



From Substrate to the Riverbed

An Artist's Response from Sonia Boyce

Frank Bowling's art practice is firmly situated in the field of activity that is late modernism. I want to approach looking at his work from the pragmatics of painting, using a series of painterly terms taken from the British Standards Glossary of paint terms. By drawing our attention to the technical aspects of paint, without labouring the point, I want to underscore the relationship between Bowling and his craft, while also exploring the effects of this activity in the murkier and less tangible realm of the symbolic. In many ways, these 'glossary' insertions act as interruptions; a momentary divergence, one might say. Some of these terms have a double function, giving an insight into the technical considerations that all painters need to contend with, while also resonating beyond their technical meaning to evoke other, more social, interpretations.¹

SUBSTRATE

The surface to which a coat of paint or varnish is applied.

I'd like to situate myself and the moment when I entered the discussions on contemporary visual arts practice. At the end of the 1970s when I was an art student, I was influenced by several heated debates about the status of painting coming from a feminist art perspective. In some quarters painting, as a critical art practice, had lost its credibility: considered over-bloated with a sense of its own exclusionary importance, as if it was the only important art activity in town, despite the incursions of performance art, feminist art (often eschewing painting altogether) and new media practices, to name but a few. For many artists like me entering these debates, painting represented a massive obstacle. Like the terror of the blank page for writers, in painting one has to tussle, a priori, with the weight of Western art history. To approach the bare canvas was to knowingly enter into the gladiatorial space of the artistic (almost exclusively white and male) canon. Not only jostling with historical figures, but also one's peers.

One can, at a symbolic level, think of the substrate – this bare canvas: the material surface upon which coats of paint and the artwork are applied (some call it the 'support') – as the social ground of authority that holds together the hierarchical status of painting as the pinnacle of art. I think I was always too intimidated by its gravitas to take on this hierarchical amphitheatre. Bowling, evidently, felt no such qualms. Albeit he was of an earlier generation who embraced the call of the 'International Style' much vaunted in the period just after the Second World War, which suggested that modernism was a universal language open to all. He dived right in, fearlessly. He was later to assert that 'the black soul, if there can be such a thing, belongs in modernism'.²

Detail of *Great Thames IV* 1988–9.
See pp.148–9 for full view.

COLOURANT

A concentrated agent that may be added to paints to make a range of colours.

I first came to know about Frank Bowling when, soon after leaving art school in the mid-1980s, I was summoned by the Director of the Arts Council of Great Britain (as it was then constituted), the wonderful and formidable Joanna Drew. Drew invited me to – well actually demanded that I join – the Arts Council Purchasing Panel, responsible for acquiring contemporary works of art for the national collection. It was Drew's belief that I should act as a representative voice for the burgeoning black British (of African and Asian descent) arts scene. I was in my mid-twenties and a bit wet behind the ears.

One of the many artist studio visits took us to the studio of Frank Bowling. I was astonished, having never been introduced to the artist or his work before. Well actually, this is a lie: Bowling and I both attended the now-iconic First National Convention of Black Artists that was organised by a group of young students who were to become the BLK Art Group at Wolverhampton Art College in 1982. However, I was completely unaware of who he was and what his attendance at that conference meant.

I wasn't aware that as part of a generation that had come to Britain from the Commonwealth he had studied at the Royal College of Art alongside David Hockney and Derek Boshier. In fact, it wasn't until the landmark exhibition curated by artist Rasheed Araeen *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* at the Hayward Gallery in 1989, that I began to understand his significance and towering achievements.

I was unaware of Bowling's standing in the United States among artists such as Larry Rivers and other giants of the New York arts scene. There were his discussions about what might constitute 'Black Art': its necessity and constraints, with African-American abstractionists in the late 1960s. So much so, that in 1969, Bowling was invited by Lawrence Alloway to curate an exhibition in New York, *5+1*, of leading African-American abstract artists that included the works of Melvin Edwards, Alvin Loving, Jack Whitten, Daniel LaRue Johnson and William T. Williams.

A few years later he began an ongoing correspondence, both personal and professional, with the most influential art critic of the mid-twentieth century, Clement Greenberg.

BARRIER COAT

A coat used to isolate subsequent coats from the preceding coats of substrate to prevent adverse physical or chemical interaction.

Why did I not know this when I was studying at art school, desperate as I was to find possible role models that might add an important range of nuances to the rest of my learning experience? Why was Bowling not on the list of canonical artists to be revered and studied?

By the time the Purchasing Panel conducted the studio visit, Bowling was in the midst of his *Great Thames* series (pp.00–00). The Arts Council subsequently acquired *Great Thames IV* 1989 (detail on p.00)

Engulfed in the presence of these monumental works up close in his studio, their sheer physicality overwhelmed me. Thick layers of paint trowelled across a huge expanse of canvas, yet with a pearlescent surface. There was something squalid and churning – on top of and beneath the surface. I was immediately reminded of the encrusted paintings of one of his contemporaries, Terry Setch, whom art critic the late Brian Sewell would berate in a review of a Royal Academy Summer Show, when he asked why 'are the squalid little squidges of Terry Setch hanging on these august walls?'³ Clearly, Sewell was not a fan. All the same, Bowling's paintings harboured a

FLOW COATING

The application of the wet film of a coating material either by pouring or by allowing it by flood coating to flow over the object to be coated and allowing excess to drain off.

slightly more colourful outlook. Afterwards, much later, I could see a genealogy going back to English romantic painter J.M.W. Turner and his infamous *Slave Ship* painting of 1840 (below).

Turner, who was an anti-slavery supporter, originally titled the painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying – Typhoon Coming*. He was prompted to make the piece after reading newspaper accounts and the subsequent court case about the slave ship *Zhong*, when, in 1781, the captain of the ship ordered 133 African slaves to be thrown overboard, so that he could claim the insurance.

Turner is often cited as a major influence, a 'father figure' one might say, in relation to expressionism in art, and abstract expressionism in particular. A later generation was inspired by the magnificent presence of his gestural style. *Slave Ship*, I believe, is an important touchstone that allows us to consider the relationships between empire, expressionism and abstract painting, and the 'Black Atlantic', a term coined by art historian Robert Farris Thompson and elaborated on by cultural theorist Paul Gilroy.



J.M.W. Turner *Slave Ship* 1840. Oil on canvas 91 x 123. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

HYDROPHILIC
Attracted to water.

HYDROPHOBIC
Repelled by water.

As a consequence of the Middle Passage (a title that Bowling also used for a painting in 1970, p.00), a term used to describe the triangular trade route that encompasses Europe, continental America, the Caribbean and Africa, through which millions of Africans were forcibly transported, Farris Thompson and Gilroy would see Black Atlantic culture as a carbon impression of the Old World, and an expressive transmission of the new. A transatlantic dialogue, they believe, was integral to modernism from the outset.

The 'sea-light': a peculiar reflective quality that emanates from Bowling's painting *Chaguaramas Bay* (below) seems to draw even stronger parallels with Turner's *Slave Ship*. Both paintings depict the sea's expanse employing a fusion of oranges, blues, pinks, reds and purples, with flashes of bright iridescent whites and yellows. Thematically, there are connections too, as the title refers to the killing of West African slaves who were thrown into the sea near the island of Chaguaramas in Trinidad.

NON-VOLATILE CONTENT
The quantity of material remaining after removal of the volatile constituents of a paint; may be expressed by mass or volume.

Turner's paintings are often celebrated for their ability to create an impassioned and expressive illusion; to 'master' and 'control' composition; to depict a state of being. As painter Daniel Sturgis has written in his essay *Substrate: Leaning Against Medium*:

When speaking about the material considerations that artists are drawn to it is important to remember the intertwining of the physical properties of a material and the theoretical ideas held in it and its specific present and past use. Just possibly the idea of the substrate might enable this collision between the material and [the] conceptual.⁴

By suggesting that the material and technical processes of art encode wider meanings, Sturgis is connecting the dots between method and subject matter, even within abstract art, which is commonly believed to be apolitical.

Ever since that first encounter with Bowling's *Great Thames* series, I have been drawn more to his abstract works that relinquish the graphic image of geography, like the maps that the earlier paintings illustrate. I find myself more in awe of those works that seem to propose the vast expanse of the sea, without a pictorial guide. Here, in this murkier realm, Bowling has jumped right in, employing all the painterly tools in his armoury to privilege the process and the chameleon substance that is paint.

Frank Bowling *Chaguaramas Bay*
1989. Acrylic paint on canvas 181.5
x 331.5. [Collection?](#)

PIGMENT
A substance, usually in the form of fine particles, that is practically insoluble in the medium and is used because of its optical, protective or decorative properties.

Returning to art critic Brian Sewell, who, in his universal dismissal of *The Other Story* exhibition, admonishes Bowling's *Great Thames* series for what he calls a 'dirty-palette version of Monet's *Water-lilies*'.⁵ Despite Sewell's refusal to entertain the idea that black British artists could make a significant contribution to the story of art as he knew it, by making reference to Monet he inadvertently inserts Bowling into a genealogy to which he denies Bowling access.

DRAG
The resistance of the brush encountered when applying a coating material.

In this move from depicting the geographical expanse, to manifesting its presence through drips and splashes, spreading substances, scraping and soaking wet materials, deft brushwork and pushing against the grain, the substrate shifts from the support for applied pictorial gestures, to the site or the stage of enactment. We are all familiar with the likes of Jackson Pollock as a performative painter. Bowling is at home within this realm.



POLYMER

A substance, the molecules of which consist of one or more structural units, repeated many times.

However, through these very pragmatic activities of painting, a doorway into another realm opens up: the underworld – a fantastical, if troubling, space. Between the mastic surface, or what the Greeks call the ‘tears of Chios’, and what lies beneath Bowling’s several layers of paint and other media, an anxiety and something mysterious lurks.

During the 1980s, like many of my peers, I was consumed by the writings of female African-American writers. The devastating consequences of the New World and the urgency of post-colonial thinking across the Americas were common themes circulating among these writers, none more so than Toni Cade Bambara with her book *The Salt Eaters* 1980. I have always made a connection between Bowling’s waterlogged paintings and the mythic atmosphere created in Bambara’s writings.

Set in the fictional town of Claybourne, Georgia, in the United States, Bambara’s difficult and experimental novel jumps backwards and forwards in a non-linear fashion. Time-travelling, it flows in and out of storylines and between characters. The synopsis of the book states:

‘The Salt Eaters is a story of a community of black faith healers, who, searching for the healing powers of salt, witness an event ...’⁶

Throughout, the book wavers on the cusp, where the shapelessness of fog acts as an intermediary foil between worlds. It may come as a surprise when I say that I get a similar sensation or aura in the presence of Ellen Gallagher’s work. Despite their



Ellen Gallagher *Dew Breaker* 2015.
Pigment, ink oil, graphite and paper
on canvas 188.2 x 202.9. [Collection?](#)

very different practices, works like Gallagher’s *Dew Breaker* 2015 (below) or *Bird in Hand* 2006 have a similar sense of an ‘otherworldliness’, a multi-layering between the empirical world and the imaginary world. Like Bambara, both Bowling and Gallagher take us on a journey where the destination remains uncertain.

Embedded, yet protruding through layers of paint, a structure resembling the hull of a ship reads as though it has been found, shipwrecked at the bottom of the ocean.

ANTI-FOULING PAINT

A coating material applied to the bottom of ships to discourage the growth of barnacles and other organisms.

Philoctetes Bow (p.00) by Bowling invokes the same sense of the spiritual. In this work he makes reference to the painful demi-world of Greek mythology. Typically, as with all underworld narratives, it is a place – a location, where the souls of the departed, or those on the verge, meet. Encountering these large abstract paintings is like experiencing the mysteries of the tide: of the deep ocean bed; the sea bed; the river bed; pond life, pulled back to reveal and obscure simultaneously the dredged-up detritus of the life below. The sheer scale of Bowling’s paintings have us just on the edge of peripheral vision, caught as witnesses in the midst of an event too monumental to name.

Bowling ‘conjures’ a hot mess of intense and sometimes surprising colour combinations and raw physicality; of protrusions and dribbles and entanglements; of scrapings and thick sticky surfaces.

AFTER-TACK

A film defect in which the painted surface, having once reached a tack-free stage, subsequently develops a sticky condition.

Surprisingly, there’s an imprint of a coffee cup – or maybe it’s a tin can used to mix paints, that trespasses the canvas’s surface of *Philoctetes Bow*, leaving its insolent mark as the composition fights with the anarchic residue of the artist’s actions.

In an interview with Okwui Enwezor at the opening of *Mappa Mundi*, it was interesting to hear Bowling speak of his art school experience in the late 1950s and the studio discussions among his peers about painting and composition. The skill of an artist at that time was measured by their ability to manage the geometry and colourways created on the canvas.

BASECOAT

The first decorative coat of a multi-coat coating system.

However, Bowling’s later works are no longer pictures in the conventional sense, but events. They clearly tussle with the impositions of that era, fighting for a different reality among the ‘stuff’ of paint, where everything is everywhere and palpable. Where the weight of materiality collides with the weight of history.