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## **Frank Bowling's New Paintings Are Family Affairs**

With help from close relatives, the 87-year-old artist is still working, even if he doesn't apply the paint himself.



The British painter Frank Bowling is enjoying a surge of late recognition. This spring Hauser and Wirth will present his works in galleries in London and New York. Credit...Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times

**By Elizabeth Fullerton**

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LONDON — On a recent afternoon behind a scruffy door in South London, remarkable alchemical transformations were taking place under the watchful eye of the painter Frank Bowling. Wearing industrial masks, a team of assistants brushed and dolloped ammonia, gold powder, acrylic gel and water onto a dripping canvas hung onto Bowling's studio wall.

Looking dapper in a fedora and a green velvet jacket, the 87-year-old artist directed proceedings from a wheelchair in the center of the room.

“Put gel on the edges of the square. No, you're putting it on the flat,” Bowling said, guiding the action on the canvas with a laser pointer. “Dust that with the gold. Brush the water all over.” “Lovely,” he added. “Now throw what's left in the bucket at the surface.”



A detail of the painting “Lovelock’s Whole Earth,” which Bowling created with assistance from his family in March. Credit...Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times



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He used a laser pointer to guide his family's work on the canvas. Credit... Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times



Bowling in his London studio with this grandson, Samson Sahmland-Bowling, at left, and his son, Ben Bowling. Credit... Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times

Bowling can bark orders at his assistants in such a forthright manner because they are, in fact, his family: his son, Ben Bowling; his stepdaughter, Marcia Scott; and his grandson, Samson Sahmland-Bowling. His wife, the textile artist Rachel Scott, makes colorful borders around his works by gluing and stapling on painted canvas strips.

Throughout most of his career, beginning in the 1950s, Bowling created his physically demanding works himself. But owing to fragile health over the past decade, he has increasingly ceded the labor of painting to family members — although he controls every detail, from the size and positioning of the canvas to the mixing of pigment, layering of coats and the application of materials.

It was clear from the good-natured banter in the studio that Bowling enjoys these cross-generational family sessions.

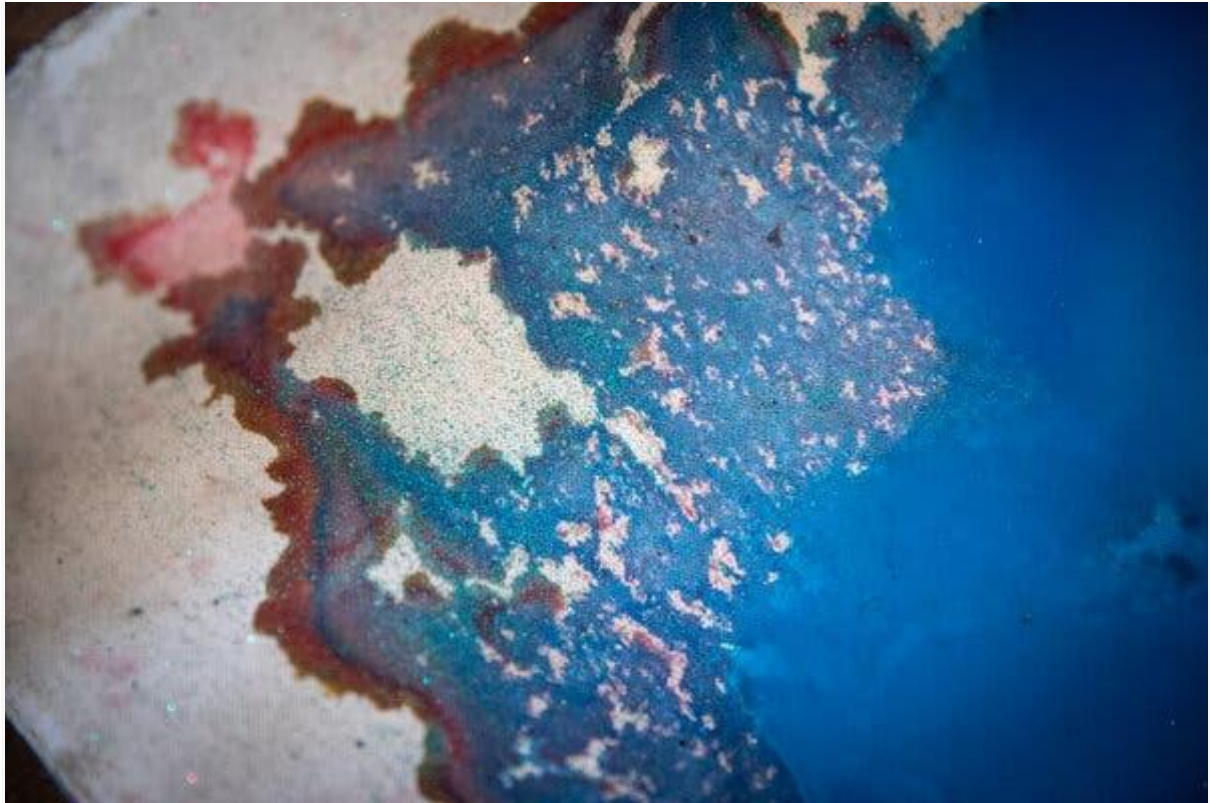
“Oh yes,” he said in an interview. “I get off on it.”

After many years in the art-world wilderness, Bowling is enjoying a surge of late recognition. In 2019, [Tate Britain in London held a major retrospective](#); from May 5 to July 30, [Hauser and Wirth, will present “London/New York,”](#) a single exhibition stretched across its galleries in both cities.

The trans-Atlantic presentation of the Hauser and Wirth show suits an artist who has forged a career between Britain and the United States and a visual language that draws on the traditions of English landscape painting and American Abstract Expressionism.

Born in 1934 in Guyana, then a British colony, Bowling’s long career has traversed many styles, including expressive figuration, Pop Art and Color Field painting. He is best known for his “Map Paintings,” melting panoramas of color stenciled with faint maps of Guyana, Africa and South America; his vigorous cascades of pigment known as “Poured Paintings”; and his almost sculptural reliefs, thickly encrusted with everyday objects from jewelry to plastic toys.

Although they are not representational, his paintings are documents of his life.



Ammonia reacting to acrylic paint on an untitled work in progress. Credit... Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times



Heaters in the studio drying the layers of paint and other materials. Credit... Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times



Bowling turned to abstraction when he moved to New York in 1966. Credit... Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times

Bowling arrived in Britain in 1953, at age 19, and won a place at the Royal College of Art, studying alongside David Hockney and R.B. Kitaj. His early paintings have the raw, tortured feel of Francis Bacon, who was briefly a friend, but by his graduation in 1962, Bowling was creating vibrant, geometric compositions with a Pop Art aesthetic.

These works were hits with London critics, but when international attention came with an invitation to represent Britain at the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts, in Senegal, Bowling said he was irked.

A raft of nations had recently gained independence from colonial rule, and the festival was a celebration of Pan-African culture, bringing together artists, musicians, writers and performers from the African diaspora, including Duke Ellington and Josephine Baker. Yet Bowling felt he was being co-opted by Britain's art establishment and pushed into an unwanted role as a Black British artist, he said.

“The empire had collapsed. The whole business of trying to placate the former colonial people — my art suddenly served that purpose,” said Bowling.

Zoé Whitley, a co-curator of Tate Modern's landmark 2017 exhibition “[Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power](#),” said in an email that Bowling “always had a complex relationship to empire, race and to identifying labels of any sort other than ‘artist.’”

“That resistance to pigeonholing, while confounding to many, might just be one of the character traits that heralds Frank's six decades of mold breaking,” she added.

His turn to abstraction when he moved to New York in 1966 is just one example of Bowling running against the grain. During the civil rights movement, many artists of color were creating figurative works that dealt with the Black experience. But Bowling was interested in painters like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Morris Louis, whose influences he synthesized into his own distinctive style, incorporating zip motifs and dreamy color fields.

“All these tricks or inventions, or technical discoveries in my work, are informed by the daring of the Abstract Expressionists,” Bowling said.

In magazine articles, Bowling defended the right of Black artists to focus on aesthetics over politics, and he collaborated with other Black abstract painters to stage the group show “5+1” at the galleries of State University of New York at Stony Brook; in 1971, he had a solo exhibition at the Whitney. All the while, Bowling was experimenting obsessively with color, smearing, spraying, staining, spattering, pooling and cutting into the works.

He began using a self-built wooden tilting platform to pour paint onto a raised canvas, changing the direction and speed of flow to allow what he called “controlled accidents” to shape the works.



“Frank has real guts,” said Marcia Scott, Bowling’s step-daughter, second from the right. “Every single day the painting is changing, and you’re up against it.” Credit...Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times

“There’s this kind of incredible ecstatic exuberance in those works that is just palpable and transformative,” the American artist Julie Mehretu said by phone from New York. Mehretu said [her current solo show at the Whitney](#), through Aug. 8, felt

like a recognition of abstraction's importance after the efforts of Bowling and others to fight in its corner.

She was indebted to "all those artists, and all those years of work, and an insistence and persistence and invention in that form," she added.

Despite success in the United States, Bowling struggled to land exhibitions in Britain when family commitments brought him back in 1975. (He kept his New York studio, and has shuttled back and forth, working between both cities, ever since.)

Yet obscurity in Britain gave him the freedom to innovate, resulting in some of his most audacious works.

His "Great Thames" paintings from the late '80s, for instance, are heavily built-up works combining metallic pigment, acrylic foam, pearlescent powder and autobiographical miscellanea such as pill holders and urine-test dipsticks, which Bowling uses to treat his diabetes. These teeming riverscapes have the luminosity and drama of J.M.W. Turner and the rigor of John Constable, two English painters Bowling admires.

By the turn of the century, the artist was garnering more attention: In 2005, Bowling became the first Black British artist elected to London's prestigious Royal Academy of Arts. It is a tradition that new members of the institution, called "academicians," give one of their works to its collection. In an unprecedented snub, its members initially rejected Bowling's offering.

The artist Isaac Julien said in a telephone interview that Bowling's reception in Britain had been affected by "deep-structured racism" leading to "significant neglect" of his works. Bowling has always been a role model for him, he said, adding that the older artist's self-belief and capacity to endure tribulations without giving up was an "extraordinary lesson of life."

In this interview Bowling preferred not to talk about race; he wanted to talk about painting, which dominates his waking thoughts. Even at night, he said, he lies awake in bed and imagines his canvases coming together on the ceiling.

Translating those visions into physical form now falls to his family of helpers, but this new way of working has done nothing to dull his appetite for risk-taking.





Bowling and his wife, Rachel Scott, a textile artist who makes borders for his works by gluing and stapling fabric strips. Credit...Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times



In addition to paint, Bowling and his assistants use materials like gold powder, ammonia and acrylic gel. Credit...Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times



“Lovelock’s Whole World” took a month to dry; its textured surface includes packing material and a shredded magazine. Credit...Frank Bowling/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times

“Lovelock’s Whole Earth,” completed in March, is a dazzling array of fuchsia, magenta, purple and florescent orange hues. The work took a month to dry after Ben, his son, and Marcia, his stepdaughter, drenched the canvas with the contents of half-used paint buckets, then scooped on acrylic gel, gold powder and ammonia (which turned the gold into indigo).

To absorb the liquid, they threw a shredded magazine and clumps of packing material onto the swamped surface, along with toxic waste bags, syringe cases and other detritus gathered by Bowling during a recent hospital visit. When the thicket of packing material refused to flatten, they took at it with a blowtorch.

“I certainly was anxious that the painting might not work,” said Ben, “but Frank said, ‘No, no, no! We’re not failing.’”

“Frank has real guts” Marcia said, adding, “Every single day the painting is changing, and you’re up against it.” Bowling, who still goes to the studio daily, looked contentedly at the atmospheric canvases lining the walls. “I’ve had times when I wish I was able to have done it myself,” he said. “But what’s been done makes me feel good.”