

FRANK BOWLING OBE, RA

Gooding, Mel, *Coffee Break: Frank Bowling RA*, RA Magazine, Summer 2012

RA

Coffee Break: Frank Bowling RA



Frank Bowling RA takes a break at his home in Pimlico, London.

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Frank Bowling RA, painter of luminous abstracts, invites Mel Gooding to share in the creative process at his Pimlico home.

One of the pleasures in visiting Frank Bowling for coffee is catching the latest version of the ever-changing array of Bowlings on the wall and floor of his living room. New and unfinished paintings – those that can be easily brought from his Kennington studio to his Pimlico flat

– are spread around the room. 'I'm wondering,' he says, 'what to do with that one; whether it will take some gold; or whether it's finished as it is. What do you think?' Bowling's paintings are made in short bursts of action – pouring, splashing, brushing, and complex interventions involving turpentine, chemical solvents, acrylic gels, ammonia, pearl-essence and gold leaf – interspersed with periods of silent contemplation, creative waiting. It is a meditative process, and much of it takes place in this first-floor room where Bowling sits, watchful in his corner seat. On the walls are works from various periods, necessary adjuncts to the process of imaginative speculation: Bowling is a philosophical artist.

The past few years have seen great success. Bowling has just returned from the opening of his new show at Spanierman Modern in New York. This prestigious midtown gallery now handles his work in the city where he has worked for several months a year for the past two decades. And his distinctive contribution to American art since the late 1960s is being increasingly recognised and celebrated there. Queues had formed to meet him: 'I'm certainly not used to that kind of homage,' he says wryly. Here in London he is focusing on a display at Tate Britain of his 'poured paintings', made in a rush of creative energy in the mid-1970s. It is a revelation of exhilarating abstracts that evoke the natural energies of light, flux and flow. On the stairs of his flat I look at an example of the series in which creamy whites and blues cascade down a narrow vertical canvas. Our conversation naturally turns to our friend, John Hoyland RA, who died last year and whose work was also deeply affected by life in the competitive cauldron of the late 1960s and 1970s New York art scene.

Back in London, Bowling's second exhibition at Hales Gallery presents large recent paintings. He has been busy pouring again, creating spectacular effects that resemble complex natural phenomena. Small paintings can be seen at Eleven Spitalfields, the stylish architect-run gallery-house in Princelet Street.

Bowling's election to the Academy in 2005 (with the vigorous support of the indomitable Michael Sandle RA) gave a kick-start to this late blossoming of acknowledgement that he is one of the most accomplished and original artists of his generation. 'What mattered most to me was the recognition of fellow artists; I enjoy the camaraderie of fellow Academicians.' Bowling has always been convivial, and sometimes combative: 'I've always loved the cut and thrust of argument among artists and poets and critics. It's part of the creative life.'

His association with the RA goes back, in fact, to early in his career. In 1966, just four years after leaving the Royal College of Art, Bowling's astonishing painting *Mirror* (1964-66) caused a stir at the RA Summer Show. It features a self-portrait at the foot of a spiral staircase, set within a dizzying compendium of 1960s art and design – Op, Pop and Abstract. This summer it hangs, an iconic work, at the V&A's exhibition 'British Design 1948-2012'. Not without a characteristic edge, he says, 'What goes round comes round!' It has come round good again for Frank Bowling, and we are the luckier for it.

- Drop, Roll, Slide, Drip: Frank Bowling's Poured Paintings 1973-78, Tate Britain, until 31 March, 2013
- Frank Bowling: Recent Paintings, Hales Gallery, London, 31 May–7 July
- British Design 1948-2012: Innovation in the Modern Age, V&A, until 12 Aug.



Midwinterstump, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 203.2x160cm