rare piece of luck [perhaps it's an historical imperative] we have had a spate of black shows: individual, collective, old, new. But it is neither possible nor desirable to separate this sudden appearance of black shows from the extant political mood,' he wrote in 1970. Throughout his career, Bowling has had one finger on the pulse of western modernity and another on his native Guyana.



Nowhere is this more starkly laid out than in *Cover Girl* (1966). A central figure embodies London's swinging sixties with tightly clipped Vidal Sassoon haircut and Pierre Cardin dress. In the background, his childhood home in Guyana lurks like a hard-edged pop art print, dilapidated in the shadow of a bleak cloud. This is an intense conversation between identity, displacement, the fall of empire and the rise of modernism.



Photography: Matt Greenwood, Tate Photography

This is not the show of an artist looking to have his ego massaged. In earlier work, every other piece is homage to someone else: Caro's carnival of banal objects, Jasper Johns' chaotic cartography, or Turner's hostile wash of marine turbulence. Some early figurative work like *Birthday* (1962) bears uncanny resemblance to Francis Bacon. Then come the map paintings, where bold hues are branded with vague outlines of southern-hemisphere landmasses, a room filled with these induces the same meditative introspection as Rothko's *Chapel*.

As the work matures, Bowling's work spurns narrative to become more touchy than feely. Abstraction gets assertive and familiarity gets swallowed up in these lumpy, foam-filled murals. Acrylic gel is palette-knifed into rippling protrusions, and paint, form and kaleidoscopic colour steal the limelight. *Great Thames IV* (1989) is like Monet's *Water Lilies* but in a hazy, algae-ridden London waters. View it from afar and miss half the story: Bowling has embedded the surface with a bric-a-brac of objects you may well dredge from the Thames' silt.

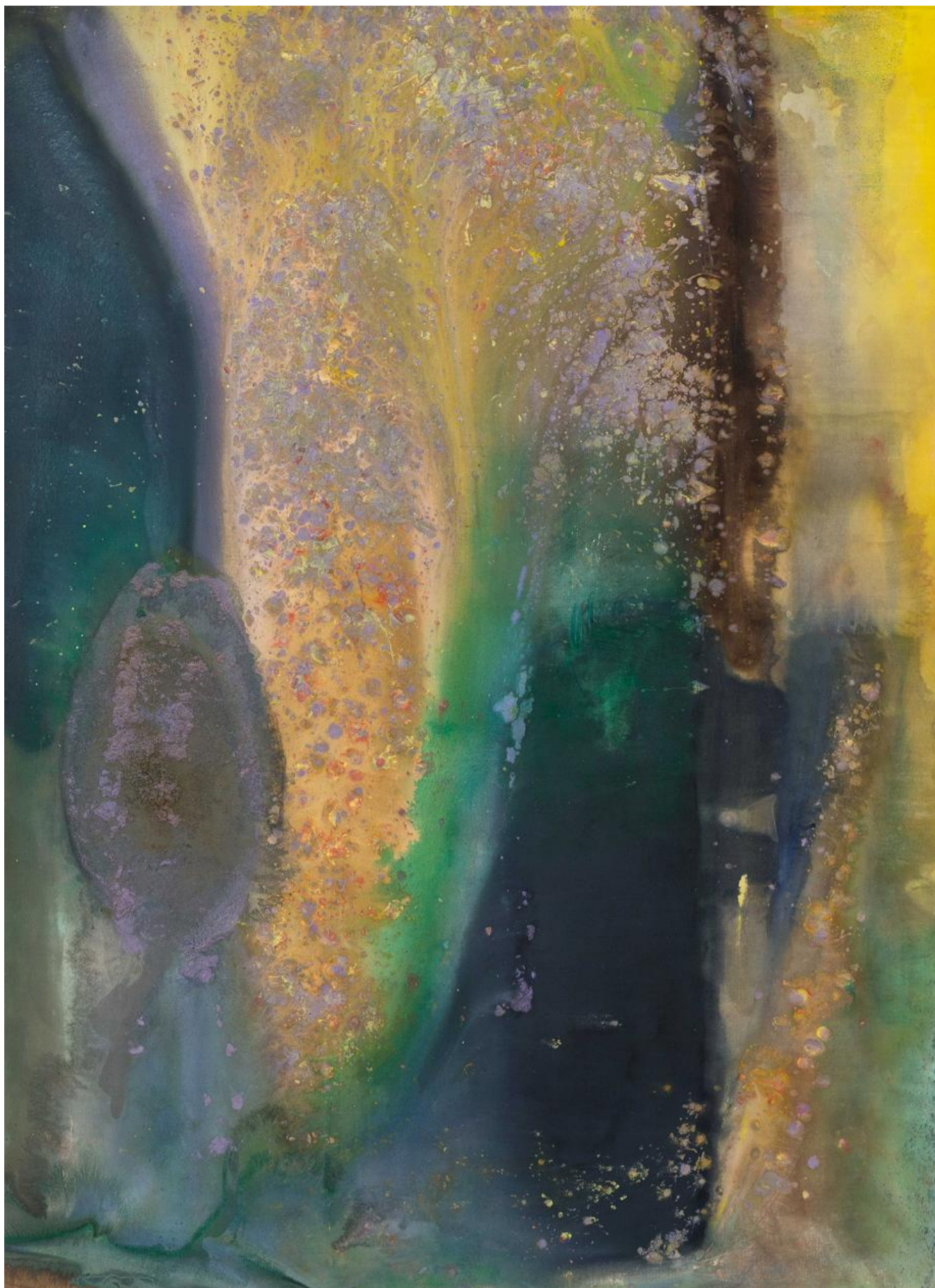
At 85, Bowling still paints every day from his East London studio. Well, he carefully directs from a seated position as assistants pour, drip and splash paint across his vast canvases. Is Bowling worried he'll lose his touch through lack of contact? Absolutely not. 'I can see more of what's happening and use these nimble people, my new painting tools, to do more of what I want to have done,' he says. Bowling never let himself get comfortable. A relentless experimenter, persistent intellectual, and shape-shifting creative – you greet an entirely different artist than you leave at the exit. He may have been built in the mould of abstract expressionism, but being with Bowling's work is like unearthing an uncharted chunk of history. ✱



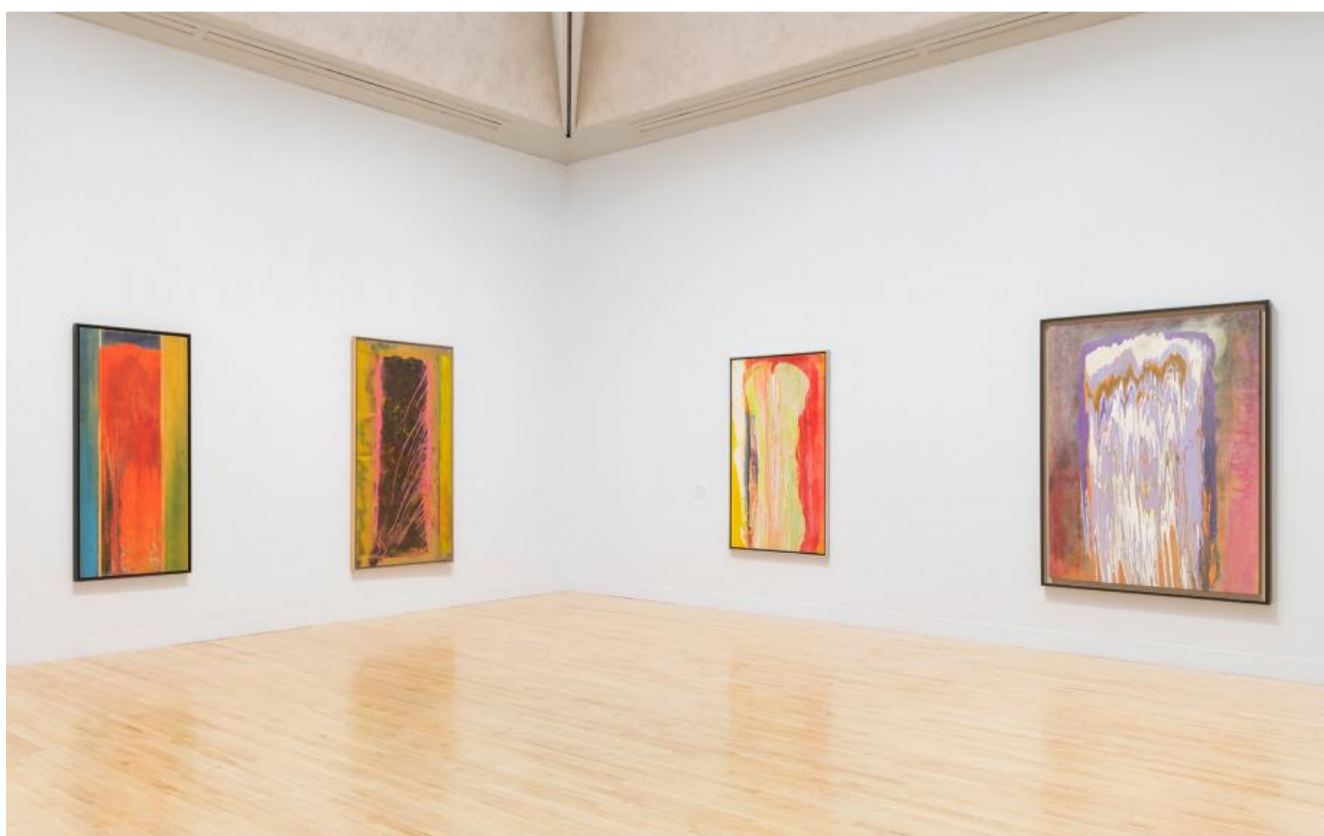


*Cover Girl*, 1966, by Frank Bowling, acrylic, oil paint, and silkscreened ink on canvas. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019



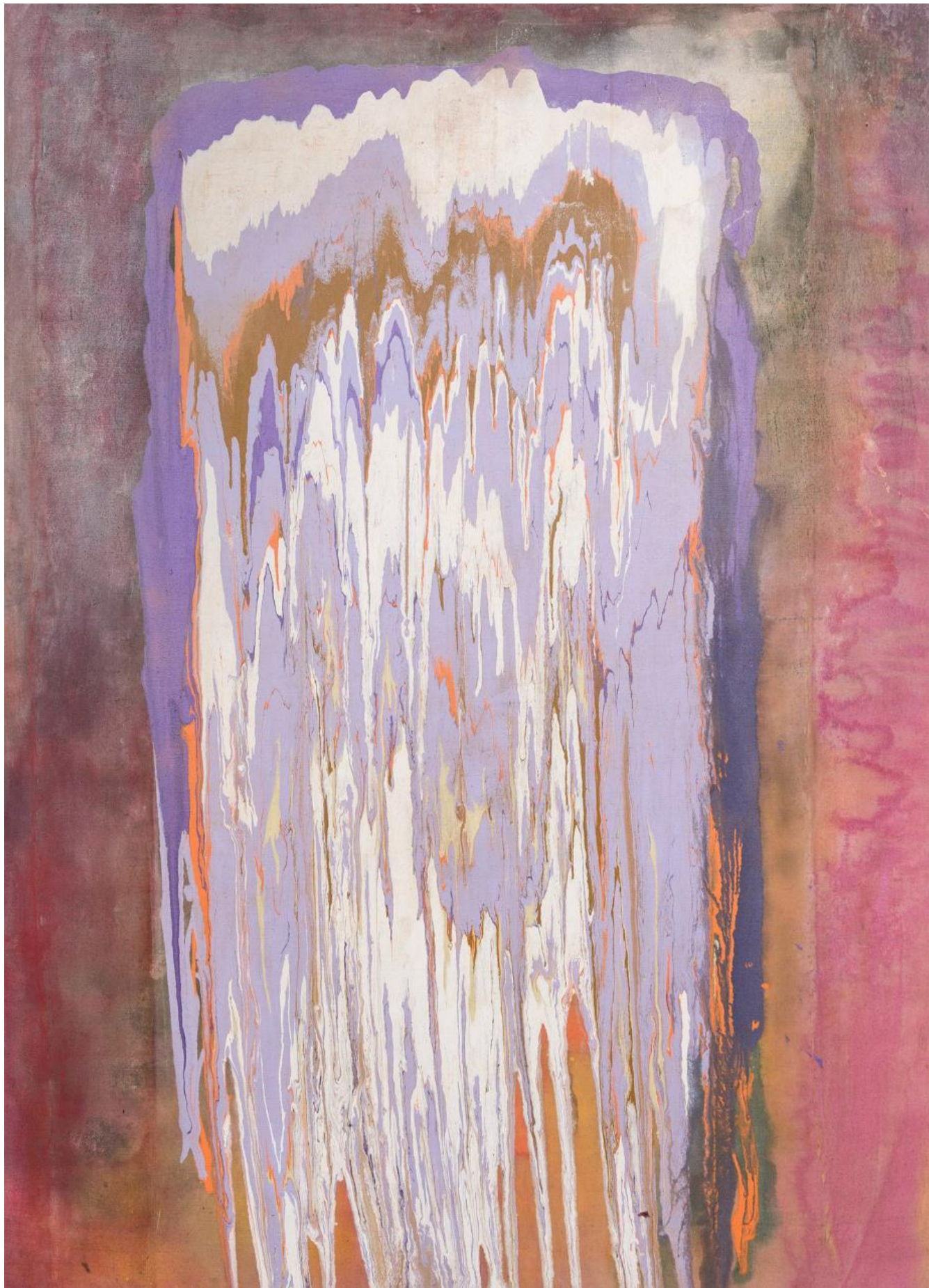


*Ah Susan Whoosh*, 1981, by Frank Bowling, medium acrylic paint on canvas. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019



Photography: Matt Greenwood, Tate Photography





*Ziff, 1974, by Frank Bowling, acrylic paint on canvas. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019*





*Iona Miriam's Christmas Visit To & From Brighton, 2017*, by Frank Bowling, acrylic paint and plastic objects on collaged canvas. © Frank Bowling. All Rights Reserved, DACS 2019

#### INFORMATION

'Frank Bowling' is on view until 26 August. For more information, visit the Tate Britain [website](#)

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