

# UBIKWIST

H A L E S

FRANK BOWLING

Steven Tate, The Geometry of Aesthetics, Ubikwist,  
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# The Geometry of Aesthetics

Frank Bowling by Steven Tate  
Portrait by Alexis Chabala

Challenging, opaque, direct, but richly layered and penetrable only after careful consideration: Frank Bowling in conversation is much like his art. But his words are as rewarding as his work, the latter having earned him an OBE from Queen Elizabeth II. He has spent more than half a century creating work – now part of permanent collections in New York’s Met, MoMA, and Whitney Museum, London’s Tate Britain and V&A, and a host of other museums worldwide. A two-time recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship, Guyanese-born Bowling remains as relevant today as he was when he burst on the art scene in 1962, fresh from London’s Royal College of Art. Pitted against schoolmate David Hockney as Britain’s next art sensation, Bowling created his own path.

**The theme of this issue of Ubikwist is Resilience. What artistic or personal situation have you had in your long career that you had to bounce back from? How did you?**

At the time I was born, my mother had great difficulty: the umbilical chord was wrapped around my neck. And I was marked by the fact that as I was born, there was a risk that I was going to die. My determination begins there. It was at 5 am in the morning, and the river boats were coming out with their goods and whatever. And my yelling and screaming outdid every other sound. I was already marked as someone whose destiny was established – that determination to live. To fight. Even as a small child, my antics and inclinations were aimed at taking risks.

And when I was not allowed to be a part of the young British artists who were emerging in the 60s, that hurt. I left London and found a much bigger community working in abstraction with continued possibilities to make outstanding works in New York. I joined a larger community

trying to make it big. I had been poor, living from hand to mouth. I was feeling resentful, but I'm always hopeful... this is the duration of poverty and material inadequacy. Since then my friends have been making money, and it has changed for the better.

**What's your artistic process?**

It's constantly changing. It's extemporaneous. The great variety of materials I use can't be categorized in a linear or orderly way. My sense of working is not rules based. It doesn't have a specific order. The rules in which I try to articulate my freedom is about the geometry of aesthetics: rectangles and flatness. I also call on anyone who happens to be around. I believe if you deliver the thing raw, you're more likely to find the truth of feeling, action, natural articulation, and new life. We live in these boxes, rectangular, and they're flat.

**Your career has spanned a very interesting period in history – for your country of origin Guyana, and your home, the UK... and your home in the US. Do you see yourself as Guyanese or British?**

I see myself as British, as I was born a British subject of the United Kingdom and its colonies. I remain British. As of the origins of my birth, I feel Guyanese – up until the self-determination and identity confusion. When we were decolonized, at the time I was living in Britain, I felt no need to deny my heritage and everything I knew and understood. When I left Guyana, I aimed to be educated and lofty in the activities and ambitions that my curiosity seemed to be obsessed with... the respect that you hold, the best in life. Initially, I aspired to literature and poetry.

**What did you think of Britain as a teenager back in Guyana?**

My generation was exposed to a sort of *swank* after the Second World War, the soldiers came back and seemed to be a cut above *everything*.

**How are you British?**

The British spirit settles for beauty rather than aims for the sublime. The sublime is out there, space, air, water – something beyond and out of reach. Whereas beauty is something you can recognize. It's corporeal.

**Additionally, how has the art world changed in more than half a century since you entered it?**

I have not much information about the art world and its changes. What I've experienced in previous establishments can be described as a series of hurdles and obstacles that have not added much to my equilibrium. Because I think that the career path that was obviously outlined for anyone with an enterprising talent and hard work is evident in my public. And my life and will continue to appear.

I feel that what my friends find in me is an abundance of warm feelings for my fellow human beings. I like people, and one of the things that has mismanaged the smoothness is that not everyone gets what they deserve. For example, there are gender situations and conflicts that are native to the Western disposition.

**What about the collectors?**

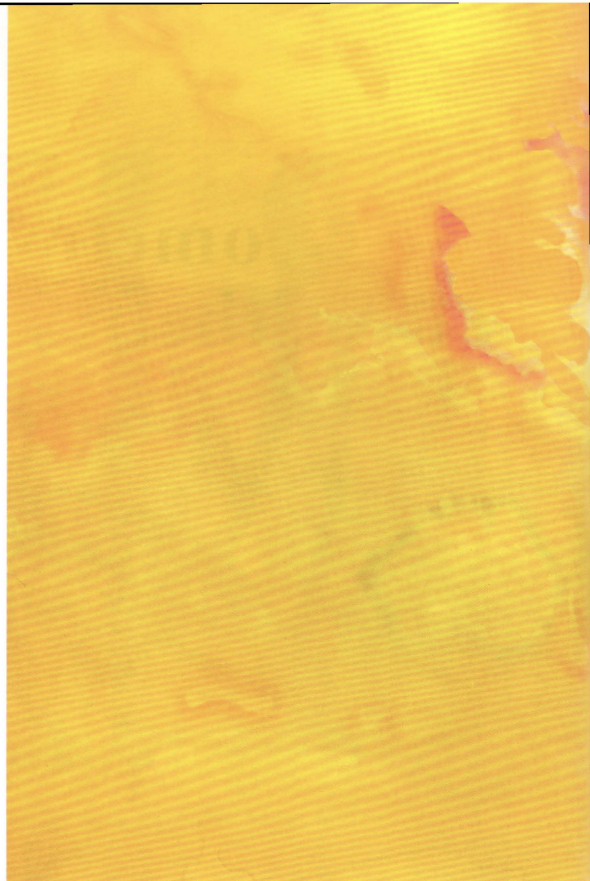
There are a lot more collectors of difficult, modernist works that people felt put off by and hard to empathize with. They've in the last 20 years changed; they're now much more able to empathize. Art became anything, and everyone could do art. Some of the more cynical and daring attempts have been gobbled up. There is a sort of blandness in much that is fashionable. Consider this facility for reusing material – you take a heap of rubbish from the corner, and you place it in the vortex between two walls, and suddenly it gives this kind of shock to complacency and has the ramifications of an act of art.

**Who are your favourite artists?**

A lot of my friends are artists, but in terms of the great masters – Rembrandt, Titian, Turner, Constable... I mean, it comes and goes who I like.

**What about your contemporaries? Do you look at them as peers or as competition?**

I never look at people whose work I admire as competition. I find myself in competition because people like Francis Bacon have instigated my natural competitive response out of curiosity. I didn't start out to be competitive with Francis Bacon; it just happened.

**Were you and Bacon friendly?**

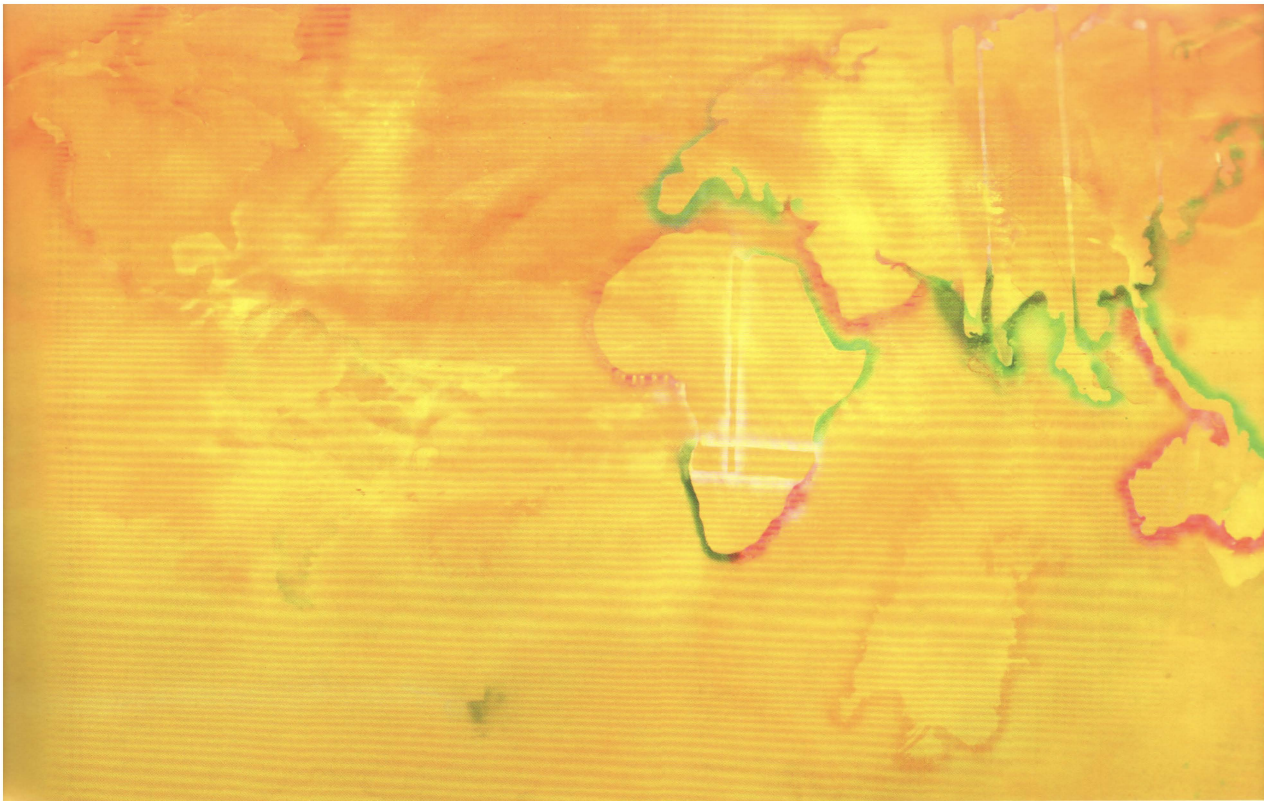
Yes. Along with some of the other older artists, who were very, very generous to me. They gave me stuff and fed me, guided me. I had gritty but very satisfying passions as a young artist.

**Baudelaire once said, "A work of art is never finished – only abandoned." Do you look back at certain works and say, "Oh, I should have done that differently"? If so, which works? If not, why not?**

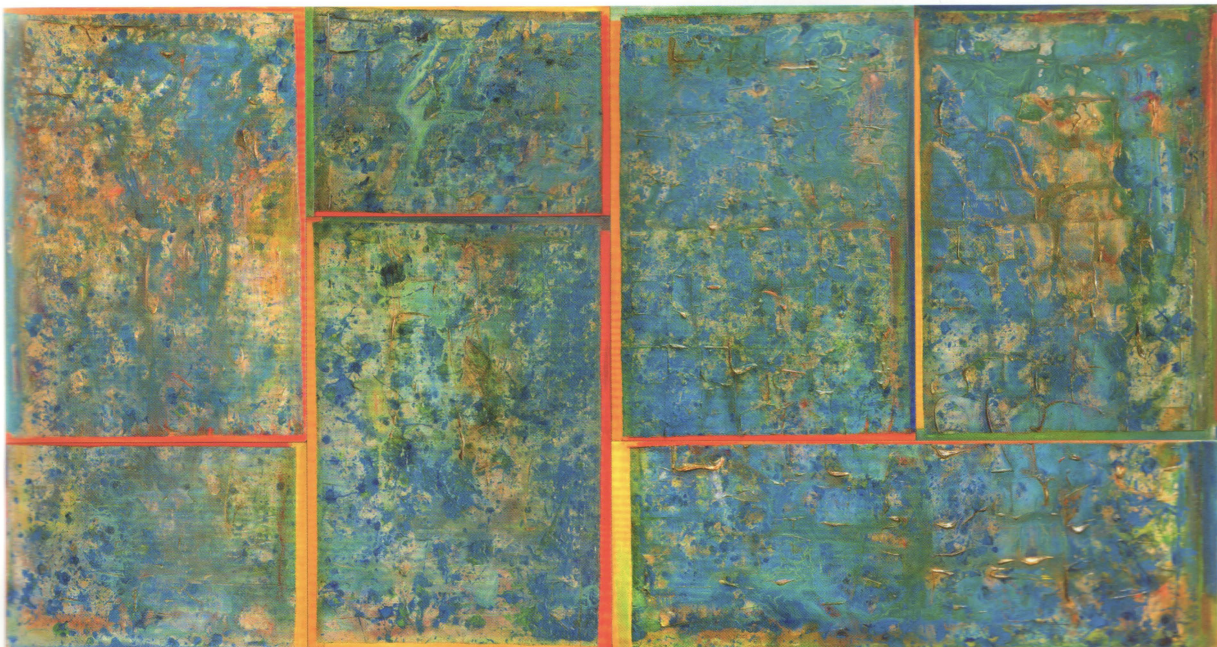
That's a constant – working extemporaneously. If you're on top of the activity, and you're going and changing and trying to enrich the work, of course you'll look back and see how you could have done it differently. But often my friends and my wife have a way of saying, "You don't have to do that again. You can do another work."

[www.halesgallery.com](http://www.halesgallery.com)

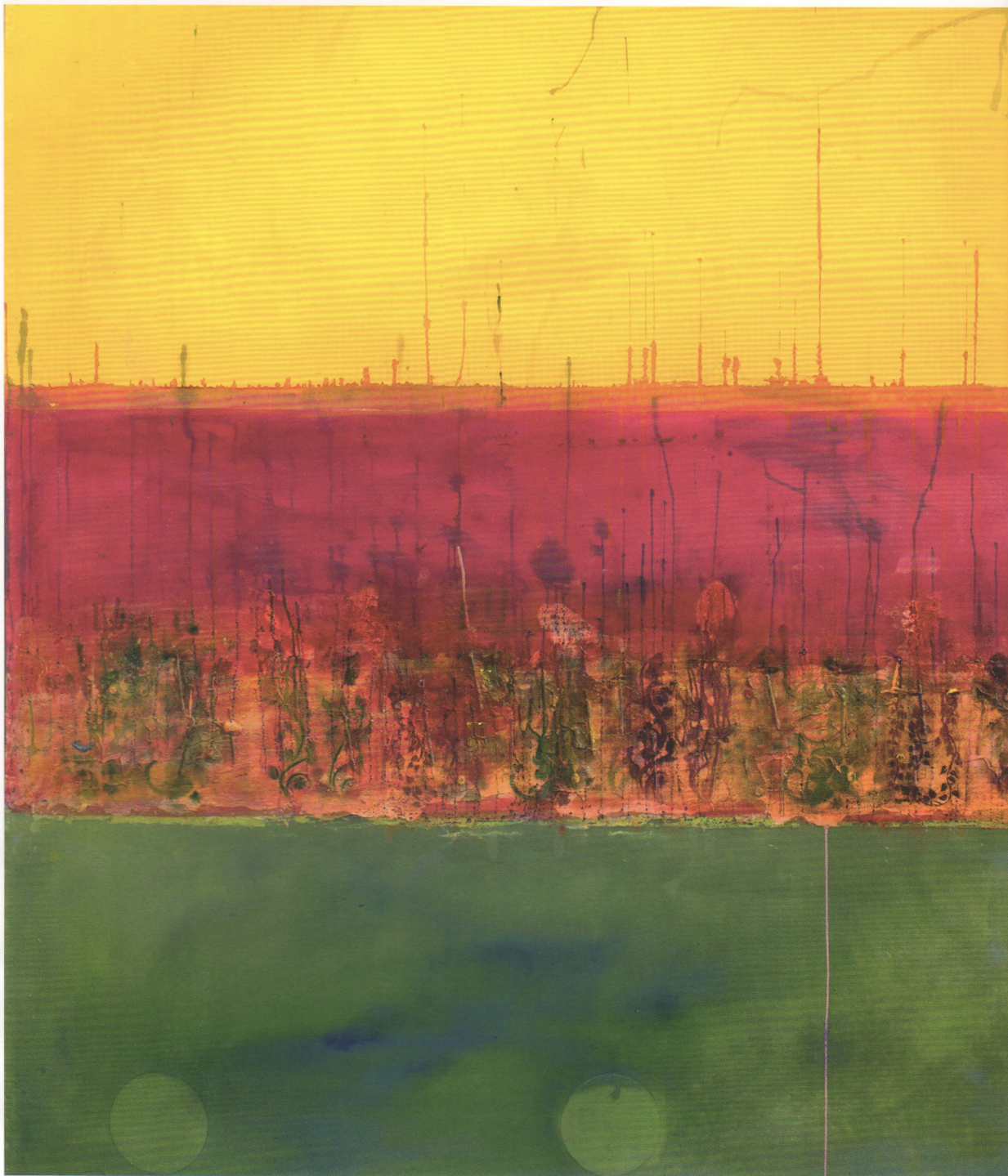
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JAMSAHIBWALL, 1990 SEPTYCH  
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UBIKWIST

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IMAGE COURTESY OF HALES GALLERY AND THE ARTIST.  
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PHILOCTETES BOW, 1987  
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**I believe if you deliver the thing  
raw, you're more likely to find the  
truth of feeling, action, natural  
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INSOMNIA WITH MS RIBBONS, 2017  
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REMEMBER THINE EYES, 2014  
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TONY'S ANVIL, 1975  
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**I had gritty but very satisfying  
passions as a young artist.**

JULIA, 1975

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