



text + work

BIG
PAINTINGS

JIM HUNTER+
FRANK BOWLING

BIG PAINTINGS

FRANK BOWLING RA

Frank Bowling is a painter of stature and importance. His practice is committed to the primacy of the creative act of painting, the pursuit of abstraction and the ideals of modernism. In his concern for the materiality and quality of paint he attempts to describe form through the process of painting, to reach an equivalence for form in the paint itself. His paintings are full of personal references: to his family and friends; his experiences of life, and death; his childhood home and, throughout it all, his enjoyment and celebration of the senses and the sensual.

And water. His life and art are as a suspension in the waters of the world: the Essiquibo River and the wetlands of British Guiana; the Thames and the East River; the mudslobs of County Cork. 'I've edged closer and closer to believing it all relates to my childhood. Guyana is where I was born, and the name of the place is the land of waters, everywhere you go in Guyana there is water'¹. And Frank Bowling was amongst the very first artists to be introduced to water-based acrylics, in 1963 through a commission from Rowney, and he has continued since to exploit, and extend, the potential of this medium in his work.

He was the Silver Medal winner at the Royal College of Art in 1962, and an early critical review² described him

¹ Frank Bowling quoted by Martin Gayford in his review of Frank Bowling at The Cut Gallery, London, 1995, in *Modern Painters*, v. 8, Autumn 1995.

as 'an expressionist of striking power and individuality'. However, wary of being classified within a post-colonial critique, his individuality led him to confound his then admirers by moving to America in 1966. In New York he worked alongside the pioneers of abstraction, with Clement Greenberg providing him with critical encouragement and moral and material support. The generosity of material use, the scale, scope and daring of painters such as Larry Poons was hugely important to Frank Bowling's own ambition as an abstract painter. His Map paintings of 1967 onwards were affirmation of his confidence in his new language of colour and abstraction. Exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971, these paintings were triumphantly reprised at the Venice Biennale of 2003.

He divides his time between his studios in New York and London, sensitive to the cross-currents of innovation and tradition and enjoying, as one critic remarked, 'a complex, wandering life in which his art has crossed and re-crossed the artistic terrain of the late twentieth century from School of London to New York School.'³ This exhibition is drawn from the paintings produced in the 1980s, a difficult and yet prolific period for Frank Bowling. Beset by problems concerning his New York

studio, and ill health, he based himself in London and established his studio in Cable Street and elsewhere. This period, however, saw Frank Bowling produce some of his most ambitious and large-scale paintings.

In 2005 Frank Bowling was elected a member of the Royal Academy. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Arts Institute at Bournemouth and in 2007 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Wolverhampton. Significant solo exhibitions have included the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1971), the Serpentine Gallery (1986), 'Bowling through the Decade' at the Royal West of England Academy (1990), The Cut Gallery, Waterloo, London (1995 and 1997), the Phillips Museum of Art, Pennsylvania (2004), 'Full of Light: Paintings by Frank Bowling' at the G R N'Namdi Gallery, Detroit (2005) and Chicago (2006), 'Frank Bowling: The White Paintings' at ArtSway, Hampshire (2006) and 'Frank Bowling: A Celebration of his Election to the Royal Academy of Arts' at Rollo Contemporary Art, London (2006). He has been included in many major curated shows in this country, Africa and America, including 'Six American Masters' at the Sugar Hill Art Center, Harlem, New York in 2002.

² Norbert Lynton in his review of Frank Bowling at The Grabowski Gallery, London, in *Art International*, December, 1962.

³ Martin Gayford in his review of Frank Bowling at The Cut Gallery, London, 1995, in *Modern Painters*, v. 8, Autumn 1995.



Silver Birch, 1985
Acrylic on Canvas
70 1/2" x 96"

BIG PAINTINGS

On 8 and 9 September 2007 I met with Frank Bowling and Rachel Scott at the Peacock Yard studio to select the paintings for this show. Other yard users had been asked not to park their vehicles in front of the studio in order that we could bring the paintings outside. It was a sunny and bright weekend. Our purpose was to select a number of larger paintings from those that are stored within the studio.

The process of viewing the paintings was extraordinary. Frank's studio is filled with the stuff of making, with work in progress and with paintings recently completed, along with a repository of earlier work. At a rough estimate the latter amounts to some 150 paintings, including 30 large works, that represent his singular commitment to the practice of painting over some five decades. Of course, this is a small sample of the total of works that Frank has produced in a very prolific career (visit www.frankbowling.com curated by Spencer A Richards for a comprehensive view). The paintings at Peacock Yard have returned or remained there for differing reasons, each has its own history: some have been exhibited several times; some included in significant shows; others have never had a

public showing; most of the big paintings had not been seen by Frank for a number of years.

We viewed twenty-four paintings over the two days. Each was hauled from its rack and carried outside to be viewed in the light, photographed and checked against Rachel's inventory. Given that the paintings had remained unseen for some time, their presence and immediacy were astounding and also, no less, the total recall of Frank and Rachel as to the title and origin of each piece. Frank recalled the stories associated with each painting, and its making, as we viewed them in turn. The moving of the paintings was a physically demanding task. These are substantial objects: stretched canvases of up to 12 feet in length with thick accumulations and accretions of paint and medium.

They are big paintings: big in their ambition for the practice and power of painting, and big in the scope of Frank's engagement with the medium of paint and the history of painting. They are the tangible, object evidence of his ambition for abstraction and modernism. In the shifting and recurring themes and motifs

there is a consistent engagement with the placement of colour on surface, the creation of feeling and meaning through an abstract structure of paint and colour. This is big painting.

'I feel very sympathetic to the work of 19th century Romantic painters like John Martin, with the intention to make awesome paintings.'⁴

Towards Crab Island refers to Frank's childhood in British Guyana, Crab Island being the mythical destiny of escape, a place free of the rules of the grown-up world, a place of demons and a paradise of birds and snakes: 'a destination that all the boys wanted to get to, away from parents, despite being inhabited by the feared Pedro'⁴. In the pools and swirls of paint we see magical beasts and phantoms but we also see that this is a painting of the landscape: the sea and the sky, distance, depth and the drama of the elements. This is a modernist take on atmospheric perspective and the painting of land and sea: 'I have come to accept it, landscape, because you cannot avoid it.'⁴ But Frank's knowledge of 18th and 19th century painting makes him mindful of the pitfalls: 'I am very concerned at

⁴ Conversation with the artist, 20 November 2007.

attempting to avoid Turner - what I do feel is that it would be very easy to fall into the lap of Turner because of the way I work.'⁴

The tactile presence of the structure and colour are integral elements of Frank's painting. The geometry of the imagery is important: Frank has written 'each piece must operate on its own as a singular piece driven by its own internal logic... In the beginning, from my student days in the late 1950s, it seems in retrospect natural for me to cling to and lean on geometry'⁵. This is not just manifest in the painting as an underlying or drawn geometry, but is often a relief structure, created through the attachment of plastic foam strips, giving a physical dimension to the painting.

However, as Frank says 'My leaning on geometry also means that I won't be dominated by it'⁴. The paint is worked up to and across these elements, the colour interrupted by them or flowing across them. In some works they form a grid structure or, in others, these elements form intervals or bars within an all-over surface, suggesting a score for the performance and experience of the piece.

Sometimes the key element of the structure is an arc articulating the colour and surface within the rectangle. In *Silver Birch (No Man No Vote)* the arc is a counter movement to the seven verticals over and around which move the dense workings of red, crimson and bronze. 'With the thick foam strips applied there would be a structure, but then to let the application interfere with this, so that the long diagonal of the square became a tangled organic shape, the process executed in a random fashion so that everything finds its own level'⁴.

Structure is inherent within the application of the colour: in *Samson's Arrival* the surface is built in thick spreads of gel, the imprints and raised edges building the structure of the surface and the sense of movement around the structure. The colour is both a part of and apart from the surface while verticals of yellow, red and blue provide spatial references and interruptions, the whole being framed by yellow/green at one edge and red/blue at the other. The painting glows with the eager anticipation of new life and the mystery of creation. The use of gel means that the colour has substance and form: the power of the colour lies not only in its chromatic value and juxtaposition with other colours

⁵ Frank Bowling, Artist's Statement for the catalogue of his exhibition '4 Decades of Color' at The Phillips Museum of Art, Pennsylvania.

but in its physical presence. Surfaces are built up from layers and gobs of acrylic paint and gel, seeming to make light palpable on the surface of the painting and making atmospheric perspective into an abstract structure. Colours at the edges suggest further spaces, receding or emerging. It is as if the colours are squeezed out of the making, pushed out of the light that has become substance on the surface.

Colour as substance is a constant theme in Frank's work; he recalls Clement Greenberg on visits to his studio referring to the 'weight of the colour'. He used this term himself in a recorded discussion in December 1983, 'He (Paul Harrison ⁶) talked about the 'weight' of colour. There were explanations in text books about the weight of colour, and one didn't know if it was tonnage or the weight that strikes your eye, or what'⁷. For her article in The Guardian of Saturday 24 February 2007 Maya Jaggi used the title 'The Weight of Colour' and quotes Frank as saying 'It's the geometry and weight of colour that allow me to say a picture is complete'⁸.

The colour has extension as well as weight: so we see the red oranges in *To Crab Island* move outwards and

establish themselves in relation to the blue violets. In *Bamboodam* the orange retreats behind the greens, which are held in check by the red at the far edge. Weight and extension require balance, and Frank juggles the contrasting values of his colours with skill and audacity. In *Samson's Arrival*, for example, the small livid yellow-green rectangle (with red) sat on the bottom edge is played off against the extreme left/right edges of green/red and the dark blue sphere in the top-right.

The use of gel allows this to be a complex game with colours hidden within the translucent forms, lying underneath or moving across as veils, or as drips and spatters of colour along with actual coloured objects embedded in the gel. In *Oysterbeds* it is as if the colour is coming up to us, oozing out of a cracked organic surface, yellow, pink and light blue, less a surface than a shifting depth, the mud of a riverbed or swamp.

Frank's preferred method of working on unstretched canvas flat on the floor of the studio exploits this sense of the weight of the colour: gravity plays its part with the colour poured and puddled on to the canvas,

⁶ Paul Harrison, a scientist and college lecturer, lived in Poole, Dorset, and was a good friend of the artist.

⁷ From 'Formalism versus New Art: a conversation between Frank Bowling, Paul Harrison and Jeremy Thomas', *Artscribe* 44, December 1983.

⁸ Frank Bowling quoted by Maya Jaggi in her article 'The Weight of Colour', *The Guardian*, Saturday 24 February 2007.

the paint left to pool, the gel to set and objects to stick. This not only allows for an all-round working method free from top/bottom associations but also allows actual stuff to become a part of the work: plastic rings, a quail's egg, and circular pieces of foam from pill jars. 'My practice was to pull the heavily saturated cotton duck up the wall so that the pigment flows downwards, which I could then reverse and pin up again, so that with the heavy gel mixture it comes pell-mell down and mixes with all the bits and pieces lying around which become part of it, fall where they may'⁴.

Indeed Frank used gravity as a creative strategy in the poured paintings of the 1970s, exhibited again recently at The Arts Club⁹ and described by Frank as follows: 'I invented a way of doing something that no one else was doing because I thought that the trouble with abstract painting at the time was that it had no structure. So I structured these platforms, sometimes four platforms, pouring the paint on at waist height, gradating the structure, letting the paint gather its own weight as it moved from top to bottom, at 45 degrees or letting it lay flat. When it got to the bottom there was a prepared but not stretched

canvas on which all the excess paint cascaded down, gathering the overspill'⁴.

Frank's use of unstretched canvas and his working method that includes cutting into, overlaying and stitching together canvasses, means that the resultant paintings are not formed within given parameters of height and width and are unbound by restrictions of dimension. The process forms the image through expansion and extension and even smaller-sized works suggest a scale and horizon beyond the confines of the rectangle.

In constructing the painting he calls upon certain strategies and devices to hold things together visually. Framing motifs, for example, may contain the composition but can equally bring further spatial readings and complexity. The colours and forms become surface and space, the framing colours creating both vertical cohesion and horizontal recession, a balance of ambiguities. In some paintings there may be a strip of colour close to the edge of the canvas that suggests a horizon, or more likely close to more than one edge, a suggested horizon to the right and left as well as top or bottom.

⁹ Exhibition 'Poured Paintings', 2 May - 1 June 2007, The Arts Club, 40 Dover Street, London.

Frank's faith in abstraction is based upon a belief that the act of painting carries meaning, that the application of paint and the manipulation of media can create visual equivalence to experiences, memories, and thoughts: the visual manifestation of a life lived. The titles may give clues. But the paintings that result from this practice are not representational or illustrative, nor symbolic or narrative, although they may be rich and heavy with associated stories.

'I do not want to illustrate anything, but to make the paint dance'⁴.

They carry and communicate their meaning through this dance, through the substance and presence of the colour and the geometry of the structure.

Jim Hunter
November 2007



Samson's Arrival,
1989-90
Acrylic on Canvas
72 1/2" x 139"

THE BIG PAINTINGS
THE ARTS INSTITUTE AT BOURNEMOUTH

Bamboodam

71" x 70¹/₂" - 1983

Painted in 19 Maclise House, London, SW1

Exhibited

'Painting and Sculpture', Trelawney Road, Bristol 1987

Fuse Gallery, Charterhouse Street, London, EC1 1988

Silver Birch (No Man No Vote)

70¹/₂" x 96" - 1985

Painted in 13 Peacock Yard, London SE17

Exhibited

Serpentine Gallery, London 1986

The Cut Gallery, Waterloo, London 1997

Flambouriarischoice

82" x 68³/₄" - 1983

Painted in 19 Maclise House, London SW1

Exhibited

Camberwell School of Art Staff Show, South London Gallery 1983

'Bowling Through The Decade', University Art Gallery, Reading 1989

Towards Crab Island

69" x 114" - 1983

Painted in 19 Maclise House, London SW1

Exhibited

Place 1, Gimpel Fils, London 1983

Serpentine Gallery, London 1986

Oysterbeds

70" x 115" - 1986

Painted in 13 Peacock Yard, London SE17

Exhibited

'Bowling Through The Decade', Royal West of England
Academy, Bristol

1989

Samson's Arrival

72¹/₂" x 139" - 1990

Painted in Cable Street Studios, London E1

Exhibited

Greenwich Citizens Gallery, London

1991

Whitechapel Open

1992

To Crab Island

63" x 84" - 1982

Painted in 19 Maclise House, London SW1

Exhibited

'The Presence of Painting: Aspects of British Abstraction'
Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield; Hatton Gallery, Newcastle;
Ikon Gallery, Birmingham

1988

JIM HUNTER

Jim Hunter is a writer, lecturer and painter. His current touring exhibition 'A Short Grand Tour', features his Venice sabbatical paintings with a critical text by Professor Simon Olding that says 'Hunter regards these new paintings (as he does the totality of his practice) as sitting in a modernist tradition. This established a strong tendency to abstraction as a means of responding to landscape, for example, as well as placing importance on the artist's physical performance'.¹⁰

Since his student days at the Royal College of Art, and time at a studio in the Cite des Arts, Paris, Jim Hunter has had an enduring interest in modernism and the potential of abstraction.¹¹ In this he was always aware of the work of Frank Bowling. However, a much closer knowledge of Frank Bowling's work, and friendship with the artist, developed from the research that Jim Hunter undertook for his public lecture on 'Abstraction, Expression and the Paintings of Frank Bowling' to coincide with the exhibition 'Frank Bowling: The White Paintings' at ArtSway in 2006.

Jim Hunter is Director of the School of Art at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth where he is also Chair of the Gallery Group. In this role he instigated the text+work concept and programme of exhibitions, each with its related critical text, and he has been responsible for 25 publications in the programme.

With AHRC support text+work collaborated with ArtSway and the New Forest Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale, 2007, with Jim Hunter chairing the seminars 'Word Matters'.¹²

¹⁰ Professor Simon Olding and Jim Hunter, 'A Short Grand Tour', 2007; text+work, ISBN 0-901196-17-7.

¹¹ Jim Hunter studied Painting at the Royal College of Art 1973-76 and in 1974 had a studio in the Cite des Arts, Paris.

¹² Stephanie James and Jim Hunter 'Word Matters' seminars 'Spinning A Line' and 'Crafting A Visual Language', 12 and 26 June 2007, New Forest Pavilion, 52nd Venice Biennale. Published transcript and audio CD, ISBN 978-0-901196-23-1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Frank Bowling is represented by
ROLLO Contemporary Art,
51 Cleveland Street, London, W1 T 4JH.
t 020 7580 0020
e info@rolloart.com
w www.rolloart.com

The exhibition is planned to tour to the
University of Wolverhampton, following the show
at the Gallery, the Arts Institute at Bournemouth.

text + work

▲
the **arts institute** at bournemouth



A TOURING EXHIBITION from text+work, the Gallery,
The Arts Institute at Bournemouth.

THE ARTS INSTITUTE AT BOURNEMOUTH

The Arts Institute at Bournemouth is one of only fifteen specialist higher education institutions in the UK devoted solely to the study of arts. The Institute has been providing specialist education for over a century and enjoys a strong reputation both nationally and internationally, providing the creative industries with practitioners of the future. The Institute's strength lies in the quality of the staff and resources used to support learning and creative success. It is committed to an innovative programme of professional practice and research, and the development of professional skills and career preparation is a key element of all its courses.

www.aib.ac.uk

text+work is the concept which underpins the exhibition programme at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth. text+work promotes and provides a forum for challenging dialogue between innovative contemporary art, design, and media practice and its theoretical context.

There are text+work gallery events, critical texts, shared and networked exhibitions and a text+work website www.textandwork.org.uk. The creative practice exhibited within text+work is thus made available to a wide audience, many of whom may never visit the gallery. It provides a platform for practitioners, writers and curators who wish to examine and extend the boundaries between contemporary practice and critical discourse. A text (essay) is published by text+work to accompany each exhibition in the programme.



Towards Crab Island,
1983
Acrylic on Canvas
69"x114"

CREDITS

© 2007, copyright of the text/essay resides with text+work, the Arts Institute at Bournemouth, including the right to reproduce. text+work hold the intellectual property to text/essay (s) and respect all moral rights. Images copyright resides with the artist.

Disclaimer: The text/essay in this publication reflects the view of the author, and not necessarily those of the text+work, the Arts Institute at Bournemouth and editors.

A catalogue record of this publication is available from the British Library
British Library Cataloguing - in - Publication Data
ISBN: 978-0-901196-24-5

Edited by Violet McClean / vmcclean@aib.ac.uk

Design by Sonja Stender / www.jazznoons.co.uk

Published and produced by text+work,
The Gallery, the Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Printed by FWB printing, WINCANTON /
www.fwbprinting.co.uk

Cover

Oysterbeds, 1986
Acrylic on Canvas
70" x 115"



Big Paintings

Jim Hunter + Frank Bowling

For Further information on the exhibition
please contact:

Violet McClean, Gallery Officer

text+work

The Gallery, The Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Wallisdown Poole Dorset BH12 5HH

t 01202 363351

e vmcclean@aib.ac.uk

w www.textandwork.org.uk

