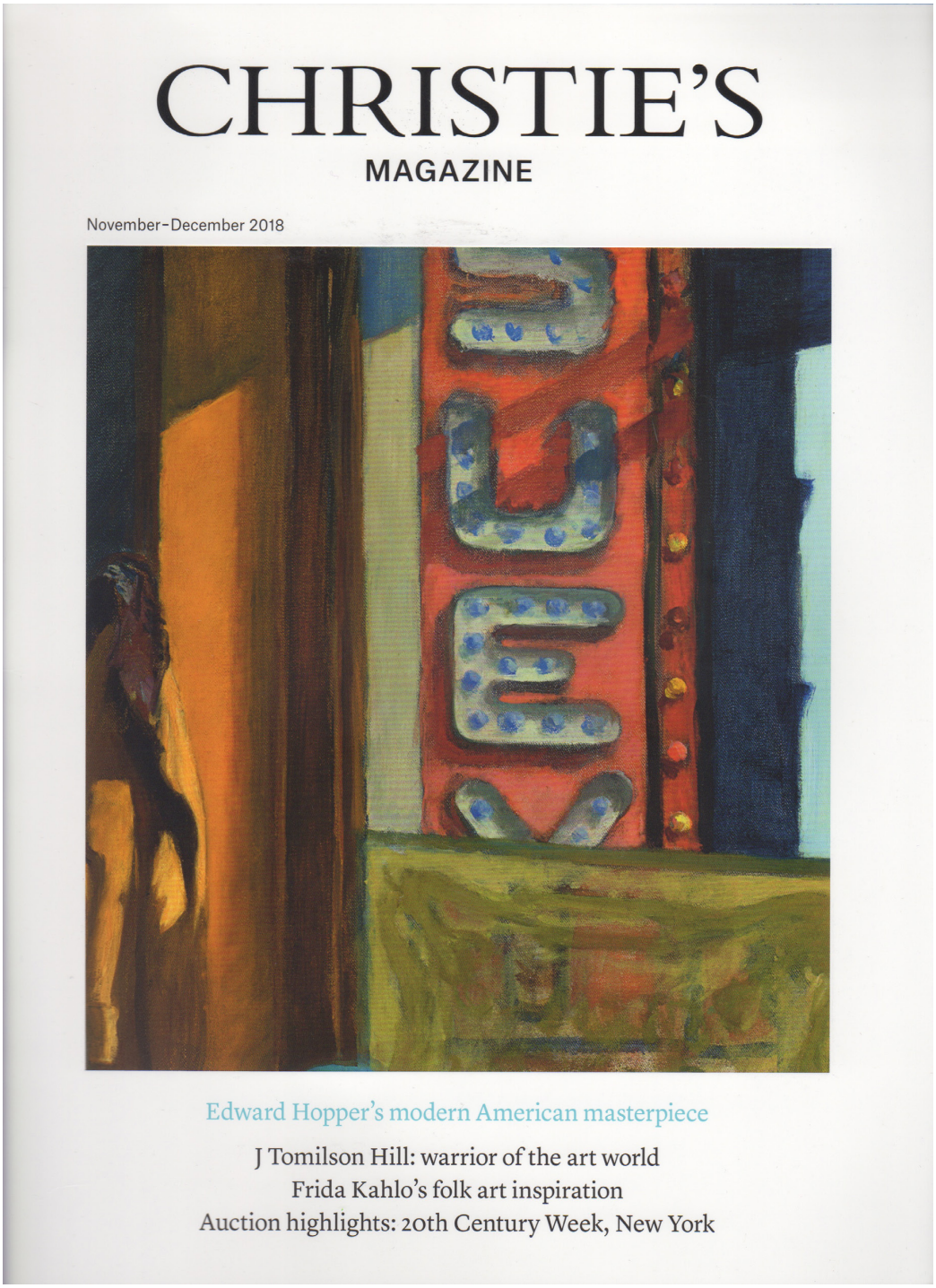
CHRISTIE'S

FRANK BOWLING
Martin Gayford, Flying Colours, Christie's
Magazine, November - December 2018, p. 90-101



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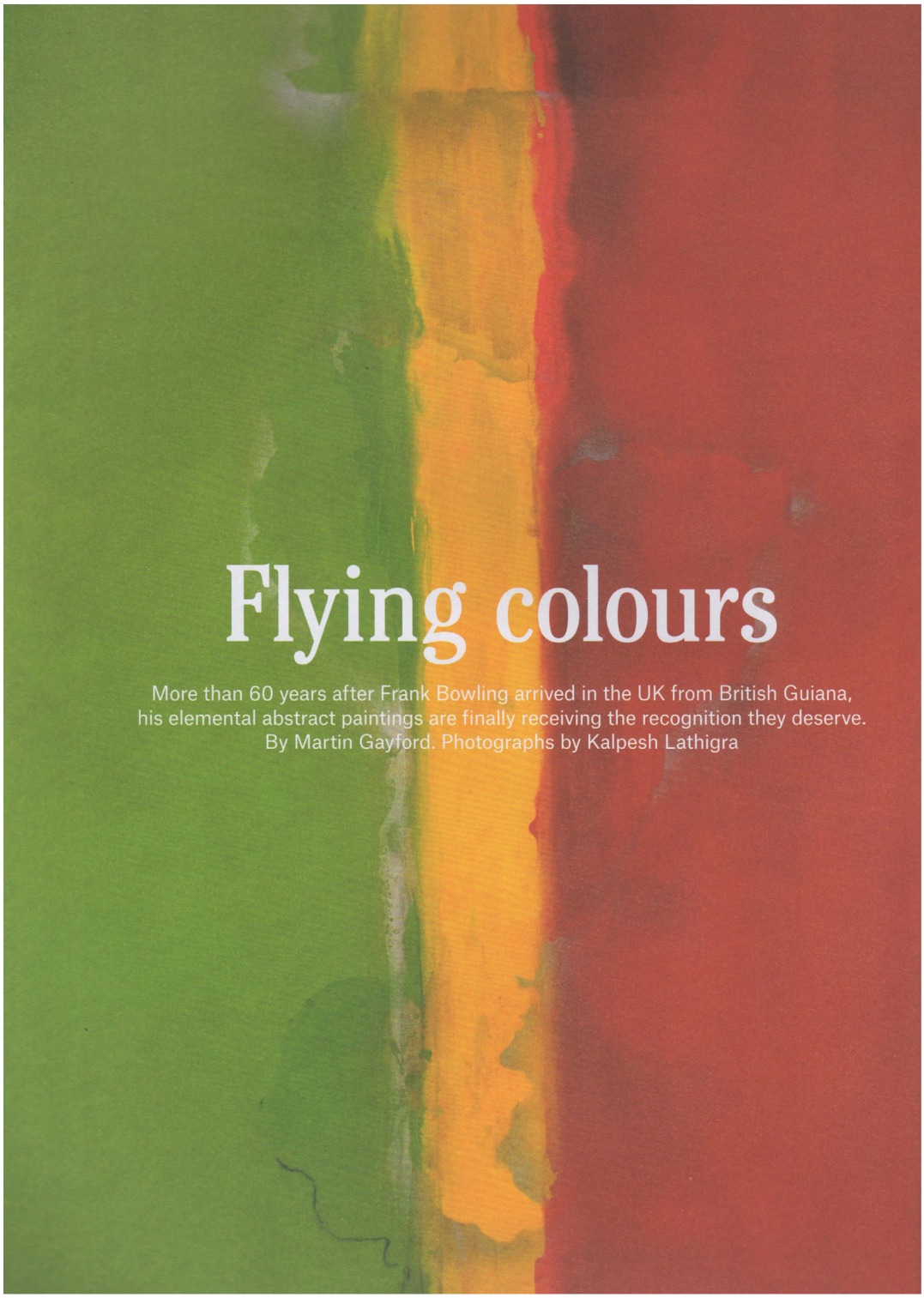
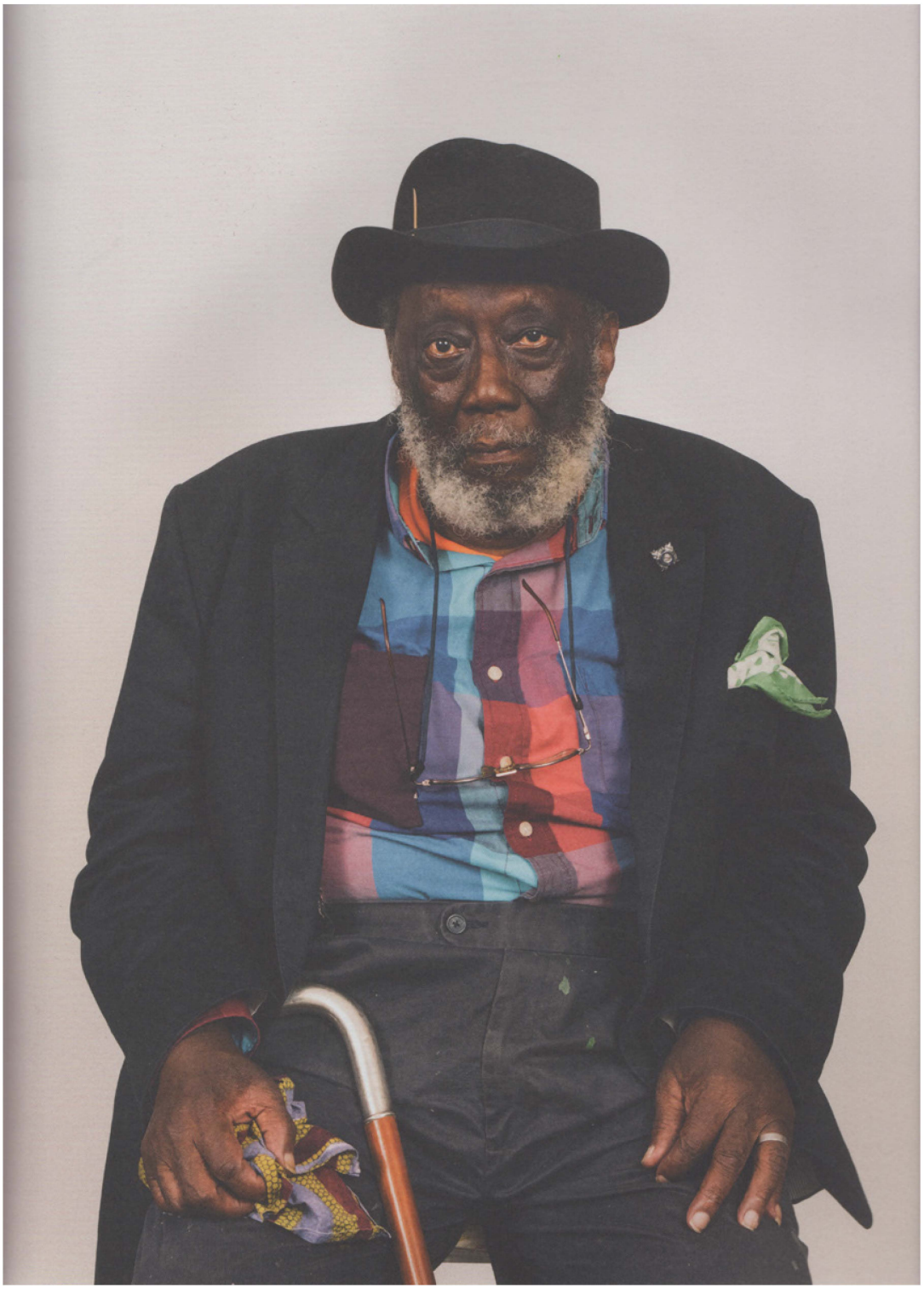
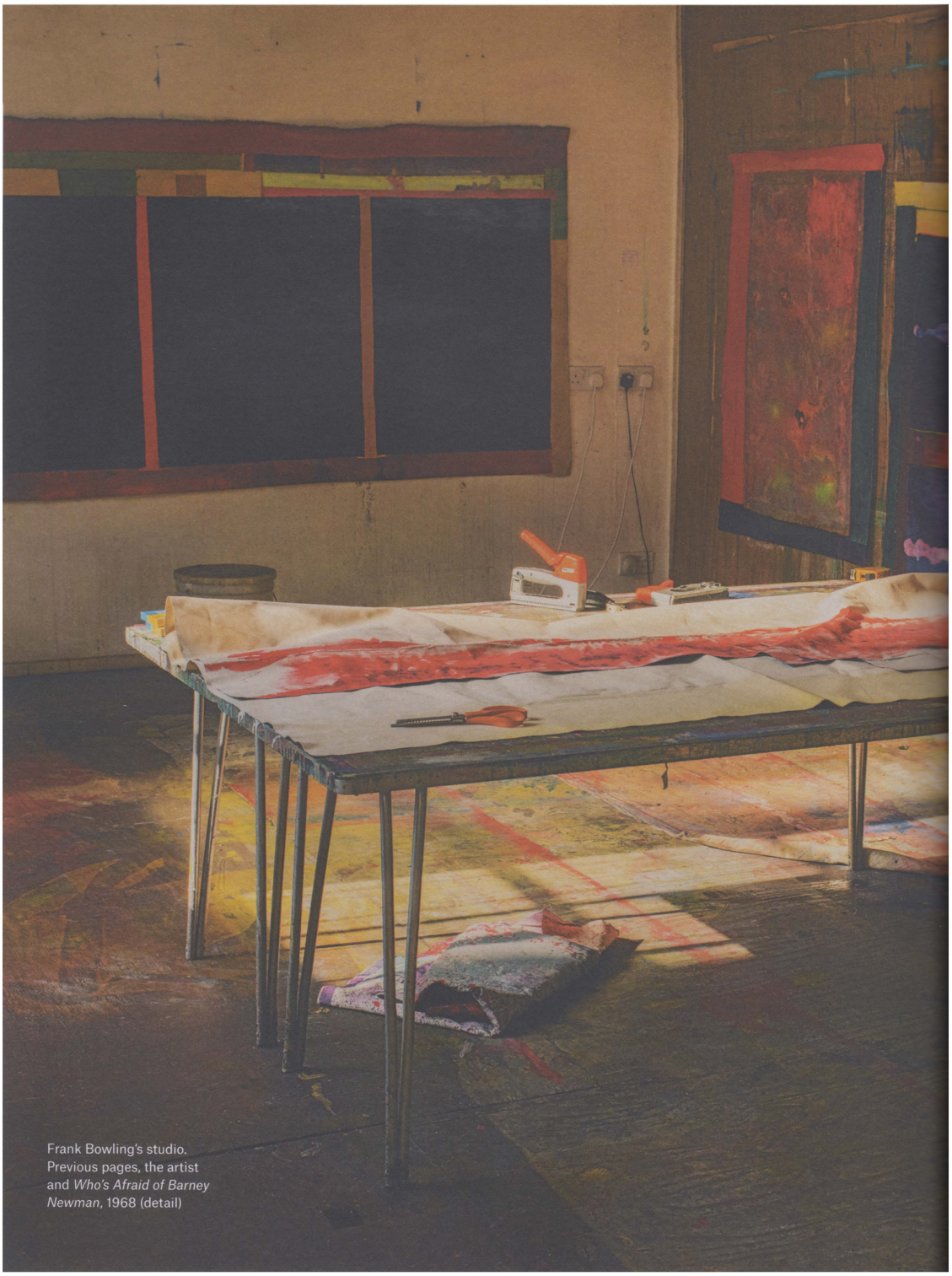


Flying colours

More than 60 years after Frank Bowling arrived in the UK from British Guiana, his elemental abstract paintings are finally receiving the recognition they deserve.
By Martin Gayford. Photographs by Kalpesh Lathigra





Frank Bowling's studio. Previous pages, the artist and *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman*, 1968 (detail)

Frank Bowling reflects, 'I must be an ambitious artist. I can't think what I can be but ambitious to have stuck it for so long. These days I can hardly walk, but I'm still there every day in the studio.' Indeed, Bowling's career has been one of the most extraordinary journeys in recent art history. He has travelled from South America to Francis Bacon's London, and onwards to New York. He has worked in many idioms and survived decades of neglect.

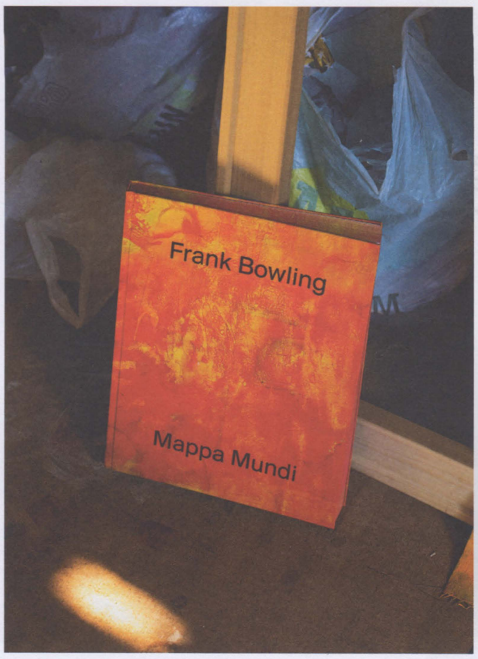
Now Bowling has finally won through. At auction, his paintings sell for six- and seven-figure sums; next summer, Tate Britain will mount an enormous retrospective of his work. Simultaneously, there will be a show downstairs devoted to Van Gogh's time in Britain. Though perhaps accidental, this is an intriguing pairing. Both Van Gogh and Bowling are associated with South London: Bowling has worked for many years in Peacock Yard, a Dickensian warren near Elephant and Castle, while Van Gogh famously lived in Brixton. And there is another, deeper connection between the two.

In the Yellow House at Arles, in 1888, Van Gogh and Gauguin dreamt of establishing a 'Studio of the South' – in the strong light and vivid colours of the tropics (Gauguin, of course, subsequently did so). Bowling made the same journey in reverse. He was born in 1934 in Bartica, a town in what was then British Guiana (now Guyana), and grew up on the banks of the Essequibo River, one of the great waterways of tropical South America. Then, at the age of 19, he sailed to London, to the misty Thames of Turner, Whistler and Monet.

What makes Bowling's trajectory unique, however, is what came next. After a dozen years in Britain, living, working and studying at the heart of the art world, he moved to Manhattan, where, on the recommendation of the proto-pop artist Larry Rivers, he took up residence at the Chelsea Hotel. 'When I arrived, Stanley Bard [the manager] thought I was a London celebrity, so he gave me a suite of rooms, plus a studio,' says Bowling. 'Can you imagine? I was allowed to run a tab. I still haven't paid the bill!'

Bowling also had a tab at Max's Kansas City, haunt of Andy Warhol and other ultra-cool cats. He would go out drinking with the critic Clement Greenberg, prophet of abstract expressionism and guru of the colour field school. Together, they would visit artists' studios and exhibitions. At one point, Bowling eked out his income by giving talks and lectures on the New York art scene.

For long years afterwards, the kind of abstract painting he was doing went right out of fashion. But Bowling just carried on. 'Maybe the punishment one gets from not being in the groove during a certain »



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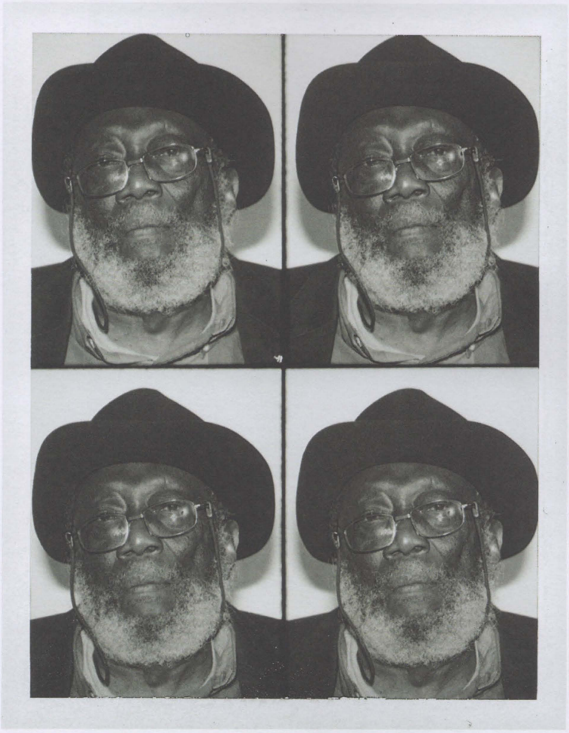
‘Maybe the punishment one gets from not being in the groove during a certain time is useful, if you have the perverse nature required’



Opposite, objects in Frank Bowling’s studio, including the catalogue of his touring exhibition *Mappa Mundi* and a Guyana Police badge. Above, passport-style portraits of the artist

time is useful,’ he says, ‘if you have the perverse nature required. It tests one’s own experience against the clichés all around.’

Bowling’s triple experience – formative years spent in the moist atmosphere and powerful sun of a tropical water land, followed by education at the Royal College of Art, then exposure to the fountainhead of American high abstraction – gives his art a distinctive quality throughout its many evolutions. ‘You change through time,’ Bowling says. ‘That happens because of the urge to make it more new, whatever drives one as an artist.’

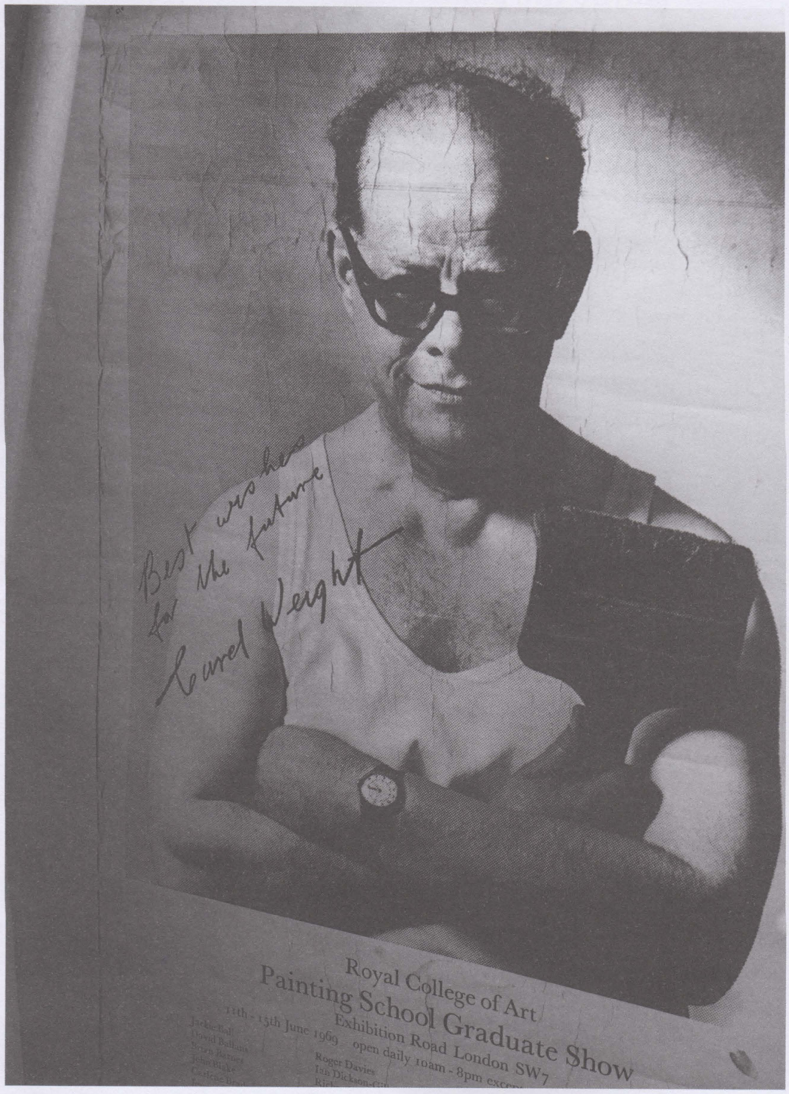
Since the early 1970s, his painting has been, for want of a better word, ‘abstract’, but with a sense of light, air and water. I put it to him that his pictures often look as if they had been done by someone with knowledge of Mondrian, Pollock and Barnett Newman, but also of Turner and Constable. ‘Absolutely right,’ he replies. ‘I think that’s very clearly the way my work has developed.’ It is also, in a way, the story of his life.

When Bowling stepped off the boat from Guyana in 1953, he remembers, he knew nothing about the visual arts. ‘I had learnt about literature, because you can’t be a British person without knowing about literature. But there was nothing in my education that would have accommodated learning to draw.’ This, Bowling speculates, is the reason why his native land has produced ‘amazing writers’, but only ‘a handful of painters in its entire history’.

In London, he soon discovered that if he registered at the labour exchange, he became liable for national service. So, thinking he might as well accept this inevitability – especially as he was told it would involve training – he went to the RAF recruitment office on Queensway and joined up. Bowling did gain an education as a result, but in a roundabout, random fashion.

The RAF taught him nothing useful, but he became friends with another serviceman, Keith Critchlow, who was already a knowledgeable and well-connected painter. Bowling pays him tribute. ‘Keith really invented me as an artist. He opened all sorts of doors for me. For example, he was an expert in Turner’s watercolours, as a boy. And Keith was always cleaning out Leon Kossoff’s studio, Leon wouldn’t let anyone else in.’

Through Critchlow, Bowling also encountered Frank Auerbach and began to visit the museums and galleries of London. He took up writing – encouraged by Critchlow and his family – and »



Above, a poster for the 1969 Painting School Graduate Show at the Royal College of Art, signed by then head of department Carel Weight. Opposite, Frank Bowling, *Mirror*, 1966

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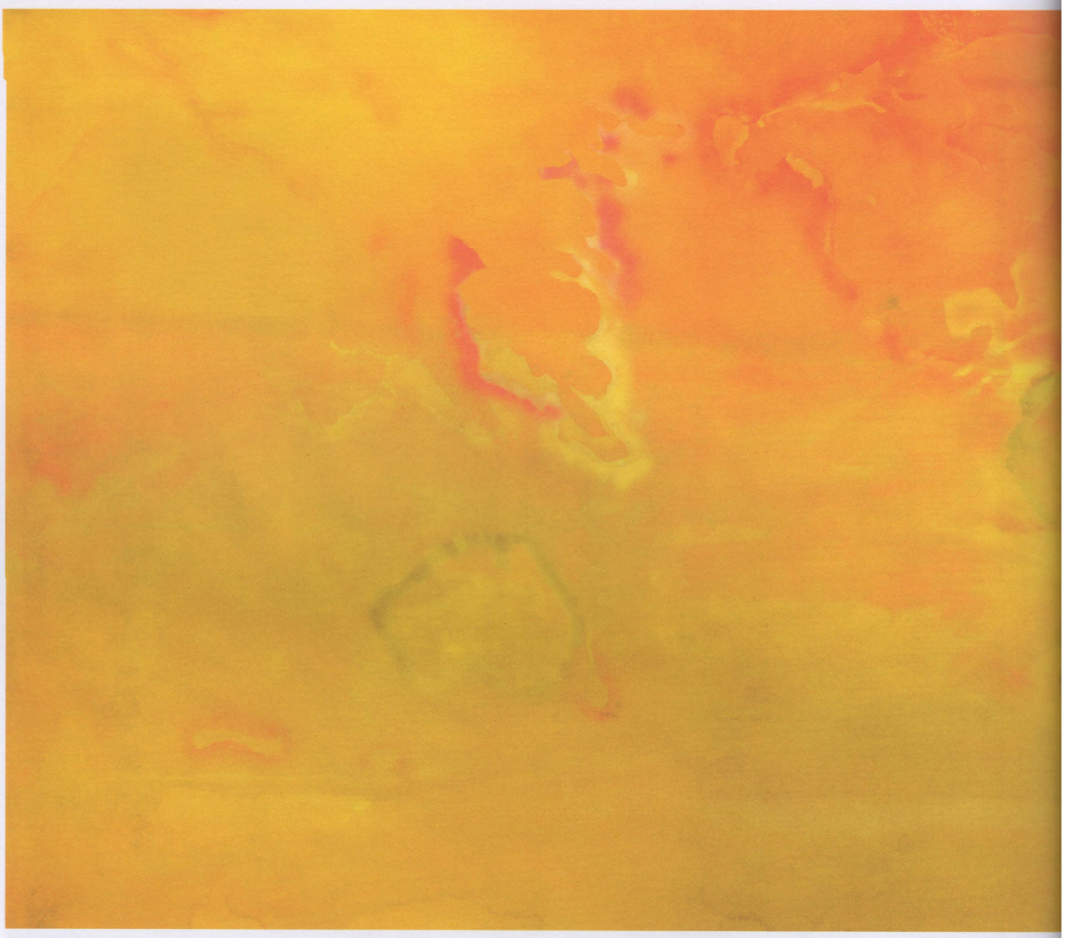


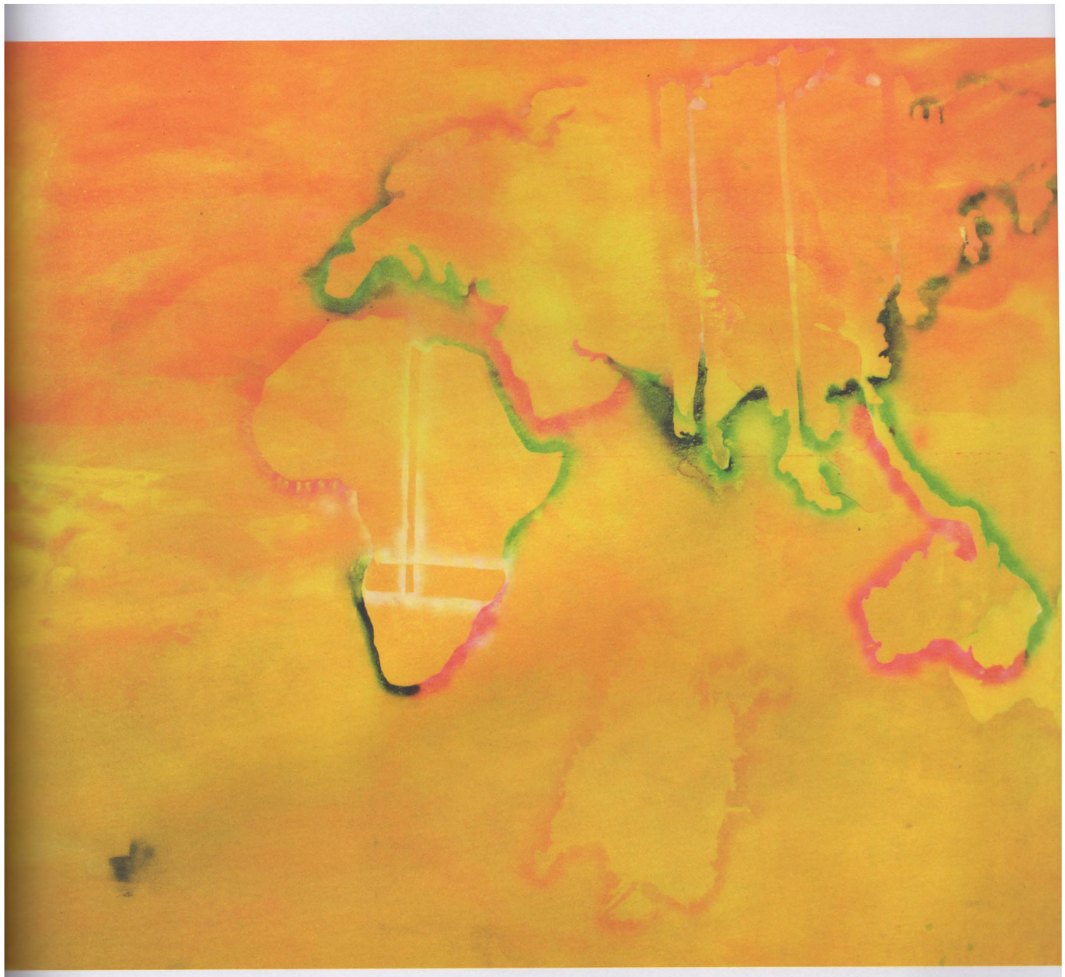
Frank Bowling,
Australia to Africa, 1971

developed a new ambition: to become a painter. But before Bowling was an artist, he was a model. 'I used to pose for people who had just graduated from college, such as Tony Whishaw and his wife.' He also sat for life classes at art schools.

Then, in 1959, after attending Chelsea School of Art and City & Guilds, he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, 'via the patronage' of Carel Weight, the head of the painting department. The summer before Bowling was due to begin, Weight arranged for him to use a studio at the Royal College, and he discovered that working next door was one of the most radical painters in England: Richard Smith.

'Dick had plastic bowls of diluted oil paint in primary and secondary colours,' Bowling recalls, 'which he was using thinly and boldly with a swing of the arm, wielding big brushes with the material raining down the surface in rivulets and splashes on the ready-made canvases which were tacked to the wall.' This sounds like a prevision of Bowling's own later work, but it was an extremely radical way of working for 1950s London.

Smith, one of the most successful British artists of the 1960s and early 1970s, became another of Bowling's mentors. 'He walked me around. Dick would always go to the pub for lunch, talk for a couple of hours, and come back through the V&A,' he says. (The Royal College painting department was then next door on Exhibition Road.) 'I learnt so much at that time, for example about Constable. He is an important painter for me. After I left London, I found out yet more about English painting in New York. Clyfford Still and people like that were so involved in Constable's painterliness, the way he pushed the paint around; they'd talk a lot about that.' In Britain, Constable tends still to be seen as a painter of cosy landscapes; in the USA, he is understood, accurately – as the critic Hilton Kramer put it – as the inventor of



Frank Bowling, Australia to Africa, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 280 x 218 cm
Image courtesy the Artist and Hales Gallery. Photo: Charlie Littlewood

'a whole new way to build an oil painting'. Bowling's mature art combines Turner's atmosphere with Constable's love of the medium itself: the thick, sensuous materiality of paint.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, abstraction was not an idiom he was ready to explore himself. 'I was so grateful to people like Carel Weight that I wanted to knuckle down and do the academic stuff that was demanded of me. So at the Royal College I did paintings from life and still lifes, my early apprenticeship.' He found himself part of a famously brilliant year. Among the other students who arrived that autumn were RB Kitaj, Allen Jones and David Hockney.

Bowling and his fellow students were all aware of the exciting developments taking place in New York. But they were inclined to turn these new ways of making pictures to figurative use. 'In England, we were taught that subject matter rules. If you don't have a story to tell, you'd better find one. I think that has hampered a lot of English artists who danced on the edge of abstraction.'

For a while, it applied to Bowling himself. In the early to mid-1960s, he worked in a variety of modes. His magnum opus of the period, *Mirror* (1966), conflates elements of pop, op, colour field and 'hard-edge' abstraction into a sort of anthology of art trends in Swinging London. The central figure, a self-portrait, owes much to Bacon, of whom he saw a great deal at one time.

Bacon comforted Bowling when the latter was temporarily expelled from the Royal College for the offence of marrying the registrar, Paddy Kitchen (the marriage did not last). After a good deal of drinking, Bacon cooked him an omelette. 'I've never eaten another omelette quite like it, so beautiful and tasty. He was a very good cook,' says Bowling. After that, however, the two men had an argument »

In the 1960s, Bowling did not see himself as a 'black artist'. He still doesn't

Above, Frank Bowling, *Cover Girl*, 1964–66. Opposite, canvases in the artist's studio

about pictorial space. Bowling felt that Bacon was still using 'Renaissance space' – a perspective box, or 'a stage with figures on it'. And Bowling thought this was too stifling. 'Being British, but coming from the western hemisphere, has enabled me to dodge a lot of traps that were waiting for me to fall into.' However, in effect, he was telling Bacon that his work was old-fashioned, and their friendship did not last much longer. Eventually, Bowling found the atmosphere in London and the conservative taste for naturalistic illusionism equally stifling.

He graduated from the Royal College with the Silver Medal for Painting (Hockney won the gold), but later felt he was being marginalised. In 1966, he found himself representing Britain at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. But Bowling did not see himself as a 'black artist'. He still doesn't. He is sceptical about identity politics in art, and such categories as 'queer art', 'women's art' and 'black art'. One of his first questions to Clement Greenberg was: were there any no-go areas in painting, for black artists or anyone else? He was delighted by the response: 'Clem blew up, and said, "No! Absolutely not! No no-go areas!"' Similarly, Bowling is nettled by being lectured about the 'African diaspora'. His own feeling is that the people of colour in the Americas are a brand new sort of person: not African, not European.

The first group of works he produced after moving to New York in 1966 – now among his best known – dealt in a way with geography. They were sensuously painted colour-field abstractions, except for outline maps of Africa and South America. From these, he moved through various lyrically beautiful abstract idioms – poured paint, flecks and flickers of pigment, surfaces built up with gel and encrusted like a river littered with flotsam and jetsam.

Many writers, myself included, felt that there was an underlying sense of landscape in Bowling's later paintings: moving water, sun through moist air. It took him a long time to accept this, however. In 1989, on a return visit to Guyana, he asked his son Sacha to look at the estuary landscape in Georgetown, early one morning. Was there, Bowling asked, any connection with his painting? Sacha thought there was. Then Bowling recognised that there was, too. 'This heat haze where everything looks flat,' he told the critic Mel Gooding, 'was what I'd been trying to do in my painting.' So he had discovered, as TS Eliot wrote, 'We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started'. ◆

'Frank Bowling' is at Tate Britain from 31 May to 26 August 2019. www.tate.org.uk. Modern British Art, Christie's London, 19 & 20 November, page 194