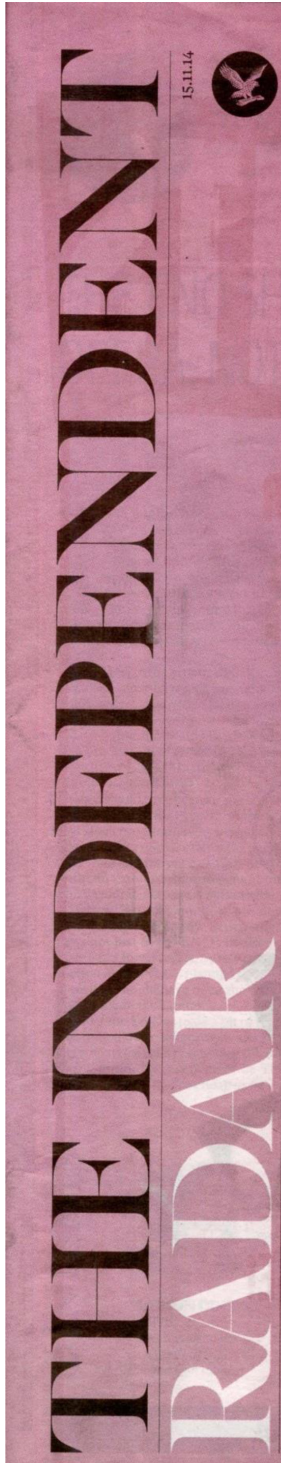


FRANK BOWLING OBE RA

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ART

IN THE STUDIO



Frank Bowling Artist

Bowling alone: the artist in his south London studio

‘I was a salesman selling lengths of cloth – I had a huckster’s licence’

By KAREN WRIGHT
Portrait by DAVID SANDISON

Frank Bowling found his studio in Elephant and Castle, south London, 30 years ago. It sits in a charming mews, away from the infamous concrete roundabout. The studio is surprisingly modest, dominated by the large amount of paintings neatly arranged in racks, labels visible, many of them from the 1980s.

Bowling was born in Bartica, Guyana, South America, in 1936, the son of a policeman and a mother who, Bowling acknowledges, was his creative influence. She designed clothes and had a small shop where he had his first job to raise money for his passage to England in 1953 to study and join an uncle already here. “I was a salesman selling lengths of cloth – I had a huckster’s licence.”

Bowling landed in the UK and quickly was told to do his compulsory National Service. He chose to join the RAF but when he got there they saw him as a

potential athlete. He was charged with insubordination, not wanting to “carry my superior’s kit”. That’s not surprising after he tells me “I was a difficult child always wanting to run away from home.”

Bowling came to London. “I met artist Keith Critchlow who introduced me to painting and the Tate and National Galleries. I discovered the Wallace Collection myself.” His mother paid for one term at art college, hoping he would get a scholarship. When that did not happen he was lucky to meet Roger de Grey, who gave Bowling a lifeline: £60, allowing him to find digs – until that time he was sleeping on people’s floors. He eventually made it to the Royal College of Art with a scholarship, where he was to be awarded the silver medal to David Hockney’s gold.

He met American Pop artist Larry Rivers who encouraged him to go to New York in the 1960s and got him lodgings at the Chelsea Hotel. Rivers saying, “Hey man, the colour in your work! The guys here don’t know what you’re doing.” The advice of “cooling

down” his colours and abandoning the challenging subject matter echoing in his ears, he turned away from his early, often confrontational figurative work. Critic Clement Greenberg became a supporter and he was included in the Whitney Biennial of 1971.

Bowling, now 78, is having a moment. He became a Royal Academician in 2005, the first black British artist to be given this honour, and was made an OBE in 2008. He has a large show in Sweden and had a sell-out exhibition in New York, and now is represented by a “hip” gallery in London. The Tate has several works in their collection including *Mirror* (1966), which reflects his figurative roots. He still comes to the studio every day, although he can only work for a few hours at a time due to increasing fragile health.

He has outlived many of his contemporaries from the Royal College including John Hoyland, RB Kitaj and Patrick Caulfield. Standing in the studio surrounded by luscious, juicy colours, I feel that although his family are now mostly all in England, his vision was somehow formed in the colours of his birthplace. Sadly, when he went back to Guyana after his mother’s death in the 1980s her shop was completely razed to the ground. “It’s sad,” he says, “I had this idea of making sculptures from the sewing machines.”

Train gone: Paintings by Frank Bowling, Spritmuseum, Stockholm (spritmuseum.se/en) to 6 April