Jumping Out of the Trick Bag:
Frank Bowling’s Lands of Many Waters
at the Arnolfini

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‘Frank Bowling: Land of Many Waters’, Arnolfini, Bristol, UK, 3 July – 26 September 2021

Anxiety keeps me painting; I want to get better. I’m always risking things with the old procedures and processes, constantly trying to push it over the edge and looking for what will surprise me in the work. I won’t stop until I make the best painting in the world ever. ¹

I was trying to jump out of the trick bag that I was being forced into. I was always trying to destroy, erase, and reconstitute clichés. ²


² Frank Bowling, from an unpublished interview with Anna Schneider in February 2017, quoted in Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi, exhibition catalogue, Okwui Enwezor, ed, Haus der Kunst, Munich and Prestel Verlag, 2017, p 33
Compared to Tate Britain’s 2019 retrospective and the major exhibition at Munich’s Haus der Kunst in 2018, Frank Bowling’s 2021 exhibition at Bristol’s Arnolfini in the UK was a much smaller and arguably more modest endeavour – but none the lesser for it. For an artist now in his late eighties who has worked tirelessly over decades (albeit with some practical assistance in recent times) and devoted his life to art-thinking and art-making, and specifically painting, the Arnolfini show, ‘Land of Many Waters’, featured a considered and reflective showing of less than thirty paintings. With none of the artist’s huge-scale canvases from periods of his earlier work – who can forget their experience of the almost 2.3 x 7 m of his dark *Penumbra* (1970), or the 3 x 7 m of his monumental, sunny *Australia to Africa* (1971) – this was a more intimate approach to the painter’s working practices selected from his paintings of the last ten years. The majority of the canvases were dated 2020, with several from 2018 and 2019 and a few others from 2011–2017. The artist is now represented by Hauser & Wirth, a commercial gallery with branches in several countries around the world, and more paintings, from 1967 to the present day, were also showing in the gallery’s London and New York spaces over May–July. So although not aiming to be major museum survey retrospectives like the earlier Tate and Munich outings, 2021 gave several opportunities, in the UK and New York at least, to experience once again Bowling’s great painterly expanses and washes of colour, and to be reminded of his indefatigable energy and force as an artist, and particularly as a painter, a medium not entirely absent from the range of contemporary formats at artists’ disposal, but one often viewed as not very cutting edge or radical or able to deliver content worthy of attention.

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In its waterside location in one of Bristol’s former dockside buildings, the Arnolfini is not a large exhibition space, and although its walls could probably have accommodated one of the artist’s supersize, immersive Map paintings from the 1970s, the practicalities of getting one there and into the building may have presented a challenge, and in any case would have detracted from the evident focus on the more recent canvases. Bowling has not shied away at all from producing largescale canvases since that time (in an interview for The Guardian at the time of the 2019 Tate retrospective, the interviewer encounters Bowling in his studio at work on an ‘exuberant seven-metre work-in-progress’) – but this Arnolfini venture was definitely a more intimate affair.

A little background first of all: Frank Bowling originally came to London from the then colonial territory of ‘British Guiana’ (now Guyana) in 1953 at the age of nineteen. Initially ambitious to be a poet, he turned to painting, he has said, in part after seeing the infamous ‘This is Tomorrow’ exhibition at London’s Whitechapel gallery in 1956, which led him to thinking that perhaps making artwork could be more fulfilling than writing poetry.

What inspired me to make the move was that I felt, on being introduced to painting particularly, that I was using more of myself – I was using my body – to deliver the material onto the surface of the canvas. It seemed to be more all-encompassing than sitting at a desk with a blank piece of paper trying to deliver what you’re feeling and thinking.5

Since first leaving London for New York in 1966, Bowling has spent much of his life going back and forth between the two continents, keeping studios in both cities and sometimes taking his rolled up canvases with him on his journeys between the two, unrolling and carrying on working on them as if there had been no such transposition. Despite some initial success in the 1960s after graduating in 1962 from the Royal College of Art (where he was awarded the silver medal in his graduating year to David Hockney’s gold) he became frustrated by aspects of the London scene and was prompted (and tempted by friends such as Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara), to relocate across the Atlantic to the city that was rapidly, at the time, becoming the place for an artist to be and pursue a career. London had given him some exhibition opportunities, critical attention, and coveted teaching time, but it seemed as if it was only going to go so far. As he began to introduce more personal elements into his work that referred more to his Guyana background, interest waned. On winning the grand prize for his painting Big Bird (1964) at the 1965 Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, he has spoken of his disappointment at what he thought of this as being reduced to being categorised as ‘a Black artist’. In 1965, he had also been offered a solo show in New York at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery for the following year, something that undoubtedly helped the decision to move. But he never completely left London, drawn back by family connections as much as anything, but

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not only – and in more recent years has been based there, notably becoming a Royal Academician in 2005, and awarded an OBE in 2008, and hence distinctly, it could be said, now a member of the 'establishment'. There was also the pull of interest in the city itself and in the British painting tradition of Turner and Constable, echoes of which are clear in much of his work and particularly in the Great Thames series from 1989. Bowling has acknowledged the specific influence of these two quintessential English painters, together with Gainsborough, and not forgetting the paintings inspired by the city’s great river of those two visitors, Monet and Whistler. But Bowling’s work from 1966 onwards clearly shows evidence of his time in New York where he moved at a significant moment in the historical narrative of abstract painting and the New York School, exposure to which undoubtedly contributed to freeing him up as a painter and pushing at any residual boundaries he may have felt in the more constricted and limited horizons of the British artworld.

As for many of us, wherever we are, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns of 2020/21 have meant more time than previously at home, and for many artists in the working space of the studio. And this showed in Bowling’s 2020 paintings on the Arnolfini’s walls. The Arnolfini rooms featured some carefully placed groups and series of paintings, together with display cases featuring letters and notes written either by the artist or to him, and with actual examples of his chalks, paints and other tools and materials bringing the sense of the artist-at-work into the gallery space. Such display cases can seem a contrivance that does not always add a great deal to an exhibition and to the experience of the work itself, unless merely for some historical interest. But in this case, the contrivance worked. There is always a fascination in seeing original photographs, and photographic images did, after all, play an important part in Bowling’s work from the 1960s and early 1970s, although work from that period was not on show here. And to see handwritten notes and letters is increasingly becoming something of value, particularly at a point in time where most communication is probably never actually written down but will be in an email or text message. I suspect fewer and fewer artists hand-write any more about anything. But the material reality in the Arnolfini display cases, of which there were several, of the chalks and inks and acrylic paints, the pots of glitter and pearly lustres, the spray bottles and strips of canvas, were a reminder of the physical action of working with paint in a studio space, of the qualities of paint itself and how it behaves when dripped or pooled or poured, scumbled with a gel medium or applied with a scraper of some sort instead of a brush. Such things have always been an integral part of Bowling’s working armoury, and they added something to the experience and more intimate sense this exhibition appeared to aim for.

The paintings on show were generally on a smaller scale than some of his previous work, something that may have been a result of lockdown studio time and the imposed shift in the sense of time, space and scale, or perhaps because a smaller studio space in London is inevitable than what might be possible in New York. Or it could be the sheer physical constraints of age… although Bowling has determinedly not let that be a barrier to his
working practice. Wherever, and whatever scale he works on, Bowling has always been a prolific, generous and expansive painter, immersing himself in his painting time, his materials, the colour, and in formulating ideas and thoughts generated through living and doing. The thinking has always been in tandem with the making. And the life has always been in tandem with the doing. These are abstract paintings, despite all the inadequacies of the term, with an abstract sensibility and an awareness of the classic aspects of surface, texture and colour. But quite frequently a lone plastic toothpick or dental brush, a plastic bottle top, or a toy spider or cocktail drink umbrella embedded in the plastic paint disrupts any po-faced ideological drifting into pretentious, metaphysical claims (which has invaded much of the discourse around abstract painting, as those who might have been painting students at British art schools in the 1970s and 1980s will no doubt remember). The plastic things are general life and studio-life detritus, left by a grandchild maybe, whereas the scraps of fabric brought back by a family member from a trip to Africa and used compositionally and glued into the paint on the canvas, have a little more resonance if we know that is what they are. Small handprints in the acrylic gel (in *Three Palms and Dawn*, 2020, for example) are another. All are small tokens/reminders of life, and of life in that special psycho-physical space of the studio. That they made their way onto and into Bowling’s expansive canvases may have been initially accidental, but in the tradition of the best opportunism, the painter has embraced this and made it work. A little light-hearted fun and cheekiness in the sublime.

Many of the later paintings have less of these material elements attached, as if the artist is allowing the light, space and colour on the canvases to come more into their own. There is a lightness and fluidity and luminosity to these 2020 paintings – which has been there since the painter’s move to New York back in the 1960s, but these later paintings somehow reach clearer, higher notes with less noise and interference. Bowling’s early work from his student days at the Royal College of Art, and after, experimented with an expressive figuration and
Detail of *Three Palms and Dawn*, 2020, acrylic and acrylic gel on canvas with marouflage, 221 x 185.4 cm, photo by the author.

Detail of *Ella and her mum Zoe’s visit*, 2019, acrylic paint and acrylic gel on collaged canvas with found additions, 238.4 x 289.6 cm, photo by the author.
elements of a pop art style, as many artists in their younger years explore and experiment with what they see and are involved with around them. In New York, he encountered the New York School, the Abstract Expressionists and the Post-Painterly Abstractionists, the pouring and staining and material possibilities offered by the new acrylic paints available there. There was also the different sense of scale, of space, opportunity and possibility, often noticeably lacking in Europe and particularly London. It can never, of course, be said with any certainty what might or might not have been, but it is probably unlikely that Bowling would have produced his great series of Map paintings, with their scale, space and subtly inscribed outlines of the iconic shape of the continents of Africa, South and North America, Australia, and Guyana, if he had not relocated to New York. Inevitably, Bowling did not limit himself to only paying attention to what the painters in New York were doing. Okwui Enwezor, in his essay for the 2018 Haus der Kunst exhibition catalogue, speculates that the site specificity that was being explored both physically and intellectually by the North American land artists such as Nancy Holt, Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer and Walter de Maria was given another kind of site-specific twist in the paintings from the 1960s and 1970s by the Guyanan/British/émigré-to-Manhattan, Caribbean artist/painter. The American artists’ monumentally ambitious and sized earthworks were, Enwezor suggests, ‘specifically American works of art, by white artists with the means, sponsorship, and audacity befitting their status within a certain color-blind ethic of modernism, a contrivance freed of any colonial unconscious’. An artist such as Bowling, who was not freed of that ‘colonial unconscious’ and who wished to work with the studio-based confines and conventions of using colour, paint and canvas, created another form of spatial encounter in the luminosity and scale of the spaces in his paintings – a site, for Bowling, that is a metaphysical one, a condition of non-specificity.

Another dimension to being in the United States at the time Bowling arrived there in 1966 was being a witness to the civil rights era. He was undoubtedly aware of the Civil Rights Act passed in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and Martin Luther King’s assassination in 1968. The young Guyanese/British painter also encountered his African American peers, artists such as Mel Edwards, Jack Whitten, Daniel LaRue Johnson, William T Williams, Al Loving and Howardena Pindell, among others – names which, to this day, are still not in the mainstream art history narratives as frequently as those of Pollock, Rothko, Frankenthaler, et al. Besides having opportunities to show quite regularly, he also curated an exhibition, ‘5+1’, in 1969 in a Manhattan space and then at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, featuring some of his own work (the +1) with that of Edwards, Whitten, LaRue Johnson, Williams and Loving. In his essay for the Mappa Mundi exhibition catalogue, Enwezor describes this as the artist taking the part of being an in-between, a ‘critical go-between’. Bowling did not naturally identify automatically with the African American history and experience;

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7 Ibid, in footnote 47, p 43
and neither, back in London, did he entirely fit in with the communities who had arrived there from the Caribbean islands, encouraged to come as much-needed labour for the post-war public health system and public transport services. So this position of being a critical conduit between identities and experiences gave the painter a unique perspective, observing from the sidelines as it were, yet also conscious of and understanding the respective histories at the heart of everything.

Other opportunities also opened up in New York for the young artist that may well not have done had he remained in London. He was invited, for example, to be a contributing editor to Arts Magazine, and he wrote and published in its pages an important series of essays, ‘Discussions on Black Art’, between 1969 and 1972, a lengthy group of some at times rambling thoughts and comments on much more than the overly simple notion of ‘Black Art’. A broad selection of the artist’s writings, including these ‘Discussions’ were republished in Haus der Kunst’s 2017 Mappa Mundi catalogue. Revisiting them makes for some enlightening reading from the perspective of 2021/2022, post-Black Lives Matter initiatives and the readjustments of the ongoing post- and neo-colonialism discussions. Bowling has always had an ambivalent relationship to the question of being named or calling himself a ‘Black artist’ and whether there can be said to be or have been any such thing as ‘Black Art’, and has avoided categorical statements about this. As Enwezor said:

Bowling is a humanist and internationalist who rejects limits and contrived social categories. He most fervently disdains labels. Yet, for an artist of African descent born under colonial conditions in South America and living between London and New York, the subject of identity and forms of identification in their multifarious stripes were not an easy matter.8

Bowling has not been ignorant of or insensitive to these complex issues and legacies, but he has forged his own way as an artist and on his own terms. He did, for example, initially refuse to contribute to Rasheed Araeen’s ‘The Other Story’ exhibition at London’s Hayward Gallery (November 1989 – February 1990), but was eventually persuaded to take part. What he has resisted is being defined by others or boxed into any categories, and has always insisted that the primary issue is being an artist, and that that is the most important thing.

That decision in London back in 1956 to be an artist, a painter, and not a poet has remained Bowling’s lodestone. He has spent his life painting, not always with the traditional tool of the brush, working with the ‘never-ending possibilities of paint’ and making it work for him. He has frequently spoken of the happy accidents that paint gives; most painters know this and use and bend it to their particular will, but Bowling has been an expert. He has not shied away from the inclusion of subjects or objects relevant to his life and experience. In these recent paintings at the Arnolfini in particular, there is a luminosity that comes to the fore, but the apparent loose fluidity is misleading; these are not paintings without structure or process

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8 Ibid, p 42
or ideas or precedent. There are still some residual ‘quotes’ of Barnett Newman’s zips, for example, that featured in some of his earlier paintings. There is structure, with inherent vertical and horizontal elements, the pull of gravity, an awareness of the edge, and the controlling by the artist of the material and the processes yet allowing them to do what they can do. This is masterful, and deceptively so. Bowling himself has spoken of how his painting ‘… is rules-based. As a teenager in New Amsterdam, I worked as a kind of apprentice to my uncle who was a cabinet maker, so I learned all about how triangles and circles would fit within squares to make rock-solid furniture… I tend to start with geometry and a colour palette, both of which are all about rules, but then what happens to the paint when it’s on the canvas is something else.’

Yet the sensation of liquidity, the elemental flowing bodies of non-solid matter has been an undercurrent in Bowling’s work for decades. Water, liquids, rivers, are significant to Bowling, in other ways than being the literal and primary vehicle and matter in his painting. Maybe because of its waterside location, the Arnolfini exhibition (and its catalogue) focused on this almost more than any other aspect. The title, ‘Land of Many Waters’, is a direct reference to Guyana, the artist’s original home, whose name is an Amerindian word meaning ‘land of waters’:

It’s all because of the material of this place called British Guiana. Whether sand or mud, it’s a place where it’s always muddy. There’s this bright light but the feel is always muddy because it rains a lot. The land of water… I was fighting with the idea of silt and concrete and being undermined by water and the road always cracked and always muddy. I was struggling with it being pinned on me by art critics that I was attracted to bright colour and yet my memory of what was underfoot, of what you touched, was that if you had to lean on something for support you’d always lose your balance because Guyana was slippery, fluid.

The artist’s birthplace town of Bartica is at the confluence where three rivers meet, the Essequibo and its tributaries, the Guyuni and Mazaruni rivers. The Essequibo is Guyana’s largest river, flowing 1,000 km from the Brazilian border further south and emptying out into the Atlantic after Bartica in a twenty-mile wide estuary. Bartica was therefore a watery place, as is the larger Guyanan town of New Amsterdam. Built by Dutch colonisers with an engineered system of canals and claimed land, like its namesake, New Amsterdam was where the young Bowling spent his youth and teenage years before leaving for London. London is also a watery place, with the River Thames flowing through it and defining its layout, and Bowling’s London studio is just a short walk from its edge. The artist’s other home city for many years, New York, is similarly defined by the East and Hudson rivers flowing through and around it. This can be read in many other ways throughout the artist’s work: the iconic continent shapes that feature in the Map paintings subtly emphasise their ocean-bounded contours; the association with the silt and eddies of river waters can be discerned in so many of

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10 Interview with Zoé Whitley in Frank Bowling: Land of Many Waters, exhibition catalogue, Gemma Brace, ed, Arnolfini, Bristol, 2021, p 29
his paintings, not only the *Great Thames* series. And other liquid metaphorical associations can also be made to the artist’s thinking and working processes. But leaving these aside, what remains key to a consideration of Bowling’s life’s work, of which only a very, very small selection was on show in Bristol, is to celebrate it in all its uniqueness, its energy and vibrancy (‘Rothko on acid’, as a friend of mine joked), its seriousness and its relevance in so many ways. Rather than trying to give what could only be a brief and inadequate summary, I leave you with some prescient words for further thought from Kobena Mercer:

> Although we only caught up with him belatedly, Bowling prepared the way for the post-colonial turn that, by decentering modernism, changed the rules of the game that gave rise to the emergence of global contemporary art.¹²

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¹¹ See, in particular, the contributions by Gaylene Gould and Gemma Brace and the interview with Zoë Whitley in the *Arnolfini* catalogue, which play heavily on these associations, even to bringing in the waterside location of the *Arnolfini* itself: *Frank Bowling: Land of Many Waters*, exhibition catalogue, op cit.