

HAUSER & WIRTH

“WATER IS LIFE, ISN'T IT?”

ON FRANK BOWLING'S EXHIBITION
IN HONG KONG

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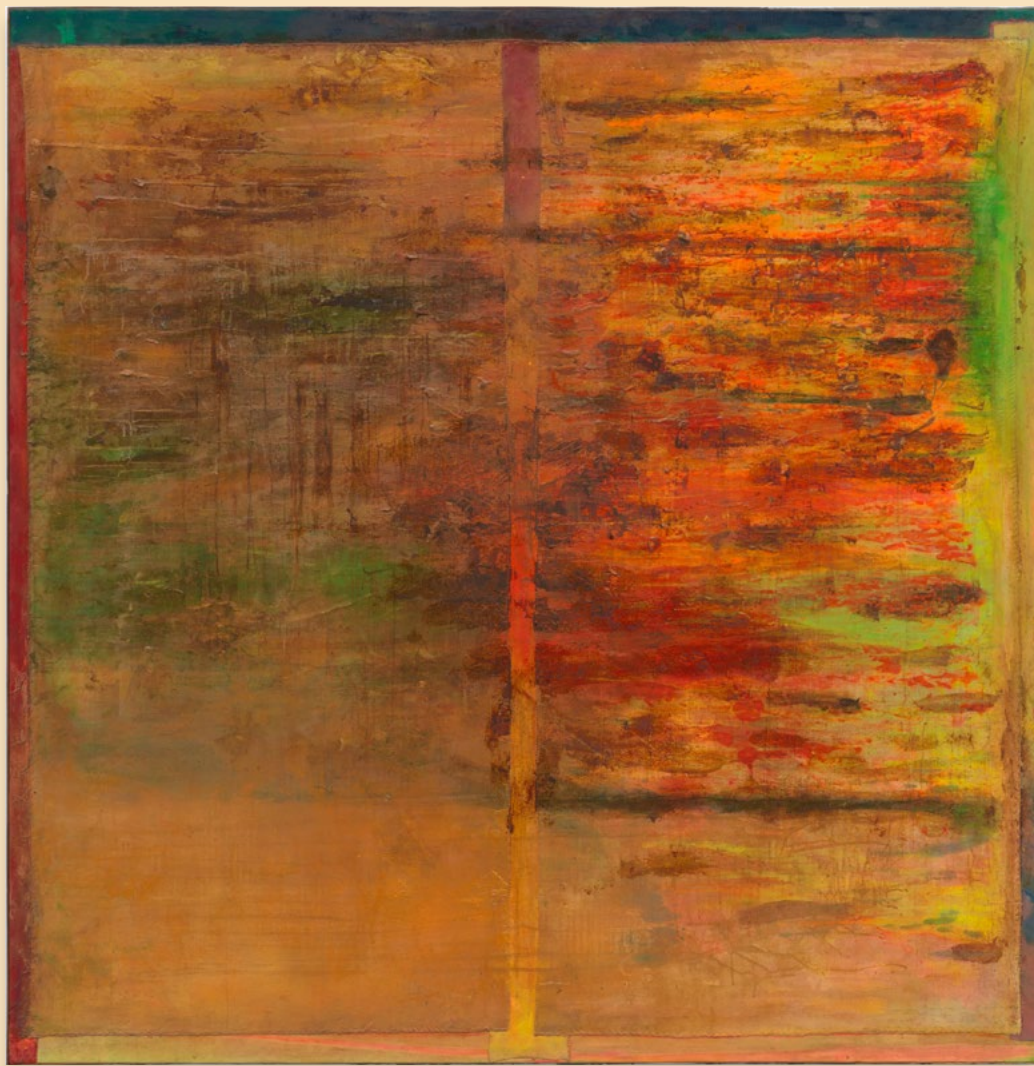
1.

Born in Bartica, Guyana (formerly British Guiana) in 1934, Frank Bowling grew up in nearby New Amsterdam and moved to London, England, in 1953 during the Windrush migration, which transformed the social-cultural landscape of post-World War II Britain. While studying at the Royal College of Art alongside celebrated artists like R. B. Kitaj and David Hockney, with whom he maintained continuous dialogues and friendships, Bowling showed his talents not only as a painter but also as an incessant researcher of experimental forms of expression. In the 1960s and 1970s, he lived and worked in New York, collaborating frequently with the artists in the local scene before returning to spend more time in London in 1975. Bowling has established himself as a significantly influential figure in abstract painting on both sides of the Atlantic, engaging with avant-garde art for nearly seven decades.

As a young artist, Bowling was attuned to all kinds of revolutions in art, looking across a variety of influences, from Expressionist figuration and Pop Art, to Abstract Expressionism and Post-Painterly Abstraction. Critics have also drawn parallels between his techniques and those ubiquitous in action painting and assemblage art. Bowling is a truly versatile artist with a maturity marked by his unique way of engaging with modernist painting, characterized by his propensity for color and form.

He has developed a complex and dynamic language often open to chance and change, realized and enhanced by his most inventive approaches, including collage, marouflage, and, of course, body movement, to create organically formed surfaces mixing effects of brushed paint, poured water, and settled dust, as well as found-object collage. In a way, this process-driven way of painting—including *Shrill* (2002), on two panels of collaged canvas, and the coagulations of watery, luminescent green in *There Be Dragons* (2020)—can, quite intriguingly, be compared to the ideal state of Chinese aesthetics of 自然天成 (so natural that it seems heaven made).

In his lifelong process of experimenting with radically diverse forms and approaches, Bowling has always sought independence and freedom, refusing to be categorized or frozen to fit any norms, styles, or schools through any specific ideological positioning. At a certain point in his life, he frequently conversed with one of the most powerful American art critics of the time, Clement Greenberg. However, Bowling eventually turned away from Greenberg's attempts to encase him in the realm of Post-Painterly Abstraction.



FRANK BOWLING

SHRILL

2002

Acrylic on collaged canvas with marouflage

195.2 × 190.7 × 2.4 cm / 76 ⁷/₈ × 75 ¹/₈ × 1 in

196 × 191.5 × 2.4 cm / 77 ¹/₈ × 75 ³/₈ × 1 in (framed)



FRANK BOWLING
THERE BE DRAGONS

2020

Acrylic, acrylic gel and found objects on canvas with marouflage

108 × 318 × 8 cm / 42 1/2 × 125 1/4 × 3 1/8 in

2.

Bowling always looks for total freedom, of mind and of action. To achieve this, he tends to complicate his relationship with any one discourse, refusing to allow his artworks to be turned into easy illustrations of abstract theories. While the artist has never refuted his deep connection to his personal, familiar, and cultural roots as a postcolonial creator, Bowling's work has never been limited by homesickness. Home has remained a recurring presence, but never a restrictive force.

During Bowling's Pop period in the late 1960s and 1970s, and as shown in *Untitled (Mother's House)* (1966), he repeatedly represented his mother and her house, which remained a steadfast anchor point for his memory and spirit. From there, he retraced his transatlantic trajectories by stenciling maps of South America and the world, with Guyana as a radiant center. However, Bowling has always refused to be fixed by any location. He embraces the world by mapping it, but also by dissolving it, aiming to turn it into an intensive "structure" or "non-structure"—a sense of grasping for order amid chaos. This impulse led to Bowling remapping the New World as an at once a personal and a trans-global utopia. Such an effort within his artworks incarnates, in a certain poetically entropic manner, the common destiny of the postcolonial populations sharing the task of making a "Black Atlantic," a community continuously inventing new cultures based on creolization that has fundamentally impacted the evolution of cultures and modernity at large on both sides of the Atlantic.¹ Traveling back and forth across the ocean, re-rooting himself in postcolonial cosmopolises such as London and New York, Bowling opted to avoid making his art literal representations of daily life.

1 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Verso, 1993).



FRANK BOWLING
UNTITLED (MOTHER'S HOUSE)

1966

Oil and silkscreened ink on two stapled canvases

120.6 × 78.7 cm / 47 ½ × 31 in

Instead, he embraces abstraction, with a conviction that it allows him more freedom, and therefore more pleasure. As one can notice in certain paintings in the upcoming Hong Kong exhibition that this essay accompanies, such as *Crevice Reflecting Morning Light* (1977) and *Untitled (Cathedral Painting)* (1986), he manages to transform his travelogue images into much more sublimated visions that reveal more substantial spirits than any anecdotal representations of his transcontinental journeys could convey. In this sense, Bowling's art ends up being realer than the real.

As further demonstrated in works like *And SN's Bookmark* (1998) and *Yonder* (1997), his more systematic abstract works are the canvases in which Bowling has most fully developed his personal and audaciously frisky methodology of painting and reached his artistic maturity. Here he expands his experiments by incorporating a great diversity of materials, encompassing almost everything available at hand: vivid pigments, threads, glue, found objects, and even glitter dust. Central to this largely open and performative process remains the artist's obsession with water, not only as a subject matter but also as a physical material and procedure. Bowling has always been inspired by the water, whether living in Guyana or the UK, from the Berbice River in New Amsterdam to the River Thames in London. He puts forward the eternal potency of watering, floating and depositing pigments and other materials on and under the water and filling up his canvases, fluctuating and shifting between cleanliness and dirtiness, order and chaos, allegory and tragedy, until they dry and form uncannily beautiful and somehow epic surfaces—visions of an unpredictable world!



FRANK BOWLING
CREVICE REFLECTING MORNING LIGHT
1977

Acrylic on canvas
165.1 × 71.5 cm / 65 × 28 1/8 in
171.5 × 77.5 × 4.5 cm / 67 1/2 × 30 1/2 × 1 3/4 in (framed)



FRANK BOWLING
UNTITLED (CATHEDRAL PAINTING)

1986

Acrylic, acrylic gel and polyurethane foam on canvas

188 × 84 cm / 74 × 33 1/8 in

196.6 × 92.8 × 4.4 cm / 77 3/8 × 36 1/2 × 1 3/4 in (framed)

In an interview about his participation in the 2025 Bienal de São Paulo, Bowling stated:

When I first looked at the concept for the biennial, and read all these ideas about the estuary—its muddy, silty existence—and the life that’s lived by the mangroves where salt and fresh water meet, I felt totally in tune with it. It sounded like my work, my environment. I’ve lived my life right next to rivers, going back to those wide rivers in Guyana that spill into the ocean. I guess you could call my work *estuarine*; the painting literally emerges from the mud and alluvium of paint matter as the water carries it over the surface.²

² Melissa Baksh, “A Homecoming of Sorts: Frank Bowling’s Work Arrives Back in South America” *Elephant*, September 12, 2025, <https://elephant.art/a-homecoming-of-sorts-frank-bowlings-work-arrives-in-south-america-at-last/>.

It is in such a vigorous but undefinable way of navigating between “clean and dirty waters” that Bowling’s art embodies the identity of cultural diaspora and hybridization: an identity in permanent renewal. Bowling both as a person and as an artist is always performative—even today, at ninety-two years old, when he is obliged to be sitting in a wheelchair. It is so touching to both watch and join him in his studio painting. Every day for a few hours, with the help of assistants, he initiates several paintings and continues to transform them, applying pigments and objects, pouring water, and incorporating other actions. Then, he seems to meditate, contemplating the canvases in formation, and reworks them until a sudden decision is reached, by chance or by will. Eventually, the atmosphere and weather that dries and secures a painting’s surface plays the final role in “freezing” the painting’s ultimate state of existence.

3.

Water is not only the material of Bowling's art, but also the very essence of his life. As he has put it:

Water is life, isn't it! And it's certainly integral to everything I do, from how I live my daily life, to the inspiration for the work, to the actual making of the work. I was born on the banks of the Essequibo and spent my childhood a stone's throw from the Berbice, and I've spent pretty much my whole adult life living close to big rivers. My home in London is literally one street away from the Thames, and my Brooklyn studio for the past twenty-five years looks out over the East River. Throughout my career, I've crossed the Thames twice daily—and in the past it could have been up to six times a day—going to and from the studio. I was also born under a water sign; I'm a Pisces, so I guess water is the stuff I'm made of.³

As his exhibition arrives in Hong Kong, Bowling's ontological connection with the element may resonate with the people here, also living by the water. One can see a certain similarity and resonance with the philosophy of Bruce Lee (李小龍), perhaps the most iconic figure of Hong Kong's unique culture: "Be water, my friend."⁴ For many, this aphorism it has become a source of energy, and intelligent resilience and revival.

3 Baksh, "A Homecoming of Sorts."

4 "Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless, like water. Now you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow, or creep, or drip, or crash. Be water, my friend." Bruce Lee, in *Longstreet*, season 1, episode 1, "The Way of the Intercepting Fist," written by Stirling Silliphant, directed by Allen Reisner, aired September 16, 1971, on ABC.



FRANK BOWLING
AND SN'S BOOKMARK II
1998

Acrylic on collaged canvas with marouflage
122 × 75 cm / 48 × 29 ½ in
127 × 79.8 × 3 cm / 50 × 31 ⅜ × 1 ¼ in (framed)

Being water—being like “water making its way through cracks”⁵—is not simply to become part of the clean water idealized as a sign of purity. On the contrary, it’s about diving in and navigating through the impure, muddy, and opaque water of reality. It also incites emancipatory and regenerative actions in the postcolonial world in general. Out of impure and muddy currents emerge meaningful creations, incarnated in the arts—from the beaux arts to martial arts, and, above all, the real art of living and envisioning the future.

5 “Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it. If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves.” Bruce Lee, “Quotable Quote,” Goodreads, n.d., <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/29138-be-like-water-making-its-way-through-cracks-do-not>

Here, the claim for opacity by Édouard Glissant, the “father of creolization theory,” is particularly telling:

Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities. Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian. What is here is open, as much as this there. I would be incapable of projecting from one to the other. This-here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries. The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms.⁶

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- 6 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1990), 190. Glissant goes on to further explain (pp. 191–92):

“The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence. We are far from the opacities of Myth or Tragedy, whose obscurity was accompanied by exclusion and whose transparency aimed at ‘grasping.’ In this version of understanding the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab their soundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation. Let our understanding prefer the gesture of giving-on-and-with that opens finally on totality.”

“We have suggested that Relation is an open totality evolving upon itself. That means that, thought of in this manner, it is the principle of unity that we subtract from this idea. In Relation the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity.”

“We have already articulated the poetic force. We see it as radiant-replacing the absorbing concept of unity; it is the opacity of the diverse animating the imagined transparency of Relation. The imaginary does not bear with it the coercive requirements of idea. It prefigures reality, without determining it a priority.”



FRANK BOWLING

YONDER

1997

Acrylic with foil addition on collaged canvas

119 × 106.6 × 2.5 cm / 46 ⁷/₈ × 42 × 1 in

4.

Frank Bowling's art unfolds as a flux of visions, mirroring our chaotic world, shaped by the confluence of fresh and muddy waters. It embodies perfectly such a "gesture of giving-on-and-with that opens finally on totality," a generous claim for the "right to opacity" that leads our understanding and envisioning of the world beyond the grasp of Eurocentric "universality."⁷ Such a fluctuating practice can eventually lead to the creation of new relations with the world, including one that encourages confluence through dialogue with artists from other continents.

7 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190–91.

Coming to Hong Kong, an in-between land connecting a postcolonial world and China, Bowling's art can certainly find allies, both among artists from the city and from China at large, who have been, for the last hundred years or so, committing to the modernization of Chinese painting by developing various forms of experimental ink-wash painting, often leading to specific models of Chinese abstraction. This development of ink-wash painting is by no means one of art for art's sake. It rather should be seen as a highly symbolic aspect of China's efforts to modernize itself, from culture to economy, from social life to politics, facing the challenges of Western domination over the last two centuries. The movement encompasses a global dimension, with artists living in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas diaspora across the continents.

Several generations of Chinese artists have been trying to introduce aesthetic concepts and forms inspired by international modern and contemporary movements to renovate the too-well-established language of Chinese painting, namely ink-wash painting. Various experiments mingling typical Eastern and Western elements, or truly hybrid forms, have come to the fore. They not only represent the internal evolution of modern and contemporary cultures in China but also have been increasingly exerting influence on the global art scene. One can trace back to the early twentieth century to find pioneers of new Chinese painting, figures like Gao Jianfu (高劍父), Lin Fengmian (林風眠), Liu Haisu (劉海粟), and Wu Dayu (吳大羽), among others. Then came the generation of Zao Wou-ki (趙無極), Chu Teh-Chun (朱德群), Wu Guanzhong (吳冠中), and Liu Guosong (劉國松), for example. Most of these masters lived various diasporic experiences, either in Japan or Europe. They were often involved directly in political struggles for China's revolutions.

On the other hand, Hong Kong has contributed to continuing the experiment of new Chinese painting by acting as a haven for artists escaping from wars and other disasters in mainland China. More importantly, this former British colony has played a unique role in keeping Chinese artists in touch with international influences, offering artists in China and abroad an anchor point of reunion. In the meantime, the local art community of this relatively small but beautifully multicultural city—famously called by many the Pearl of the Orient (東方之珠)—has also been nurtured by these encounters and exchanges and produced its own genius locus among new Chinese painting. Its artists include Lui Shou-Kwan (呂壽琨), Wong Wucius (王無邪), Tsang Tsou-choi (曾灶財), and Kan Tai-keung (靳棣強). Today, the



ZAO WOU-KI

29.09.64

1964

Oil on canvas

230 × 345 cm / 90 ½ × 135 ⅞ in

Courtesy Fondation Zao Wou-Ki

© ProLitteris, Zurich, 2026



CHU TEH-CHUN
SANS-TITRE
1962

Gouache on paper
51.5 × 36.5 cm

© Fondation Chu Teh-Chun / ADAGP, Paris, 2026

new Chinese painting movement continues to grow into highly conceptual expressions, as found in the works of Gu Wenda (谷文達), Yang Jiechang (楊詰蒼), Wang Dongling (王冬齡), and Zheng Chongbin (鄭重賓), among others, who now live in different parts of the world and are influential figures on the global stage.

The new Chinese painting movement spans the world, with artists living, working, and exhibiting in all four corners of the globe, tirelessly inventing new forms of expression that bridge Chinese heritage and Western influences. It has manifested a clear and highly ambitious goal to create a certain singular modernity that has become an indispensable element within the continuous creation of a global multitude of modernities, or a real contemporaneity—somewhat comparable to the contributions of the artists of what sociologist Paul Gilroy calls the “Black Atlantic,” among which one can mention, in addition to Frank Bowling, Jacob Lawrence, Faith Ringgold, Isaac Julien, Sonia Boyce, and Hew Locke. The fusion and interaction of ink and water—namely, ink wash—is an eternal fuel to animate the machine of endless invention. It is exactly here that one can discover a rather straightforward path that connects, with a certain intimacy, Frank Bowling’s paintings and those of his Chinese colleagues, despite the fact they have not necessarily been familiar with each other. Confluences between the two distinct but comparable streams, or estuaries, certainly can be imagined, and even realized. They lead to a common horizon of aesthetic, moral, and spiritual ideals that can be subsumed in the Chinese maxim: 出污泥而不染 (emerging from the mud unsullied—like a lotus)!⁸

8 This saying comes from the poem “On the Love of the Lotus” by Zhou Dunyi (Northern Song dynasty, 11th century).

FRANK BOWLING LIKE WATER

11 June – 29 August 2026
Hong Kong

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Over the course of six decades, Frank Bowling (b. 1934) has rigorously pursued a practice which boldly expands the possibilities and properties of paint. Renowned for his innovative use of material, colour and process, Bowling has exhibited internationally, with works held in major museum collections worldwide.

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ABOUT THE WRITER

Hou Hanru is a prolific writer and curator based in Paris and Rome. He was Artistic Director of MAXXI (National Museum for 21st Century Arts, Rome, 2013-2022). He is an advisor for numerous cultural institutions and frequently contributes with various journals on contemporary art and culture while serving at juries of major international awards.

