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Frank Bowling

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of Arts

1 BECOMING AN ARTIST: FIGURATION TO ABSTRACTION

When Frank Bowling arrived in the late summer of 1959 at the Royal College of Art, the most prestigious and sought-after postgraduate art school in the country, to begin work before his fellow cohort of new students arrived for the autumn term, it was with a remarkable self-possession and not a little *chutzpah*. He had behind him a number of evening-class drawing sessions and a handful of piecemeal efforts at painting, but no other relevant qualifications beyond ingrained determination, an indefatigable ambition to make himself an artist, and the absolute conviction that he could make it happen. He was, of course, aware that his sometime friend and drinking companion Francis Bacon – whom he considered to be without doubt ‘one of the greatest painters of our time’ – was essentially self-taught. Bowling already knew what he couldn’t yet do, but he knew that when the demand arose, and he had defined his purposes, he would find the way to make the art he desired. It was an inner certainty he had carried with him to England from British Guiana: the restless conviction of one who voyages with creative purpose, whose peregrinations and travails are understood as the necessary preparations to a poetic destiny.

The paintings that Bowling made at the Royal College, and in the period just after, were various in style and subject, but they had in common an intensity of regard to the visual fact and a deeply sensual concentration on the material actuality of the paint itself, as if it were the very medium of the connection between the eye and its subject. In the still-lives of 1960–61 (*Sheep’s Heads*, *Birds*, *Pig’s Head*) the play of the brush or the palette knife seems to enact the optical play of vision over the object in its painterly space, registering that operation as almost haptic. This quality of visceral energy and visual intensity transferred to the human subject *in extremis*, as in paintings like *Birthday I*, *Birthday II* and *4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (all 1961), or even the *Athletes* series of the previous year, was bound to make those critics who were impressed think of Francis Bacon, who was at that time without question,

as David Sylvester remarked, ‘the modern British artist most talked about over the last ten years’.

From our perspective now, however, it is quite clear that, despite a vital connection, this critical identification was overdone. The deeper significance of Bacon’s influence on Bowling was neither stylistic nor thematic: it was, rather, a matter of attitude, of painterly *insouciance*, it encouraged a determination in the younger artist to do as he deemed necessary, regardless of what others expected. It is an attitude that persisted. Unlike that of Bacon, moreover, Bowling’s figuration in these early paintings was unabashedly narrative and humanistic, neither emblematic nor instantaneous and immediately sensational: ‘What I painted was human concern’ he said many years later. His subject in these paintings is pain, violence and suffering, conceived within a social reality, and its presiding spirits are Rembrandt, late Goya, Van Gogh. Its essential feeling is shaped by the pity of things. It is coloured by the memory of specific circumstances, particularly aspects of his childhood and youth in British Guiana. This pervading presence of recollection and commemoration has persisted to this day, in differing ways, even in Bowling’s most radically abstract painting.

Beggar No. 3 (1963) is explicit in this respect: it features the haunting image of his mother’s house, here *painted* directly, rather than, as in later works, a photo-screen stencilled ghost, one of Bowling’s most significant recurrent motifs. It is an emblematic acknowledgment of T. S. Eliot’s psychologically fraught line: ‘Home is where one starts from.’ It was the house to which Bowling brought, at his imperious and charitable mother’s behest, the beggars on the streets of New Amsterdam to be fed. The enduring trauma induced by these duties undoubtedly lay behind the anguished expressionist figuration of the works of this early period; it was mitigated already by what was to be Bowling’s abiding concern for some years to use colour in a schematic structural way, and to work recurrently with an idea of underlying pictorial geometry. Pain kindles chaos; form alleviates.

‘To just get out and go to London, and maybe – this was the plan – maybe get lucky, right?’

FRANK BOWLING, 2001

Bowling's overriding sense of the painting as itself a made object, its design-structure and its physical presence manifest and significant irrespective of subject, and the ramifications of that when, before long, his art moved in the direction of abstraction, can be traced to his preternaturally intense engagement with the materiality, with the very stuff and texture of his paintings. It is clear from the beginning that his critical-creative negotiations with classic art, his first-hand studies at the National Gallery and the Tate of Rembrandt, Gainsborough, Goya, Turner and Constable, which deepened and became more complex with the years, were deeply informed by this concentration on facture. Bowling's first concern was with the concrete: from this time on, his eye and mind would concentrate on the dynamic disposition across the surface of medium and pigment, and of the painting's visual and tangible topography as effected and modified by material substances, including unorthodox colouring agents, ammonia, spirits, varnish, beeswax and acrylic gel.

In Bowling's own painting as time went on, the involuntary memories of his mother's craft – stitch, seam, baste, edge and tack – were assimilated to his sometimes obsessive preoccupation with the nature and facture of the textile support and his penchant for arbitrary stitched, glued and stapled extensions and additions. His period as a teenage huckster cycling the coastal road with material swatches and samples for dresses and saris contributed no doubt to this lifelong penchant for fabrics and textile patterns. Imaginative individuation draws on many sources: as Bowling grew older these Proustian cues to recollection recurred in different ways with increasing frequency, as colour or surface feature, as subliminal image or incorporated cloth object.

In a fabular visual narrative, Bowling's dazzling and enigmatic painting *Mirror* dramatised his fraught emotional and artistic predicament in 1966, and crystallised a characteristic attitude with extraordinary complexity and ambition. Among other things, that brilliantly reflective (and reflexive) painting



Self-Portrait, 1959
Oil on board, 45.7 × 35.6 cm

was Bowling's multifaceted 'goodbye to all that': it was a defiant valedictory renunciation, at once personal, professional and satirical. The portrait of the disillusioned artist dematerialising into the Ellisonian 'invisible man' was, indeed, a wry expression of sorrow, as well as an image of satirical 'savage indignation'.

After the extraordinary emblematic layering of figurative with abstract elements, and the kaleidoscopic deployments of minimal art and design-style elements in his 'Swan paintings' of 1964 and his 1966 masterpiece *Mirror*, Bowling's earliest work in New York continued to experiment with such arbitrary juxtapositions for a while: divided, roughly geometric planes of chromatic colour were combined with stencilled lettering and complex, evocative figurations – his mother's store, the street beggars, bathing women. By 1967, however, by radical experiment and self-critical elimination of what was no longer necessary to his art, he had found his way forward to the first of the all-over stained emblematic 'map paintings', and was establishing himself as a New York abstractionist of towering ambition and self-confidence.

2 A TRANSATLANTIC ARTIST: LONDON TO NEW YORK

When Frank Bowling got to New York in late 1966 he was determined to hit the ground running. He took with him a considerable number of canvases that carried the silk-screened, stencilled image of his mother's house, Bowling's Variety Store on Main Street, New Amsterdam, in British Guiana. These he had had printed deliberately at Camberwell before his departure, as a practical preparation for a new beginning in the USA. They were to provide a focal-point image that maintained a tenuously emotional connection to his personal and artistic history (he had already included this somewhat ghostly image as a graphic element in *Cover Girl*, a painting made earlier that year): 'I didn't want to lose my identity, that's how I felt about it.'

Bowling had thus already anticipated the possibility of an arbitrary but potent graphic sign as an element – formal in nature – in whatever kind of painting he might make. The reference was to be personally significant to the painter, but, as a sign, enigmatic to the viewer of the painting in which it figured. The Guggenheim Award in early 1967 – a considerable accolade for an artist with so little experience behind him – enabled his move from a room at the Hotel Chelsea to a larger downtown studio, and a game-changing shift in scale. For Bowling the new beginning was an investment in colour, pure colour, and paint as such, thinned to a translucency, poured, allowed to find its own expressive fields and fusions, its own radiant atmospherics. His 1971 interview with the Whitney curator Robert Doty was emphatic about his concern with 'pure painting': 'Colour plays an enormous part in my work, if not the most important part.' He had found it necessary, he said, to 'lean on ready-made shapes and photographs' – the latter in the form of screen-printed photo stencils – as formal focus points. Within a year he had abandoned these devices.

In 1967 Bowling began with two 'ready-made' motifs – 'mother's house' and the maps – as props to support his primary formal purposes, which, as he conceived them, were to do with light and colour as such. The former was a

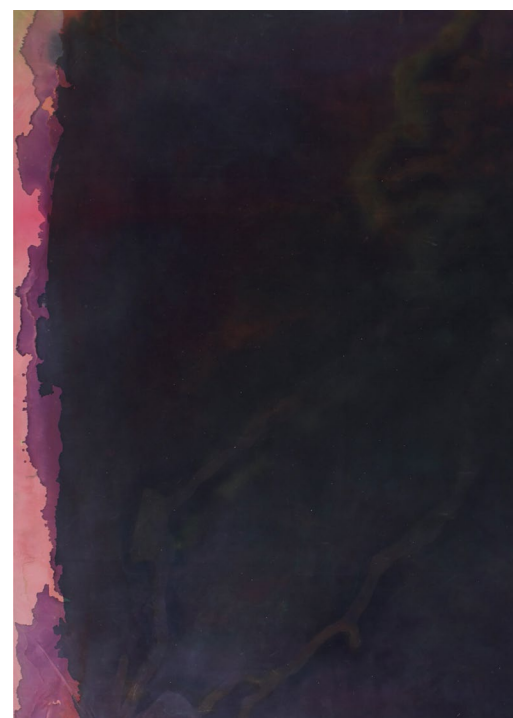
microcosmic memory-sign, deeply personal in implication; the latter was a macrocosmic geo-historical sign, instantly recognisable and objective as a map of somewhere else – the southern half of the American continent, Africa, Australia and, later, Asia and the whole world, as in the panoramic *Penumbra* (1970). Repetition of these signs, especially when placed in inexplicable juxtaposition, created (as was intended) a kind of identity for the artist, but it was one the spectator could not read as definitively determined or tendentious.

These signs might seem autobiographical, suggesting a local personal history set against an impersonal cross-continental vastness; they might seem to allude to the troubled historic connection of Africa to the New World; but having no readable narrative, nor the encryption of the rebus, they lacked any immediacy of political address, whether direct or indirect. In the title of *Mother's House on South America* (1968), for example, the preposition (*on* rather than *in*) clearly indicates that the relation of the two motifs is formal, and intrinsic to the painting itself, rather than narrative or personal-historical. Bowling was happy that these paintings made in New York in the late 1960s made their own meaning: they were seen as indeed complexly polyvalent, and Bowling was, and remains, of the view that they could have no fixed meaning or message. They were certainly free of any intentional message (using that term as in communication theory, not as in political discourse) beyond that of creating the circumstance for a special kind of experience, one that had no predetermined 'meaning' beyond what Bowling (remembering, perhaps, Bacon's insistence on physical and psychic immediacy) called 'a painting experience', complex and allusive maybe, but inextricable from the sensational presence of the work.

This was a radical position; one that gave primacy to what Ad Reinhardt termed art-as-art. ('Art is art, and everything else is everything else,' Reinhardt had written; and

*'How to be a major artist?
A painter in contention?'*

FRANK BOWLING, 2001



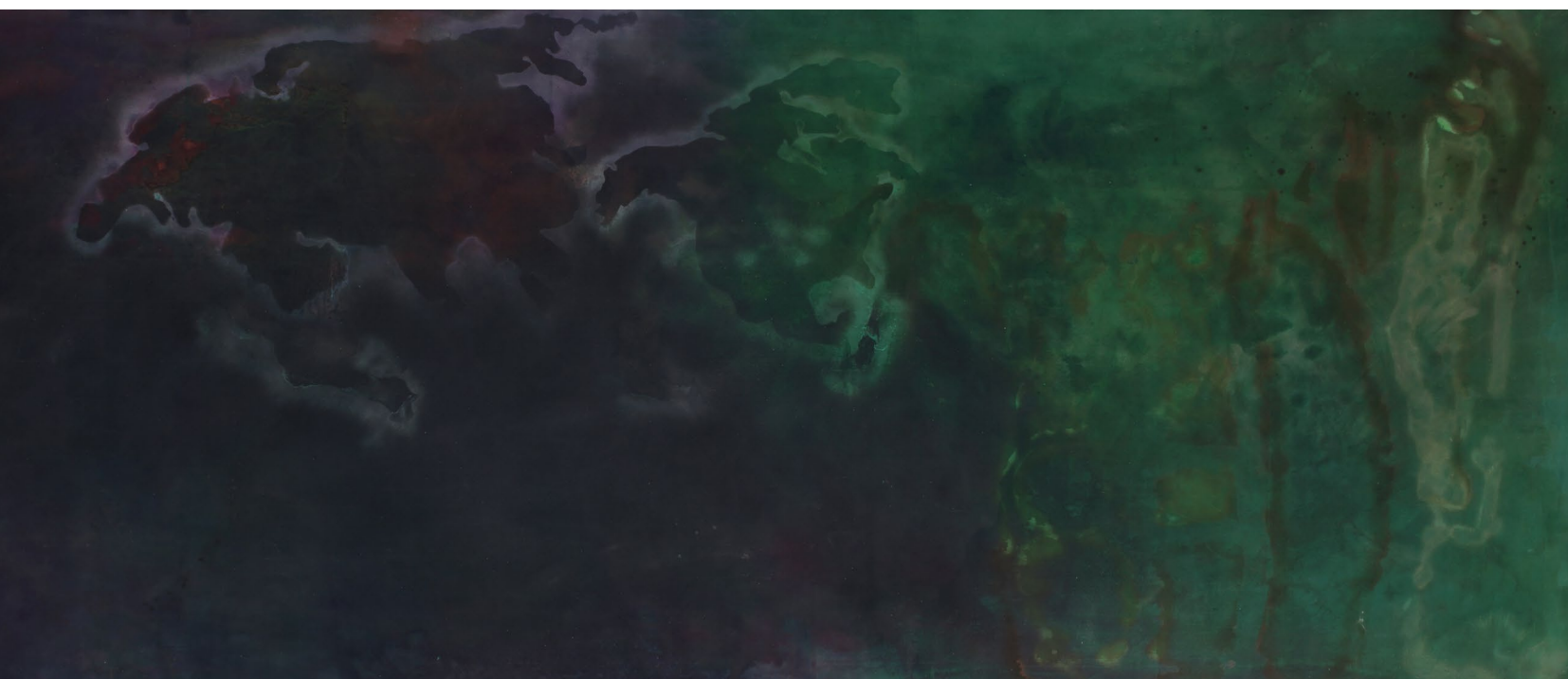
Bowling might well have agreed with another Reinhardt maxim, in all its ambiguity: 'Any meaning is a demeaning.' Even though maps as abstract signs, as Jasper Johns had implied, are in themselves simple and value-free, they are nevertheless immediately recognisable – 'things the mind already knows' – and carry connotations as diverse as the histories and world-views of those who recognise them. Bowling discovered and developed a motif that was not a 'subject' as such, but was fraught with possibilities of thematic and political interpretation. As Johns had observed: 'Everyone is of course free to interpret the work in his own way. I think seeing a picture is one thing and interpreting it is another.'

The map paintings were from the start intended to consolidate a distinctive new presence in New York painting, and their scale, at times vast, culminating in the astounding paintings of 1971 (made with the great spaces of the Whitney in mind, and not seen again until

2013 in London, except for *Marcia H Travels*, 1970, which was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2003) was deliberately attention-seeking. In these major contributions to post-painterly abstraction, with the distinctive added potency of a charged referential implication, Bowling was fearlessly putting himself 'in contention' with the best painters of the post-war New York School, including the legendary first-generation abstract expressionists, many of whom were still actively on the scene. Only now, half a century later, can we see clearly the originality and magnitude of his creative success in this endeavour.

Screen-print stencilling and epidiastroscope-tracing, the means by which Bowling infiltrated apparently connotative elements into colour abstraction, are both mechanically mediated procedures that abnegate the indexical mark, as do the arbitrary wash, pour and puddle that create the unpredictable colour fields themselves. Thus he may have considered that they would evade the sentimental implications

Penumbra, 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 226 × 702 cm



of autobiography or of expressionist emotion. He insisted in fact that the traced and stencilled signs in these paintings were essentially denotative, and that the colour was not symbolic. (Bowling may have thought that his political aesthetics found ample expression in the critical and polemical writings that made him a lively presence in a contentious contemporary New York discourse.) The paintings themselves provide the spectacle – they were indeed spectacular – of a black artist deliberately committed to a form of abstraction that, notwithstanding its resort to the emblematic sign, was obdurate in its refusal of any clearly figurative or symbolic expression of an overtly political kind. The act of painting *itself*, Bowling insisted, was political. Much of their historical significance, however, has been seen in precisely this aspect, and the map paintings came to the foreground of historical and theoretical discussion only after their critical rediscovery in the first

edition of this monograph in 2011, and their exhibition at Hales Gallery in London in 2013.

Paintings make their own histories, regardless of their makers' intentions; or, rather, their histories are made for them in the dialectics of exhibition, critical response and interpretation, and their representations in private and public collections. In New York in the late 1960s Bowling became quickly aware of the myriad of interpretative possibilities he had opened up; he might, in certain titles, even provoke them – as in *Night Journey* (1968–69) and *Middle Passage* (1970) – but he did not intend his paintings to be primarily declarative in either personal or political terms. The power of the map paintings, like that of dreams – and indeed they have over the years acquired an increasingly dream-like countenance – lies precisely in the freedom they confer on the spectator to confer meanings and values on them. They have become classic.

3 THE RETURN: MATERIAL LANDSCAPES OF THE MIND

In 1972–73 Bowling made a handful of expansive, beautiful and purely abstract colour-field paintings, devoid of motif, which conformed essentially to the strictures of 'openness and clarity' by which Greenberg had influentially defined 'post-painterly abstraction' just ten years earlier. These works represent the artist's final reckoning – in a kind of lustration – with the two giants of the first-generation abstract expressionists who had preoccupied the back of his creative mind during the previous five years: Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. These were the 'great precursors' (to use a term from Harold Bloom's 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence*) who had haunted the map paintings. One of the paintings from 1972 was, significantly, entitled *Looking at Barney and Mark*: each of these paintings certainly reflected formally on that act of awed contemplation.

At this point Bowling realised that what he was painting was not really his own. His response, characteristically radical, not to say drastic, was to initiate the series of 'poured paintings', which in the mid-1970s carried to a definitive conclusion the creative predisposition of his New York years to a formalist art freed from expressive personality and representation. In the first edition of this book (2011) I wrote of these exhilarating paintings that their achievement 'of painterly spectacle, of vital materiality, of motif diversity' still awaited due critical recognition. That came rapidly, with the 2012 Tate Britain *Focus* display. The automatic creation of these brilliant object-paintings enabled an astonishing diversity of both managed and accidental effect, and of image and mood. Bowling, however, eventually chafed at the limitations of a purely automatic procedure. By 1978 he felt again the compulsion to intervene in

'I wanted to catch the light and movement of nature itself.'

FRANK BOWLING, 2010



the image, to re-complicate the surface, to add touch and atmosphere, to augment the evocative possibilities offered by the sheer vertical format demanded by the process.

In a group of remarkable, mostly vertical paintings made between 1979 and 1982 Bowling initiated a new phase in his work in which expressive ambition entered into a new kind of dynamic interaction with the materials of his art. In a succession of complex and spectacular works, which included *Mazarunitankfeat* (1979), *DEVILSOLE* (1980), *Ah Susan Whoosh* (1981) and *Odysseus's Footfalls* (1982), the external world – indeed, more exactly, its circumambient cosmos, the skies of night, of dawn and sundown, the wheeling stars, the towering, vaporous clouds irradiated by sunrise, the contrasting effulgence, shimmer and gleam of night and day – has inescapably become the very subject of the paintings. It is as if the schematic and prescriptive, self-referential constraints of New York formalism had at last been shed: it is impossible to contemplate these paintings without associative reveries, without an overpowering sense of their poetic resonances.

Although he was to continue crossing and re-crossing the Atlantic for the next thirty years, in the late 1970s Bowling returned to base

himself in London, his primary concern being at this time to spend more time with his growing sons. He settled in Pimlico, within a step of the Tate Gallery on Millbank. It was a period of intensive experimentation, most significantly with the expressive use of acrylic gel and acrylic foam strips. The strips enabled him to create quasi-geometric relief-structures, held in place by the gel, which could itself be worked up to hectic impasto, bringing turbulence and reflected natural light to the painting's surface, and complex colour-light refracted from the underlying acrylic colour.

The purposes of those New York contemporaries who were also using acrylic gel – among them, notably, Jules Olitski and Larry Poons – were persistently formalistic; their aesthetic preoccupations remained resolutely with the enclosed world of the painting as a flat surface, abstractly self-referential. Bowling, however, was concerned with the ways in which his textural disposition of this translucent substance together with the relief 'drawing' enabled by the use of the strips might intensify the complexity of the 'painting experience'. They would extend its visual effects, and its affective potency, to the vivid evocation of natural phenomena and their complex associations, to

Jamsahibwall, 1990
Acrylic on canvas, 188 x 356 cm



9 NEW YORK, NEW YORK!

Because he had friends there, and had found the atmosphere and the artistic camaraderie of the New York scene congenial, Bowling felt confident in 1967 about going to live and work in New York. He had already visited the city several times, staying and working at the Hotel Chelsea, a favoured venue for artists and writers and the home-from-home for a transient raggle-taggle of unconventional and otherwise displaced poets, artists, photographers and musicians. Bowling felt as at ease there, and in the New York artists' bars, as he had in the artists' pubs he frequented in London. He was nevertheless disconcerted that in New York there were distinct divisions between black and white artists and that, even in the bars frequented by both, they tended to keep apart. Bowling found, however, that his status as a black British outsider enabled him to move easily between the two groups.

During an extended visit in 1965, he had been actively encouraged to migrate to New York by the poet-critics John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara (who was also a charismatic curator at the Museum of Modern Art), the poet Kenneth Koch and the painter Larry Rivers. It was thanks to a generous intervention by O'Hara that when Bowling arrived at the Chelsea in late summer 1966, Stanley Bard (the owner) was expecting him, and installed him in a room-cum-studio. 'When I asked [him] how much it cost, and he told me, I couldn't believe that anyone would think I had that kind of money. So I sat him down and told him what I could afford, and he said "Don't worry, don't worry, don't worry: we can make a trade."' Shortly before Bowling arrived, O'Hara, at just forty years old, died in an accident on Fire Island.

In all things an ironist and a provocateur, Larry Rivers was to be a crucial and influential mentor and a generous friend. He was a jazz musician, a poet and a brilliant and idiosyncratic draughtsman and painter who had been one of the key initiators of pop art, his own brand of which was a kind of controlled anarchy of styles in which he combined poetic juxtapositions, personal references, free-form quotation from



Frank Bowling at the 5+1 show, State University of New York, Stony Brook, 1969

high, low and popular art, and political parodies of big historical themes. His quick, edgy wit, his politics, his rebellious temperament, his musical and poetic gifts, his love of chance and his technical virtuosity chimed well with Bowling's inclinations and ambitions. Rivers was a quintessential New Yorker, and through him Bowling had an immediate *entrée* into the city's most lively culture. At this time, through Rivers, Bowling also met Jasper Johns, whose deep games with sign, stencilled word and enigmatic image made an impact upon a mind seeking new ways of knowing and new ways of making art.

There were, naturally, mixed impulses behind Bowling's transatlantic passage. Powerful among them was the attraction of an informal comradeship among the many artists he knew in New York 'who happened to be black' (as he ironically recalled many years later) and with whom Bowling had forged links on his earlier visits. Theirs was a solidarity intensified by their own embattled position as abstractionist modernists within a larger black visual-arts community in the States which at that charged historical moment was looking for art to demonstrate a visible commitment to

the civil rights movement, and expected that identification to be expressed in figurative or symbolic terms. There were also organised moves afoot to press for proper representation of black artists in public institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

No such organised black artistic community existed in London, where Bowling had come to feel that he was regarded as an exotic. The Caribbean Artists Movement was mainly literary in inspiration and did not come into formal existence until late 1966, after his departure. Indeed it was his growing sense of exclusion and isolation as a visual artist that provided the primary negative impetus for his move. 'I thought my career path here was being blocked', he said many years later. 'If I hadn't gone to New York I wouldn't have been able to develop as an artist.'

Bowling's career in London was perhaps faltering, but for reasons it is difficult to identify with precision: it certainly seemed to be unconnected with the quality of the art he was producing or the interest it aroused. In that year, 1966, he was persuaded by Roland Penrose (who shortly after bought a painting for his own collection) and Bryan Robertson to submit the diptych *Big Bird* (1964) to represent the UK at the *First World Festival of Negro Arts* at Dakar in Senegal. At first he resisted what he felt was a subtly limiting placement, but his painting went nevertheless to the great Léopold Senghor's celebration of *négritude*, where it won the Grand Prize. At the 1966 Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy, *Mirror* won the Painting of the Year award. Bowling was also a respected member of the London Group, with which he regularly exhibited.

He had, though, been disappointed not to be able to find a dealer who would operate more effectively than Grabowski within the mainstream London commercial scene, and he had noted, with troubled puzzlement, his exclusion from major exhibitions. In the polite, middle-class exchanges characteristic of English socio-cultural discourse, it is sometimes difficult

to pinpoint a specific occasion of discrimination within the operations of unconscious or unspoken prejudice. But his friend Bryan Robertson had remarked sometime in 1964 (the year of the first *New Generation* exhibition) that 'England is not ready for a gifted artist of colour.'

Bowling has attested that Robertson himself (notwithstanding Robertson's exclusion of his work from the *New Generation* show) and several artist-administrators, Carel Weight, Robert Medley and Claude Rogers among them, had been actively encouraging and helpful to his career. He recognised moreover that neither his entry into art schools, nor his early success in the art world (which included his two teaching posts) had in any way been hindered by his background and colour. Whatever the case may be, Bowling has usually spoken without rancour of his decision to migrate west, and wryly acknowledges that it is difficult to identify any specific act of racism as responsible for the setbacks his career suffered in England during the mid-1960s.

In fact, there were powerfully subjective factors, both personal and professional, at play in his decision to relocate to New York: the crisis in his marriage; a certain personal uncertainty and complexity of spirit, reflected, as we have seen, in his creative work; above all, perhaps, the discovery that there was a raw vitality and competitive edge to the New York creative-critical scene that suited his temperament. He was seeking new stimuli and a new direction, and New York seemed to offer just those possibilities. Other artists among his talented contemporaries were also responding at precisely this time to the magnetic pull of the American art world, most notably David Hockney, Richard Smith and John Hoyland. Bowling's arrival was preceded propitiously by his first solo show in New York, at Terry Dintenfass Gallery, in January 1966, which presented a number of his earlier expressionist-figurative paintings.

The critic Lawrence Alloway, who had been highly influential in promoting American abstract painting in England and was now a curator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, had set the



opposite

***Barticabather*, 1966–67**

Oil and stitched canvas on canvas,
148 × 102 cm

new critical mood in 1960: 'American art is not an exotic national style. It is the mainstream of modern art, which used to run through Paris.' For Bowling in the mid-1960s, New York was where the most interesting and challenging action was. 'New York', he later recalled, 'seemed like the centre of the modern world in terms of modernist philosophy. The best public thinkers were all there.'

Once there, he set to work to re-create himself as a painter. Paintings from his first months in the city understandably spring from pop art influences, the geometric interests and the wilful stylistic contradictions that had characterised his art over the previous two years. Paintings such as *Barticabather* (1966–67) and *My Guyana* (1966–67) combined stitched-on collage fragments of earlier figurative work with the screenprint images of 'mother's house'. It was as if he was loath to let go of the familiar and cast himself into completely unbroached territory.

Other paintings from this time, such as *Mother's House with Beware of the Dog* (1966) and *Bowling's Variety Store* (1967), contain ironically self-referential features; in these the geometry is regular and determined, and both the planes of colour and the divisions between them are clear and definite. Yet each painting has the feel of disguise about it, as if it is coded in some way inaccessible to the viewer. This is an aspect of Bowling's painting we have encountered before: a habit of ambiguity, a propensity for hidden meaning. It is of a piece with the striving in his work of the previous years to free his art from the literalism of any one-to-one correspondence, and to create a multivalent imagery, fruitfully ambiguous and obscure. Pure abstraction beckoned, but he was not yet ready to succumb to its call.

In *Mother's House with Beware of the Dog*, the top half is dominated by a tumultuous screen-printed image of his mother's house, its windows and the windswept palm tree in red, as if the house were engulfed in fire, while an absurd rat-like figure (a dog?) is inserted into the arbitrary geometric spaces of the lower half, and the



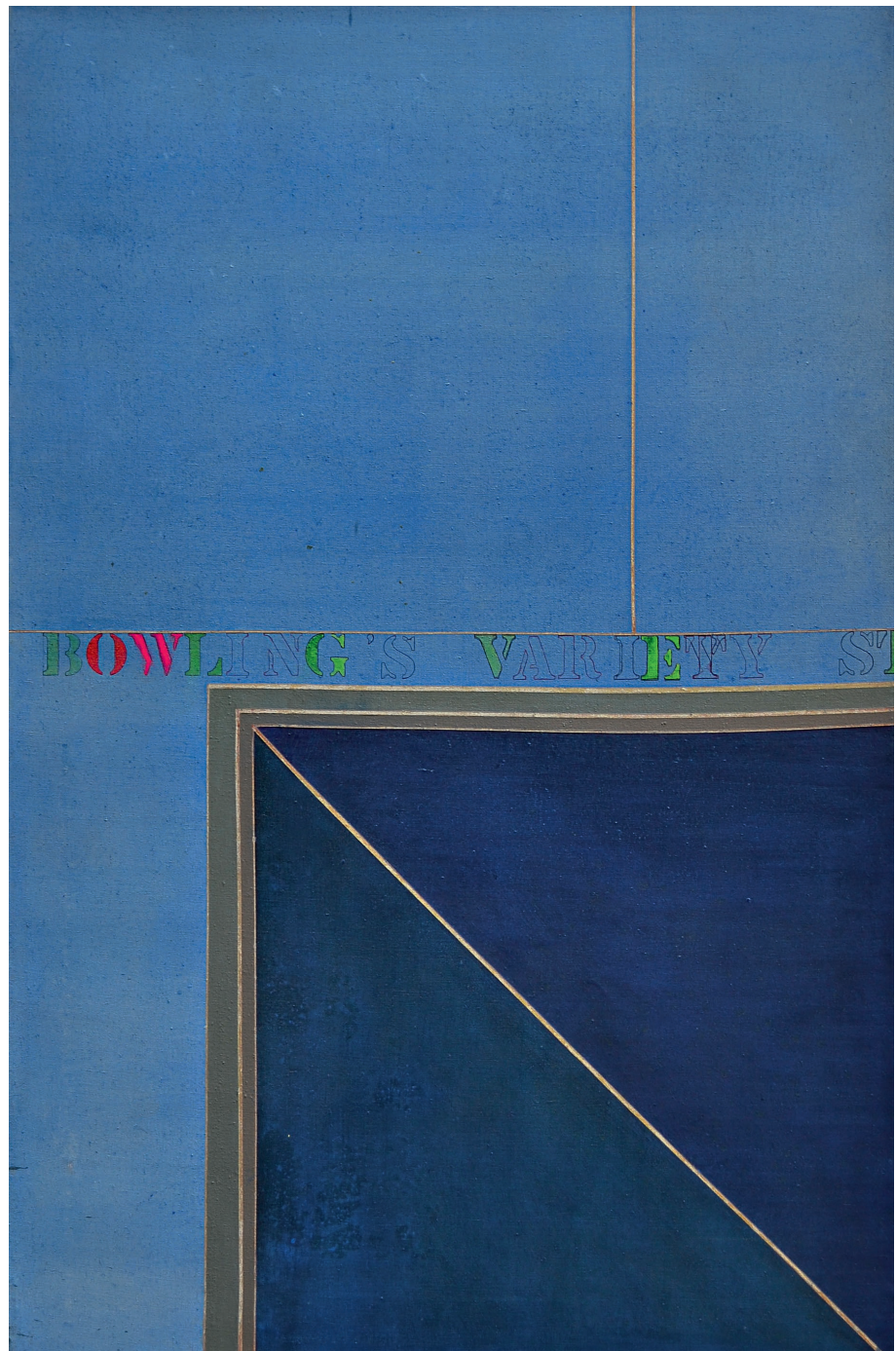
***My Guyana*, 1966–67**

Oil on canvas, 143.5 × 120.5 cm

opposite
*Mother's House with
Beware of the Dog, 1966*
Acrylic on canvas, 143.5 × 120.5 cm

vertically stencilled fairground lettering delivers the cheerfully multicolour *cave canem* warning. There is a kind of quasi-surreal inconsequentiality to this image; its programme (for there certainly seems to be one) is enigmatic. *Bowling's Variety Store* replaces the subject-image with its stencilled title, hinting both at the artist's own virtuosity and at his uncertainty as to style and content. Against the void of a Hockney blue sky, the lower-right rectangle suggests the back of an empty canvas. What is to be the next act in this variety show?

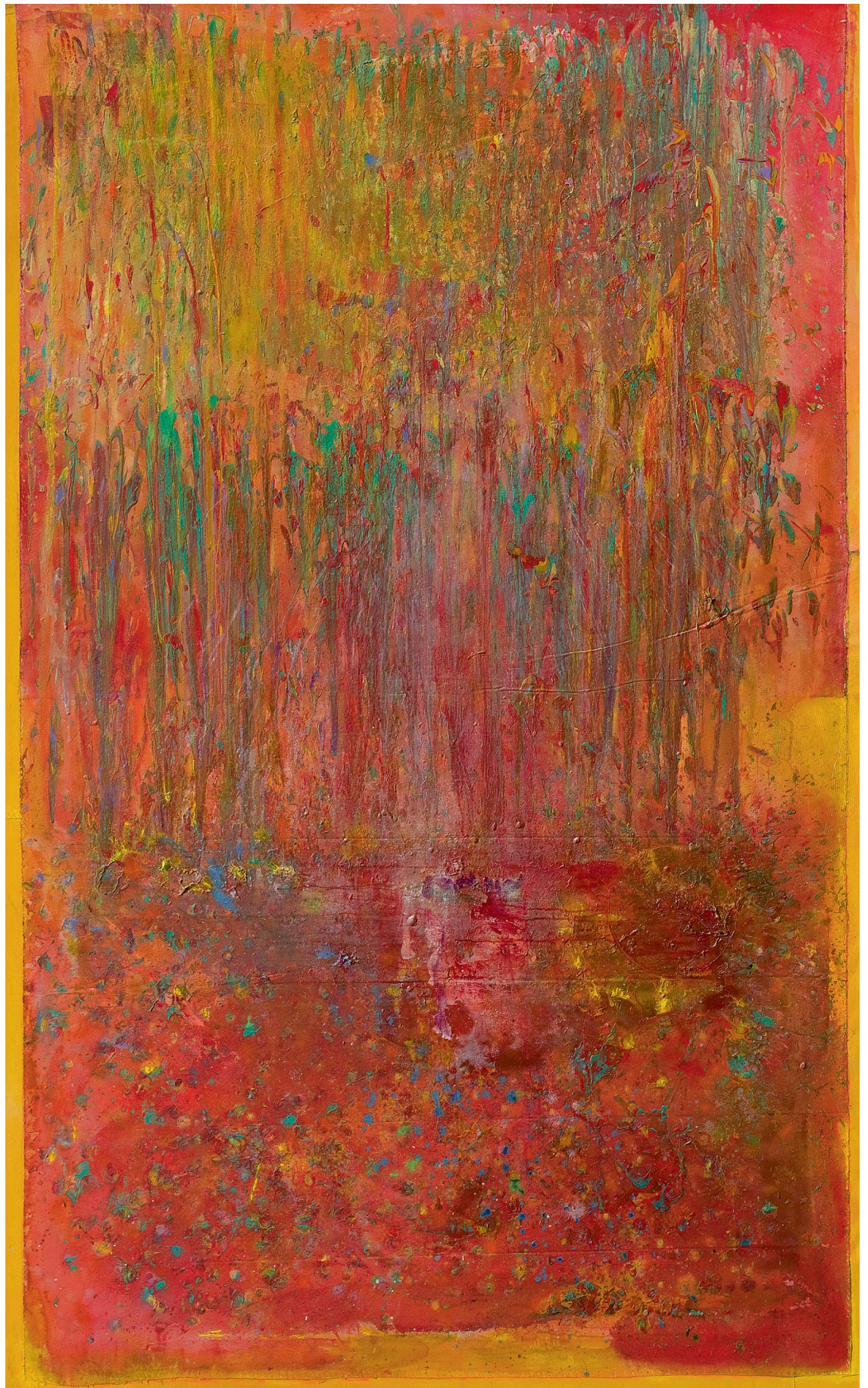
As often happens in an artist's progress, a combination of chance and circumstance set Bowling on a course that would lead quickly to the creation of a style and imagery at once distinctive and resonant with the times. After several more paintings which juxtaposed the stencilled words 'Variety Store' with colourful if somewhat arbitrarily geometric abstractions, in the spring of 1967 Bowling's search for a new way of painting led him to experiment with thin acrylic washes flooded over a canvas spread on the floor, sometimes incorporating the 'mother's house' motif, sometimes not. Using the shifting shadows thrown by the window light as a guide to shape the liquid movement, Bowling noticed how often those shapes assumed the vague look, first of General de Gaulle (then in the news over the *Québec Libre* affair) and then, more significantly, of the outline map of South America. Following this lead, he began also to create the shape of Guyana, still imprinted in his visual memory by endless drawing exercises at primary school. Later in the year Bowling was taught by Rivers to use an overhead projector to create accurate outline drawings of South America and Guyana.



Bowling's Variety Store, 1967
Acrylic on canvas, 120.5 × 79 cm



Lemongrassblackpepperbush, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, 167.5 × 221 cm



Journey along with Marcia Scott,
2011
Acrylic on canvas, 310 × 193 cm



top
Crossings: Overlooking
Chaguaramus, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, 71 × 81 cm

middle
Crossings: Egyptian, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, 71 × 81 cm

bottom
Crossings: Towards Liberty, 2011
Acrylic on canvas, 71 × 81 cm

