

# Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction

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*Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea  
has locked them up. The sea is History.*<sup>1</sup>

### Open Sea

In 1953<sup>2</sup> when Frank Bowling, at age nineteen, set sail for England from his native New Amsterdam in colonial British Guiana, he initiated a journey that, by 1970, would take more than half a million citizens of the British colonies in the West Indies to Britain<sup>3</sup>, as a great historical shift was reshaping its far-flung empire. Traveling on a Booker boat<sup>4</sup> from Guiana, Bowling's trans-Atlantic crossing took him through passages in Trinidad, Martinique, and Spain, before landing in Portsmouth on the south coast of England. From Portsmouth he made his way to London by train, disembarking at Waterloo Station where he was met by his maternal uncle, Basil Franklin, with whom he lodged for several months in a flat off Finchley Road in West Hampstead, one of the city's suburbs. The last leg of this long journey from South America was by the London Tube. Inside the moiling train, the provincial Bowling, mesmerized by the new impressions of the great metropolis, no longer paid attention to his relative. Marveling at the surroundings and at the sheer energy of the heaving crowd, he soon lost himself in the packed, bustling sights of euphoric, postwar London, in the midst of "coronation fever."<sup>5</sup> However, the raucous and festive scene of revelers in the Tube station that summer afternoon belied the struggles of a city and country still deeply scarred by and emerging from the disasters of war.<sup>6</sup>

The end of the war had also precipitated other changes in politics, economics, and culture. In art, modernism's once brisk flag, though long rooted in European avant-garde traditions, flew at half-mast, as the winds of artistic change shifted towards the American shores.<sup>7</sup> The windy gust was even more powerful in geo-political terms, especially in colonial relationships.<sup>8</sup> As Britain rebuilt, its empire was slowly disintegrating. There were pressing demands for self-rule in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. This put the Empire on the back foot, as pressure for decolonization accelerated the reduction of its colonial holdings.<sup>9</sup> Short of a labor force necessary to rebuild the country, Britain turned to its colonies in the Anglo-Caribbean—which it flooded with advertisements—for workers who were offered free passage to the "mother country" in exchange for the promise of decently remunerated employment. The flow of labor from the Caribbean brought thousands of West Indian men and women to Britain in an epic story of postwar black migration to Europe. The first group of recruited workers arrived on June 22, 1948 in Tilbury Docks, on the steamship *Empire Windrush* fig. 1.<sup>10</sup> A decade of migration, powered by the wave of guest workers, began to alter Britain's cultural, ethnic, and social composition. The population of immigrants who settled in various British cities contributed to the creation of a permanent West Indian presence in post-

war Britain, and, as Kennetta Hammond Perry writes, did so "in ways that subsequently transformed notions of citizenship and ideas of what it means to be British."<sup>11</sup> In an article recalling this period in the *Guardian* newspaper, Neil Spencer writes that a new society was being created with the arrival of those first immigrants, and with it "the seeds of multicultural Britain were duly sown."<sup>12</sup>

Britain was a full five years into its recruitment of guest workers when Bowling arrived in London. On the Tube journey that summer afternoon, Bowling would have seen a cross section of people—black, white and brown. The visible presence of West Indians, Africans, and Asians in the city depicted the new social composition of cosmopolitan London. Intertwined as notions of citizenship and multiculturalism were at the time, migration and the new settlers were not necessarily well received by the native population. As the postcolonial migration was transforming the face of Britain, it was also straining the relationship between hosts and guests, natives and immigrants.<sup>13</sup> Racial hostility and violence was rewriting the cosmopolitan brief of Britain, and consequently altered the nation's ethnic and class relations.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Bowling's arrival was at a moment of cultural and political crosscurrents that impacted thousands of postcolonial strivers who joined this milieu. Despite experiences of racial antagonism in the city, for Bowling, being in London and seeing himself as part of its contemporary social composition represented its proper cultural currency. The journey from New Amsterdam was not intended to be to just any city in Britain. The specific cosmopolitan romance of it all was linked directly to London. As he described it to Mel Gooding: "the moment I arrived in London, I knew I was home." It was a feeling he shared with a multitude of other postcolonial aspirants: "... we always saw London as the place..."<sup>15</sup>

It is in this sense that Bowling laid claim to London. But if he spoke of London from the perspective of a new arrival to an exciting and bewildering metropolis, his was not a unique sentiment. Scenes of West Indian arrivals throughout the 1950s underscore the emphasis on London as the place to be. The great



fig. 1  
The *Empire Windrush* arriving from Jamaica, 1948

Trinidadian calypso singer, Lord Kitchener (born Aldwyn Roberts), provided the perfect pitch for the sentiment about London as the place of arrival in the popular song: "London is the Place for Me." Upon landing in Tilbury with other passengers on *Empire Windrush's* maiden voyage of 1948, Kitchener was captured on camera by a British Pathé film crew that was reporting on "The Big Black British Invasion." When asked to sing a song, the nattily dressed Kitchener, standing on the ship's gangway, broke into an impromptu song, crooning "London is the place for me ... London this lovely city ... You can go to France or America, India, Asia, or Australia, but you must come back to London city."<sup>16</sup> For generations of black Britons, this disembarkation, with the instantly composed ode to the city on the bank of the Thames, has since become a seminal moment of postcolonial migration.

The generation of West Indian immigrants who peopled postwar Britain between 1948 and the end of the 1950s has been referred to as the "Windrush Generation."<sup>17</sup> It included students, writers, artists, World War II veterans, civil servants, nurses, and workers of all stripes and skills who made similar journeys, arriving in Britain from different parts of the British empire to support the "mother country." A postcolonial émigré culture was in the making. Notable figures among the black migration include cultural theorist Stuart Hall (Jamaica); writers Edward Kamau Braithwaite and George Lamming (Barbados), V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad and Tobago), Wilson Harris (Guyana); artists Francis Newton Souza (India), Rasheed Araeen (Pakistan), Aubrey Williams (Guyana), Uzo Egonu (Nigeria), Ibrahim El Salahi (Sudan). The men and women of this generation would go on to play pivotal roles in British cultural life. They brought into the British mainstream new sounds, cultural codes, narratives, and artistic strategies that remain palpable to this day.

The desire for London as "the place" also reflects a certain allure and glamour. Here, the quip attributed to the eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson, who famously remarked that "a man who is tired of London is tired of life," is relevant. London as "the place" also reflects part of the enduring myth of cosmopolitanism,<sup>18</sup> a romance that has animated the history of modern Western culture through processes of migration, whether voluntary or forced. In another way cosmopolitanism can be interpreted as a crossroads of unaffiliated strangers who find commonality in a world of estrangement.<sup>19</sup> Edward Said identified a certain strain of cosmopolitanism at the core of modern Western culture which belongs to the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees.<sup>20</sup> Exploring the way exile creates estrangement and homelessness in the life of cosmopolitans, George Steiner has written of an entire category of modern literature that he calls "extraterritorial," namely works produced by and about exiles. But Said and Steiner each caution against the romantic view of exile and émigré culture, since to leave one's native context is to leave something behind. What makes today's exilic communities different from earlier ones, Said stresses, "is the scale: our age ... is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass migration."<sup>21</sup> Steiner's concluding passage in his essay underscores this point:

*A great writer driven from language to language by social upheaval and war is an apt symbol for the age of the refugee. No exile is more radical, no feat of adaptation and new life more demanding. It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism which has made so many homeless, which has torn up tongues and peoples by the root, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely as he aspires to be and so often is, [the exile] remains, by virtue of his extraterritoriality, profoundly of our time, and one of its spokesmen.<sup>22</sup>*

For the immigrant, leaving and setting off should not merely be understood as a search for oneself or a voyage of discovery. Surely it can be those things. But setting off is also a leaving behind. It is a rift that produces a lacuna, an absence that is constantly filled by memory and nostalgia. The success and fame achieved by migrant artists does nothing to resolve the quandary of extraterritoriality or alleviate the loss that accompanies departure from a known world. Despite feelings of homelessness, artists and exiles do sometimes manage to find a harbor, if only for a fleeting moment. As Said so eloquently asked, if "true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching motif, of modern culture?"<sup>23</sup> Whether it is Pablo Picasso migrating from Barcelona to Paris or Wifredo Lam from Havana to Madrid to Paris, James Joyce from Dublin to Trieste or Aimé Césaire from Fort de France to Paris, Ben Enwonwu from Onitsha to London or Arshille Gorky from Yerevan to New York, Samuel Beckett from Dublin to Paris or James Baldwin from Harlem to Paris, we are constantly reminded that modernism is in fact profoundly marked by the work of exiles and immigrants. They create new formations of culture that enrich the social ecology of their host cultures. Therefore, despite the terminal loss of exile—the endless habituation to living ahistorically in foreign lands, the schism between habitus and habitat, the tension between hostility and hospitality—artists have constantly endured the privation of displacement, carved out an imaginary space, and found within modernism a certain harbor of belonging that is more than territorial.

#### To be Belated

The cultural context in which Bowling began his artistic quest in his mid-twenties, a quest to make a success of his life, coincided with changes in British socio-political life. But it meant beginning anew as a migrant, exile, foreigner, and cosmopolitan all at once. After a brief study of English at Westminster College and a two-and-a-half-year enlistment in the Royal Air Force (RAF), he was still uncertain in which direction he wanted to go. His initial dream was to be a poet and writer, a bit of which he did, but with little success. He went to Paris for several months to explore the bohe-

mian life of the writer, but became disaffected with the French capital and returned to London. Meanwhile, his ambition to become a poet and writer started to fade. He later came into art through Keith Critchlow, a young Englishman who had befriended him in the RAF. After demobilization, he and Critchlow made regular visits to museums – the National Gallery, Tate Gallery, Whitechapel Art Gallery, Institute of Contemporary Art – and frequently saw the latest exhibitions at commercial galleries in Soho. He traveled to Munich in 1959 to see the work of the Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) artists and German Expressionist painters, at which time he may have visited Haus der Kunst, which was then busy rehabilitating itself into a space dedicated to the work of European avant-gardes. He also seriously immersed himself into both European old masters and the contemporary art of the time, slowly building up his knowledge. Of the European old masters, Velasquez, Goya, Rembrandt, and El Greco were his favorites. The large traveling exhibition *The New American Painting*,<sup>24</sup> comprised of works by American Abstract Expressionist artists, made a triumphant stop at Tate Gallery in the 1959 in the course of its year-long tour across Europe, as did Jackson Pollock's exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery the previous year. The shows made a great impression on Bowling and artists of his generation. His passion and interest in art were fired up by these encounters.

Struggling financially and sometimes needing a place to stay, he briefly spent time with friends in Bristol. Despite his homelessness, the lure of London as "the place" remained undiminished. He finally returned to the city in 1958. To earn some money, he did odd jobs, worked at a construction site, started modeling for artist friends, and found work doing regular sittings for students at the

Royal College of Art as a studio model under the guidance of Carel Weight, then the head of the painting department. These exposures and contacts finally convinced him of the direction he wanted to take. It is on this account that modernism provided him the first opportunity in his search for an identity as a cosmopolitan artist and a lifelong harbor of belonging. First he attended Chelsea College of Art in 1958, but had to withdraw when funds sent over by his mother from Guyana ran out. When he finally won a place as a student at the Royal College of Art in autumn 1959,<sup>25</sup> London was a full-blown scene of mixed heritage. It had become a city in the throes of social transformation. Sounds of Caribbean Calypso joined West African Highlife, Cuban Rumba, American Jazz, and Rock and Roll to create a mixture of cultures and a hybrid social experience previously unknown to the city. The Independent Group in the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*,<sup>26</sup> held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1956, introduced a pop sensibility and the imagery of postwar consumer culture, urbanism, and communication technology into the discourse of contemporary art. In London of that period, everything was mixed up, but separate at the same time. This was especially so for a solitary black artist looking to break into a white artistic domain. To understand Bowling's influences we must therefore also look into some of his encounters with modernism's alienating exclusions.

A charming, opinionated, gregarious, ambitious, and self-confident man by nature, Bowling was already, even before graduating from college, a habitu  of the London art scene.<sup>27</sup> He was garnering interest in his work, and was being written up in the press.<sup>28</sup> As one of the few visible black artists on the scene, he was attracting and riding the crest of attention. He won the silver medal in painting, with David Hockney taking the gold medal, as a mem-

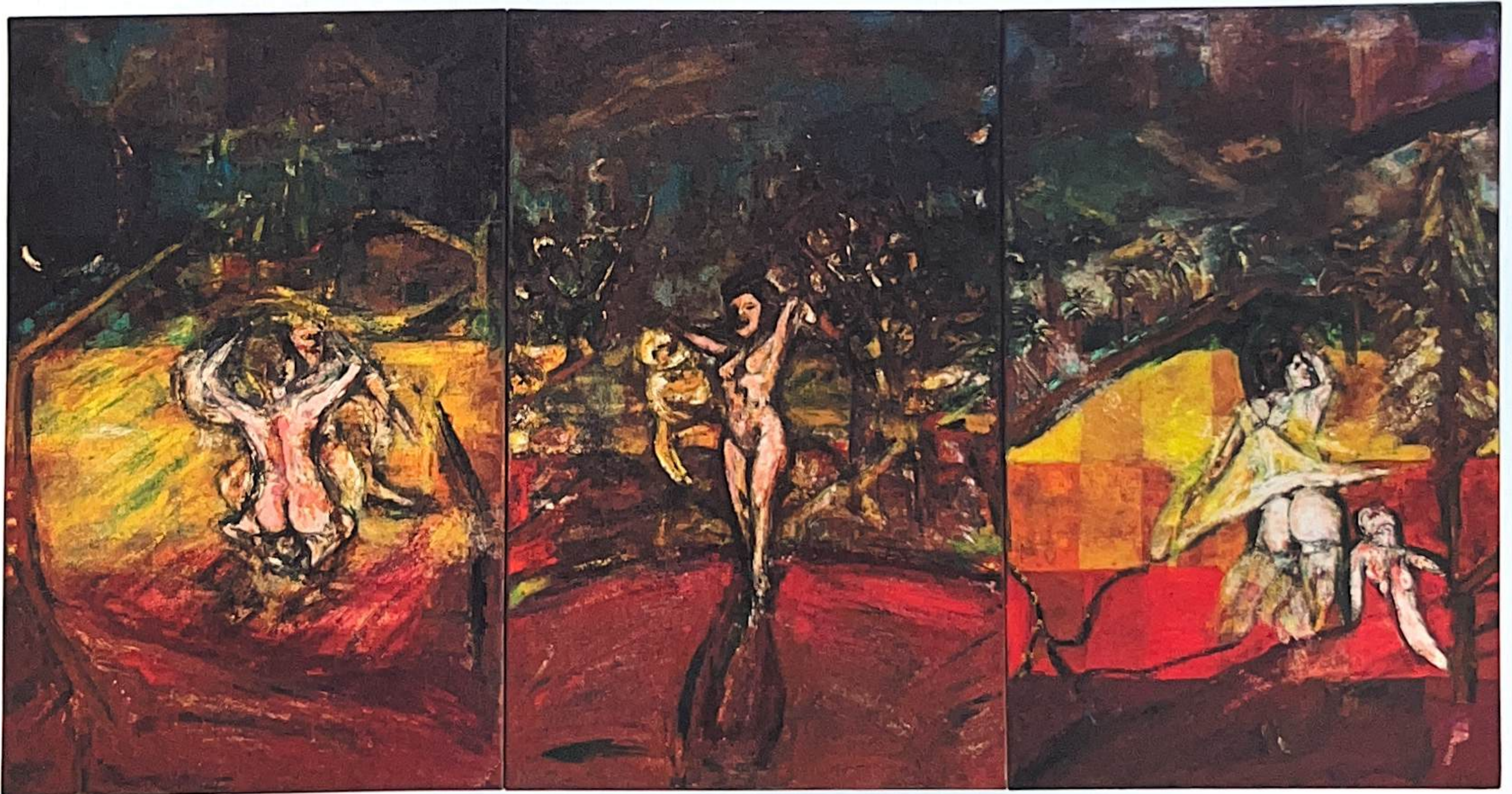


fig. 2  
Frank Bowling, *Frolic*, 1962  
Triptych, oil on linen, 121.5 x 238.5 cm

ber of the graduating class in the summer of 1962, though many thought he should have been awarded the top prize. His first major exhibition, held on October 5, 1962 at Grabowski Gallery in Kensington just a few months after his graduation from RCA, gained him further visibility as a member of the New Contemporaries.<sup>29</sup> Under the title *Image in Revolt*,<sup>30</sup> he exhibited eleven paintings in the two-person show with RCA classmate Derek Boshier. A centerpiece of his display in the exhibition was the large Baconesque triptych, *A Mirror, Three Windows, and a Door* (1962) pp. 156-7. While Boshier exhibited ironic, pop-oriented paintings with biting political references, Bowling presented angst-driven, expressionistic figuration that plumbed the state of the human condition in a Sartrean, existentialist key. The pairing of Bowling and Boshier, each working with different pictorial strategies, was an inspired and confident outing for both young artists. The next year, following the Grabowski Gallery show, he was again hard at work, making new paintings in the studio and pushing the ambition and scale of his work. In a profile published in the *Chelsea Post and West London Star* the writer described Bowling's bold, slashing expressionistic marks and provocative figuration in this way: "His colours are rich, vivid and powerful. His paintings, which for me had tremendous impact, are full and absorbing. A free and daring painter, Bowling likes to work on large canvases." Bowling commented in the article: "I like to push the paint to its limit. When I work on a small canvas, I constantly want to take the paint over the edge."<sup>31</sup> And so he often did. A standout in the series of new works he produced was *Frolic* (1962) fig. 2, a ludic scene composed of three canvases, abutted end to end to create a continuous narrative of frenetic energy that was "full of torrid sexual fantasies."<sup>32</sup> This painting's formal model followed the theme presented in an even larger triptych he exhibited at Grabowski Gallery. The influence of Bacon on both his style and handling of narrative during this period is clearly evident.<sup>33</sup> Bacon at the time was at the height of his powers. And especially after his triumphant 1962 Tate Gallery retrospective, he straddled like a colossus over debates around the British painting scene. However, there are differences in temperament and mood of the paintings. For example, the charged evocations of eroticism and contorted forms, which in Bacon carry an existentialist and homo-erotic drive, find a dark racial-sexual counterpoint in Bowling's hetero-social drama of inter-racial sexual desire. The differences in both the style and content are underscored by Bowling while discussing the influence of the older artist on his work and his perceptions of its impact on him. This he acknowledged to the critic, with a caveat:

*It's a kind of flattery really. I think he's one of the greatest painters of our time. Certainly the best painter on the English scene. He is a daring painter who really does push the paint. While there might be similarities, I suspect we might be after different things. It's not as though I am just doing bad Bacons. I wouldn't look to any modern painter for direction, even though I might admire their work.*<sup>34</sup>

In an article in *New Statesman* David Sylvester writes about a group of young London artists, including David Hockney, R.B. Kitaj, Philip Sutton, and Bowling, who were enthralled by Bacon. He comments that "Frank Bowling from British Guiana, ... has obviously seen in Bacon ways to compress terror and violence into the form of painting." He praises the paintings of the young, emerging artist, saying: "Bowling's development over the last couple of years is a living proof of the truism that, for an artist bursting with something to express, a gain in control of the medium is a gain in forcefulness of expression."<sup>35</sup>

But Bowling was also beginning to chart his own course and plotting to reorient his work in a different direction. While his painting had become deeply connected to Bacon and expressionistic figuration and colored by postcolonial violence in such places as Congo and Kenya, the fact of his work's imbrication with Pop, politics, and the postcolonial situation was never publicly acknowledged. He discusses this bewildering omission of Pop, and the complex interests of his work in a 1995 interview:

*I was there working at the same time with all the people who emerged from Pop Art ... Everybody who was making ambitious paintings worked from photographs. And photography was naturally consumed with what was in the news, like Marilyn Monroe. A lot of people painted things about Marilyn Monroe; but my emphasis, what I was painting, was the changing situation, and what was emerging from that sort of change, like the Belgians gave up Congo, and the British gave up Kenya, and places like that.*<sup>36</sup>

In 1963, at the age of twenty-nine, he was one of the artists invited by Richard Buckle – the others included Peter Blake, Ceri Richard, and Leonard Rosoman – to participate in an exhibition at Stratford-upon-Avon marking the four-hundredth anniversary of William Shakespeare's birth. Bowling produced three large paintings for the exhibition, all of which, to his horror, were later destroyed.<sup>37</sup> The largest of the lot was the monumental contemporary allegory, *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (1963) pp. 254-5. At four and half meters high and over ten meters wide, the imposing, mural-sized painting remains his largest work to date. But it also indicated his sheer audacity, and the direction he wanted to take. It was not going to be easel scale painting for him. Bigness connoted power and visibility, and the idea of being in the mix remained part of his interest. He did not want to be ignored.<sup>38</sup>

Having come to art in his mid-twenties, with no prior training, he had a lot of ground to make up. With his relentless expansion of the possibilities of painting, it seemed that Bowling wanted to compensate for his artistic belatedness. He was in a hurry to get somewhere. In three short years at RCA with a short stint at the Slade School of Art, where the influence of David Bromberg reined amongst students such as Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, he not only amassed an impressive body of work, he attracted serious critical and curatorial attention, and gained

control and mastery over his expression. He most certainly made it possible for him to ... With his expanding professional responsibilities as the ... participated in exhibitions of the ... period. He also showed w ... exhibition, with artists fr ... land, Canada and Asia,<sup>39</sup> ... First World Festival of N

This period, f ... terms of experiment ... as a contemporary a ... painting, *Mirror* (196 ... *Big Bird* (1964) pp. 1 ... evinced a new orie ... introduction of har ... diffuse figuration. ... intersect differer ... from incorporati ... figurative to Pop ... All these works ... next move: to

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control and mastery over his medium and the forcefulness of his expression. He most certainly gained enormous confidence that made it possible for him to work on the scale that he undertook. With his expanding professional career he was also juggling family responsibilities as the father of three young sons. He participated in exhibitions of then emerging new contemporaries of the period. He also showed work in the *Young Commonwealth Artists* exhibition, with artists from the Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Asia,<sup>39</sup> and later represented Britain in the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Art and Culture in Dakar, Senegal.<sup>40</sup>

This period, following his time at RCA, was profitable<sup>41</sup> in terms of experimenting with new ideas and examining his place as a contemporary artist within the London art scene. His major painting, *Mirror* (1964–66) p. 163, now in the collection of the Tate, *Big Bird* (1964) pp. 160–1, and *Swan I* and *Swan II* (1964) p. 56 all evinced a new orientation in his painting style, with the forceful introduction of hard-edged geometric abstraction against a more diffuse figuration. The optical program of these paintings, which intersect different elements of contemporary postwar painting, from incorporating a fragment of Bridget Riley's Op Art painting to figurative to Pop Art, is vividly adumbrated in *Cover Girl* (1966) p. 47. All these works and experiments with form laid the ground for his next move: to the wider shores of modernist art in New York.

#### Double Crossing

As is clear, before finally settling in New York, Bowling was deeply involved in contemporary British art. He therefore came to the artistic scene of Manhattan with some measure of success and notoriety in London. He had already made the journey to the city, first on a bursary in 1961 with RCA classmates Hockney and the New Zealander Billy Apple. He left London finally in 1966, two years after Apple moved to New York, while Hockney fled London for America, settling in Los Angeles. Before he relocated to New York in June 1966, Bowling's first monographic exhibition in the city was held at the Terry Dintenfass Gallery in January 1966.<sup>42</sup> While he did not make the trip over for the exhibition in the city in January, his arrival in June in New York was already prepared by Larry Rivers, whom he had met in 1963 in London, and the poet and curator Frank O'Hara. They helped make arrangements for lodging at the Chelsea Hotel on Twenty-Third Street, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues in the west side of Manhattan. He immediately set about working in the cramped space of his Chelsea Hotel quarters.<sup>43</sup>

Most discussions of Bowling's artistic maturation and the emergence of political awareness in his work are dated to this time, with the fortuitous convergence of his relocation to New York and the rise of post-civil rights radical black nationalism in the United States. This view has contributed to a tendency to elide the significance of postcolonial British cultural life and diasporic politics,<sup>44</sup> and their ultimate impact on his work. The cultural sources and networks – for example, the postcolonial situa-

tion in Africa and Guyana, "the dire level of Blacks and minority people"<sup>45</sup> in Britain – that informed and animated his later abstraction were already developed in London. Their charge simply became combustible when the two met and mixed in the racially divided art scene of Manhattan. But they cannot be narrowed down to debates that shaped black cultural production in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>46</sup>

Certainly, upon entering the scene, his transnational credential as a black Briton must have provided him with a kind of exotic fillip. While living in New York, he became a sort of go-between figure, connecting and mediating European, Caribbean, and diasporic aesthetics amongst his African American cohorts.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Bowling took up this role, not only as a black British expatriate artist, but also as a curator and writer. His writing was featured regularly in *Arts Magazine* pp. 196–218, for which he penned a series of analytical essays on the urgent questions of black art from 1969 to 1972.<sup>48</sup> Writing and curating as a black British artist, born in South America, in colonial Guyana, and as an outsider to American culture, Bowling began to articulate a bridge between African American aesthetics and an intercultural and transnational take on questions of blackness. His incisive essays and reviews provided a forthright, and sometimes combative cultural perspective that went beyond American post-civil rights discourse, and the strident politics of the black power movement. However, the American debates on blackness<sup>49</sup> fired up his own interests in ideas of cultural heritage:

*Current art criticism is developing an attitude which threatens to consign the idea and fact of Black Art to the periphery of artistic events. This establishment criticism hides behind useful political terms [such as] 'revolution,' malignant in its approach to Black art; for Black art, like any art, is art. The difference is that it is done by a special kind of people.*<sup>50</sup>

Only by virtue of the full acknowledgement of all the facets of his journey – from colonial Guyana to a new multicultural Britain transformed by the migration of its former colonial subjects and the emerging postcolonial agitations, to the American post-civil rights debate on Black Art and abstraction – can we gain a full appreciation of the cultural complexities that underpinned Bowling as a postcolonial, émigré, black, and modern artist in late modernism. To explore these different identities simultaneously is not inimical to his position as one of his generation's most articulate and accomplished artists. Eloquent, generous, and fearless, Bowling as a critic was always insightful, provocative, and polemical, writing from a perspective that echoes Baudelaire's maxim that "art criticism should be partial, impassioned, political – that is to say formed from an exclusive point of view, but also from a point of view that opens the greatest number of horizons."<sup>51</sup> Writing occasional essays and criticisms while teaching at Columbia University and curating the odd exhibition did set him apart from his immediate contemporaries.

However, to gain a better grasp of Bowling as an artist along with the most consequential painters working at this time in New York and London, we should see his practice as a part of the artistic and critical context of his West Indian contemporaries such as Derek Walcott, Stuart Hall, Edouard Glissant, George Lamming, Edward Kamau Braithwaite, V.S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, and others. These writers, poets, and thinkers, through their work, have rendered the New World experience as a non-linear and polyphonic phenomenon. Like theirs, Bowling's work defies the specificities of blackness and the ambiguities of abstraction. In its retelling of the Homeric epic *The Odyssey*, Walcott's major work, the sweeping epic poem *Omeros*,<sup>52</sup> identifies the epic dislocation of Africans to the New World as a tragic historical event and renders out of it a narrative about imagination, exile, migration, and displacement. Bowling explored similar themes—like his literary counterparts—and was particularly drawn to the rich, complicated relationship between blackness and abstraction as refractions of the Homeric ideals of perseverance, heroism, and transformation. The convergence of the literary and the poetic paved the way for him where pure painting intersected content. Dennis de Caires has identified the gnarled innards of Bowling's post-painterly experiment and what it might share with the literary orbit of his Guyanese compatriot, the writer Wilson Harris. de Caires was the first to name some of the literary roots of Bowling's abstraction, exposing it to a searching exploration of form and identity. He writes:

*Wilson Harris's radical and beautiful use of language in his attempt to attain "a form that precedes content" is not only an attempt to extend the formal possibilities of the novel format, but is the beginning of the process of self-discovery. Wilson Harris's achievement is important when considering Bowling's own history, for Bowling could never have conceived such a programme in particular (if Yeats is transportable, Titian is not). It seems to me that one of the interesting features of Bowling's work is his interest in establishing a corresponding equivalent of Harris and Mitteleholzer (sic) with visual language.*<sup>53</sup>

#### Caribbean Discourse and the Abstract Sub-Marine

In the New World—between the Caribbean and South America—black populations have an intimate subterranean knowledge of the open indigo-green sea, its lugubrious salty depths, and the roiling anarchy of the waves. The sea is more than nature. It is memory. The sea is history, as the eminent Saint Lucian, Walcott, reminds us. Or it is submarine as the Barbadian poet, playwright, and essayist Braithwaite situates the discourse of the Caribbean. With this in mind, it is necessary to admit how the New World experience furnished Bowling's work with a "Caribbean Discourse,"<sup>54</sup> as Glissant theorized it, without necessarily making prescriptive

politics out of it. As with the writings of these towering figures of the Antillean, West Indian, Caribbean, Bowling's monumental abstraction was a way to stage painting as part of a different grand narrative. However, admitting to cultural and historical experience, and its inflections of migration, deportation, displacement, exile, and errantry<sup>55</sup> as structuring ideas in the production of modern art are not novel. But in Bowling's paintings there is an added blistering-the-tongue piquancy in how the shifting, unstable soil of content and form are tackled. This is no easy matter, particularly when certain explorations—even within abstract formats—are abjured by a type of modernist criticism deeply invested in the purity of painting. But what happens when an artist proceeds to contaminate this purity, to challenge the picture plane with unsanctioned material? Or when painting's surfaces and frames are breached and inundated with historical flotsam and jetsam? It is the bravest of artists who seek to upend those strictures of modernist abstraction in which subjectivity and content are eliminated for the glorification of pure immanence. Bowling has written of the conundrum of cultural identity in the fashioning of an artistic position within such modernist discourse:

*The Jewishness of a Jewish novel can be controversial, polemical, attractive, and embraced. However, it remains valid and establishes itself as such. So with Chinese-ness or Japanese-ness. In art, this is not so. In the hierarchy we are led by art doesn't allow the color or ethnic lines—except at its peril. This is clearly a questionable position in the changing, fermenting world in which we live.*<sup>56</sup>

This confrontation with the pieties of modernist criticism suggests that Bowling would not shy away from addressing issues that hold back new ideas, new content, from what a work of abstract art could contain. As he shifted into pure abstraction Bowling sought to interrogate how the subjective identity of the artist could be interpellated into late modernism's strictures. In fact, he wanted to see how it might be possible to bring a new investment into modernist abstraction without abandoning the formal challenges he thought necessary to advance his vision of painting, and thus free his own art from a narrow New York-centric provincialism.

Perhaps we can take up these questions in Bowling's art through the idea of an abstract sublime, much like what has happened in the literatures of the Caribbean and the New World. It might require testing the proposition that cosmopolitan modernism<sup>57</sup> offers multiple contexts that could enliven its discourse, and thus offer a fitting entry point where Bowling's vision of painting meets the quest to confront a metaphorical, rather than a literal blackness in the discourse of late modernist abstraction. Here, I would like to press into service Paul Gilroy's idea of the "Black Atlantic," for it offers for the study and theory of diasporic blackness a cogent and critical through-way to explore that "peril" for the contemporary black artist which Bowling had identified in his writing a few decades earlier. In the concept of the Black Atlantic, Gil-

roy reconceives Glissant's "Caribbean Discourse." He asks cultural historians to consider the Black Atlantic "as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective."<sup>58</sup> Lest we think of the Black Atlantic as a fixed space of moribund meaning, Gilroy's use of it is transactional. Might the quiddity of Bowling's abstract sublime fit into the "transnational and intercultural perspective" that Gilroy advocates? Indeed, the theorist does echo Bowling when he writes: "it is regrettable that questions of 'race' and representation have been so regularly banished from orthodox histories of western aesthetic judgement, taste, and cultural value."<sup>59</sup> In contrast to Bowling's and Gilroy's statements, art historian Darby English resorts to a more America-focused account, and thus a more provincial view of blackness, writing that:

*The discourse of Black Art aspires to nothing less than a theory of the widest generality, best characterized by the size and topology of the domain it organizes. It is a strong theory beyond reproach, as its reach and reductiveness have become virtues in the perpetually "exceptional" circumstances of a difference-fixated politics of representation.<sup>60</sup>*

There is something to the muscularity with which the statement is delivered that one might admire, but both its critical and historical perspectives are far too limited to be useful in the more complex and transactional context of the Black Atlantic. In these texts, the dialectical assessment of representation and race could be seen in tension with the metaphorical and figural blackness in "Black Art." None of these two modes ever seems to cohere. Even when an artist like Bowling assiduously places blackness at a remove and sets a distance between his work and the burdens of blackness through pure painterliness (and here abstraction is perceived as an escape hatch from such entanglement), it is not a guarantee that blackness as such can be liquefied. In fact, there is no guarantee that any "Black" painter who makes work not immediately identifiable as "black" is necessarily assured of modernism's putative universalism and color-blindness. For this reason, I too share the skepticism about certain overweening racial and ethnic projections that too easily and expediently attach to the work of non-white artists, as if the most abstract thoughts can be readily coded by ethnicity or race. To do so is to ignore how diverse black thought actually is and can be. In the work of critical artists such as Bowling and even those artists and their supporters whom English admonishes, the question of



fig. 3  
Sam Gilliam, 10/27/69, 1969  
Acrylic on canvas, installation dimensions variable, approximate installation dimensions:  
355.6 x 469.9 x 40.6 cm

"Black Art" and whatever it might be or stand for need not be placed in an either/or binary system.

In his book on the magisterial abstraction of Sam Gilliam fig. 3, Jonathan P. Binstock devotes himself to rendering Gilliam, who is African American, colorless, as if such identification would make his monumental achievement any less important because of his blackness, which has been insistently positioned as a lack rather than a surplus. In this reading, the color to see in the innovative, billowing curtains and cascading free forms of Gilliam's stained canvasses is paint. The only image to behold is the chemical, not the epidermal pigment. Fair enough. But then Binstock resorts to a cliché, pointlessly arguing that "Gilliam is deeply rooted in the ethics of midcentury modernism and its *universalist* philosophies: that is, the hope that modernism harbors, in the form of individual expression, for all *humanity*."<sup>61</sup> Why is it necessary to contrive such an under-nourished notion of "universalism," which itself is a priori a loaded term, particularly when it faces a certain degraded "humanity"? We have seen in recent years how conventional art history and curatorial knowledge have sponsored these ideas, while paying little heed to the complicated history of Western "pigmentocracy" in the aftermath of the Middle Passage. Lately historians have been working hard to extricate the "black artist" from his "blackness,"<sup>62</sup> to reinvest him with an abstract colorless humanity, as if color and race are normative and not historically determined values. The questionable judgments of modernism itself, however, bear witness to an intractable epistemological problem, namely the dialectical tension between its purported universalism and the essentializing character of its particularism.<sup>63</sup> In his curatorial statement for the exhibition *5 + 1*,<sup>64</sup> a show of six New York-based black artists (Melvin Edwards, Daniel LaRue Johnson, Alvin Loving, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams along with Bowling as the sole non-African American, hence, the + 1) which he organized, Bowling writes:

*It is certain that Black as art is not readily available as Black as militant. Black, aspirationally, politically, socio-*

*logically. Black art demands the same learning, knowledge, in-touch-withness as any art. Black art is not isolated by Africanisation with its implied stagnation. Two positive virtues of Black art: (i) an awareness of the solid canons of traditional African artistic expression and thought (which have contributed to 20th century western art); and (ii) that powerful, instinctive, and intelligent ability which Blacks have shown time and again, despite inflicted degradations, to rearrange found things, redirecting the "things" of whatever environment in which Blacks are thrown, placed, or trapped.<sup>65</sup>*

With this statement, it seems therefore that the critical reflections necessary to advance the claims and historicity of the artistic competence of "Black Art" require that critics also confront modernism's own "difference-fixated politics of representation" and its limiting frames in the field of Western art history.

There is no doubt, despite the limited international institutional visibility accorded his work so far and the works of his generation of artists, that Bowling in his peerless work is first among equals in the field of post-painterly abstraction. The fact that we so rarely encounter his work in museums' permanent collections bespeaks the blind spots that still bedevil institutional judgments and collecting decisions. The formal concerns and discursive complexity of his approach to color, composition, scale, material, subject matter, the sensitivity to painterly facture (for instance, the torn and sutured quilts of his later canvases), and the immediacy of the visual environment of his art make for a rich mix of painting's possibilities. In the poem, "The Schooner Flight," an exploration of the sea and loss, and the complicated Caribbean racial crucible, Walcott writes, "either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation."<sup>66</sup> In the poem, an examination of blackness and its intermixture in the bitter amber of race and identity, colonialism, slavery, and miscegenation in the New World become vivid. The salty, wet climate of the poem mixed with the hazy, sweaty tropic

of the Caribbean, maps the tension Indies. The sea turns malevolent, a section where the poem's protagonist race fisherman Shabine metonym of the Middle Passage:

'cause I couldn't believe  
where the horizon was  
the fog swirl and swirl  
that I saw it was sailing  
it was horrors, but  
.....  
Next we pass sailing  
Our fathers believe  
To hear us shouting

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and funereal bla  
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tering glyphs  
race riots in  
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fig. 4  
Oscar Murillo, *a futile mercantile disposition*, 2016, Oil and oil stick on canvas and linen, stainless steel, vinyl, latex, copper, PVC tubing, self-hardening clay with ground corn, and single-channel video, dimensions vary with installation

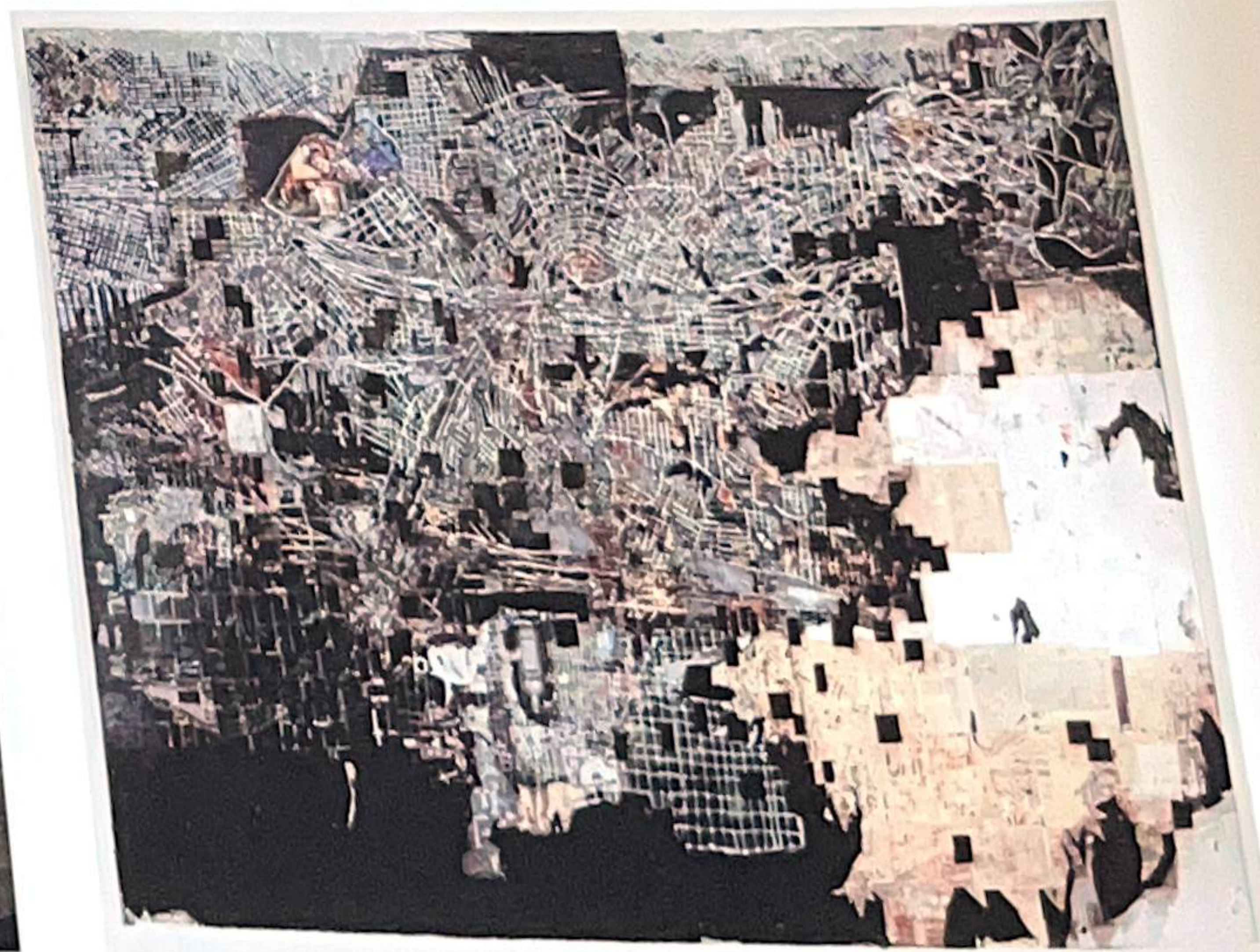


fig. 5  
Mark Bradford, *Across 110th Street*, 2008  
Mixed media collage on canvas, 259.1 x 365.8 cm

of the Caribbean, maps the tension in the sad islands of the West Indies. The sea turns malevolent, and is addressed as such in the section where the poem's protagonist, the philandering, mixed-race fisherman Shabine metonymically encounters the slaughter of the Middle Passage:

*'cause I couldn't believe what I see:  
 where the horizon was one silver haze,  
 the fog swirl and swell into sails, so close  
 that I saw it was sails, my hair grip my skull,  
 it was horrors, but it was beautiful.*  
 .....  
*Next we pass slave ships. Flags of all nations,  
 Our fathers below deck too deep, I suppose  
 To hear us shouting. So we stop shouting ...*<sup>67</sup>

If we accept Walcott's treatment of blackness as either nothingness – a sign of negation which accrues to a creolized identity – or its surplus – the idea of a people and nation – as the manifestation of its complexity, we might interrogate the rather reductive idea of blackness as racially marked; as “pigment oriented.”<sup>68</sup> In much recent art, the climate of blackness is everywhere. We can see this in how a current crop of contemporary artists has been mining blackness's abstract possibilities. Painters such as Oscar Murillo fig. 4 with the dense materiality of his oil-stick laden and funereal black canvases, Mark Bradford fig. 5 in the epiphanic and colossal polyphony of his abraded urbanscapes, Julie Mehretu fig. 6 with her explorations of the spectral in which skittering glyphs circumnavigate the surfaces of erased images of race riots in her massive paintings, and Rashid Johnson fig. 7 in his turbid black paintings made slick and gleaming with globules of black soap as entropic matter, have all made conscious, formal efforts at excavating new pictorial means to interrogate the substance of blackness. In the early paintings, *Swan I* and *Swan II* (1964), Bowling already intimated the idea of decapitation and slaughter, as his own emblem of displacement and exile, through

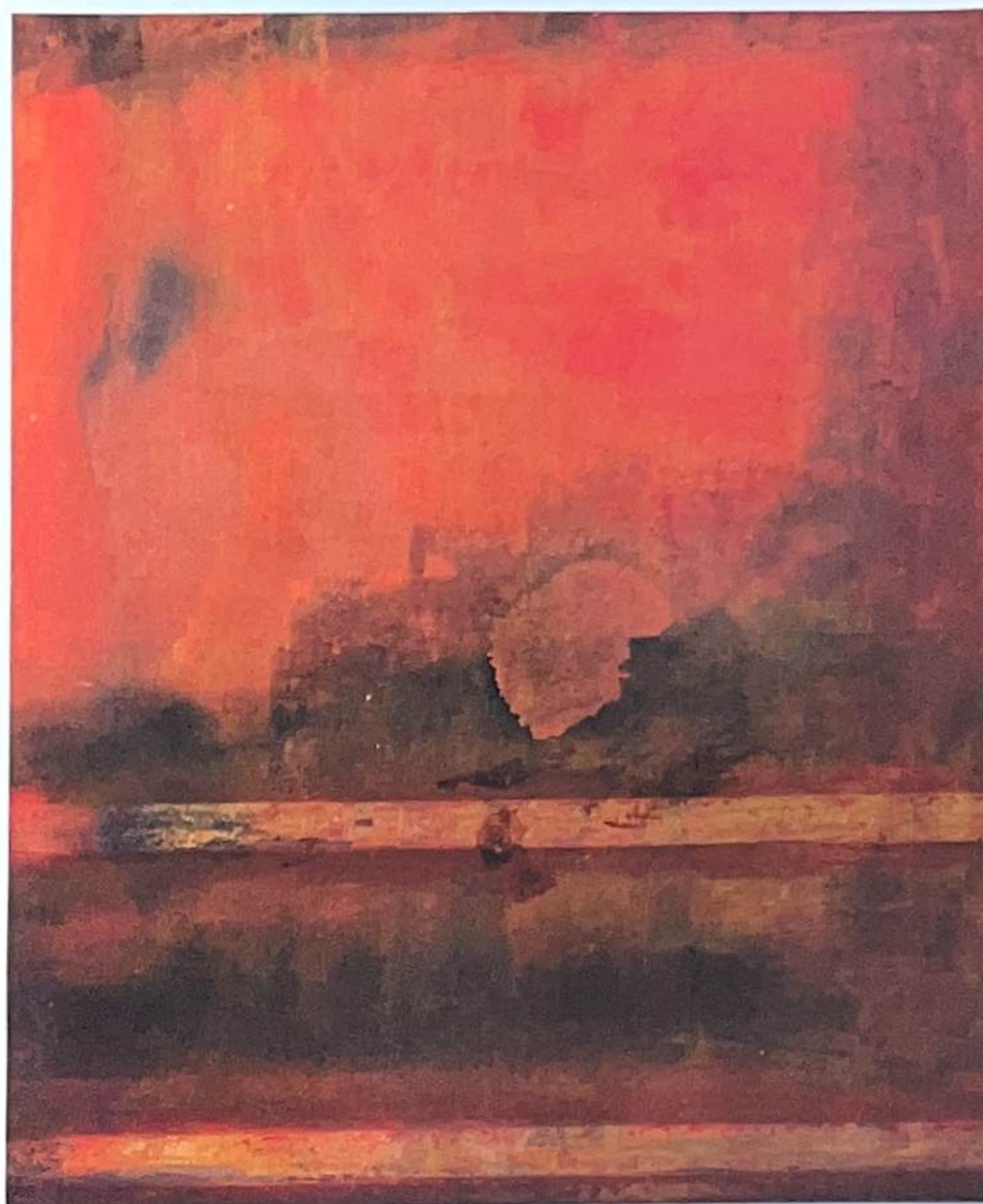


fig. 8  
 Frank Bowling, *Dan with Map*, 1967  
 Acrylic and silkscreened ink on canvas, 129.5 x 106.5 cm



fig. 6  
 Julie Mehretu, *Stelae 2 (Voodoo)*, 2016  
 Ink and acrylic on canvas, 304.8 x 365.8 cm



fig. 7  
 Rashid Johnson, *Antibiotic*, 2011  
 Black soap and wax on board, 276 x 367.7 x 10.2 cm

the allegory of the swan. But the subtle climate of Bowling's later work, its abstract turn, for example in the patchy "swirl and swell" of *Dan with Map* (1967) fig. 8, a painterly sign of the entire peripatetic shift of mapping journeys, began to strain the recognition of imagery. Here, metaphor is substituted with allegory. However, Bowling's critical importance in this current discourse – like his contemporaries such as Jack Whitten and Sam Gilliam – extends beyond the formal inventiveness of his painting practice. The reading of his work demands the recognition of its transnational and intercultural perspective. In fact, such a perspective underscores the uniqueness of Bowling's artistic enterprise within modernism. Like Shabine riding the crest of the white waves of the Caribbean Sea in "The Schooner *Flight*," Bowling's paintings on the theme of memory, dislocation, and absence not only reveal, but also triangulate, the vital scenes of experience in which his art was to be situated, across and between modernism, location, and identity (painter, British, and black).

Here, yet another triangle emerges. It traverses and connects those cities (New Amsterdam, London, and New York, the erstwhile New Amsterdam) and continents (South America, Europe, and North America) where the lineaments of his practice took shape. Bowling's critical project became fully realized in the artistic milieu of Manhattan at a time when post-minimalist sculptors such as Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria, Michael Heizer, and others were developing the ideas of site-specificity. Such work, though largely abstract, was neither devoid of cultural context nor content. It might even be possible to perceive within these broad abstract vistas of earth works an undercurrent of whiteness and the artistic imagination so productively explored in Toni Morrison's reading of American literature.<sup>69</sup> The sublime visions of America's vast Western landscape and its rugged natural environments, so integral to works such as *Spiral Jetty* (1970) fig. 9, *Lightning Field* (1977) fig. 10, and *Double Negative* (1970), required a type of somatic disciplining. These works are in themselves not free of the haunting presence of America's colonial imagination. These are 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. Bowling's magisterial appropriation of the dense flatlands of Guyana and of the continental expansiveness of South America and Africa in his mammoth paintings – the two paintings *False Start* (1968) p. 66–7 and *False Start* (1970) fig. 11 are good examples – announces and anticipates the material and somatic shifts in visual experience on a flat plane contemporary to the giant earth works of Smithson, De Maria, and Heizer. The scale of the two paintings transcends the conventional pictorial experience of easel painting and that of the minimalist object in space. The first *False Start*, at just over seven meters in its span, makes a bid for the epic. But the visual cognates it depicts, the cascading vertical poles (reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1952) fig. 12, and the swirling lines crossed by coruscating white diagonals that cut across the even bisection of the painting's pinkish red and bleached and oxidized horizontal surfaces, knit together agitated temporal and spatial projections. The second *False Start* articulates a more tenuous relationship to space. In it, Bowling orchestrates a visual event of slow time, a sensuous amplitude within the calm dreamscape of the painting's absorbent chalky pink surroundings and dry smudged whites, with intervals of appearance and disappearance of marks, shapes, and form upon which almost indecipherable outlines of the South American and African continents float. The continental features within this painting are not aberrations. They represent both coded and uncoded representational systems, marked and unmarked visual signs.

#### Bartica-Born: Unraveling Mythic Memories

Richard Sheridan Patrick Michael Aloysius Franklin (Frank) Bowling was born in Bartica, in the county of Essequibo, British Guiana, on February 26, 1934,<sup>70</sup> the first son and the second of four children. The country, whose Amerindian name means "land of



fig. 9  
Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970  
Great Salt Lake, Utah mud, salt crystals, rocks, water, 457 m long and 4.5 m wide

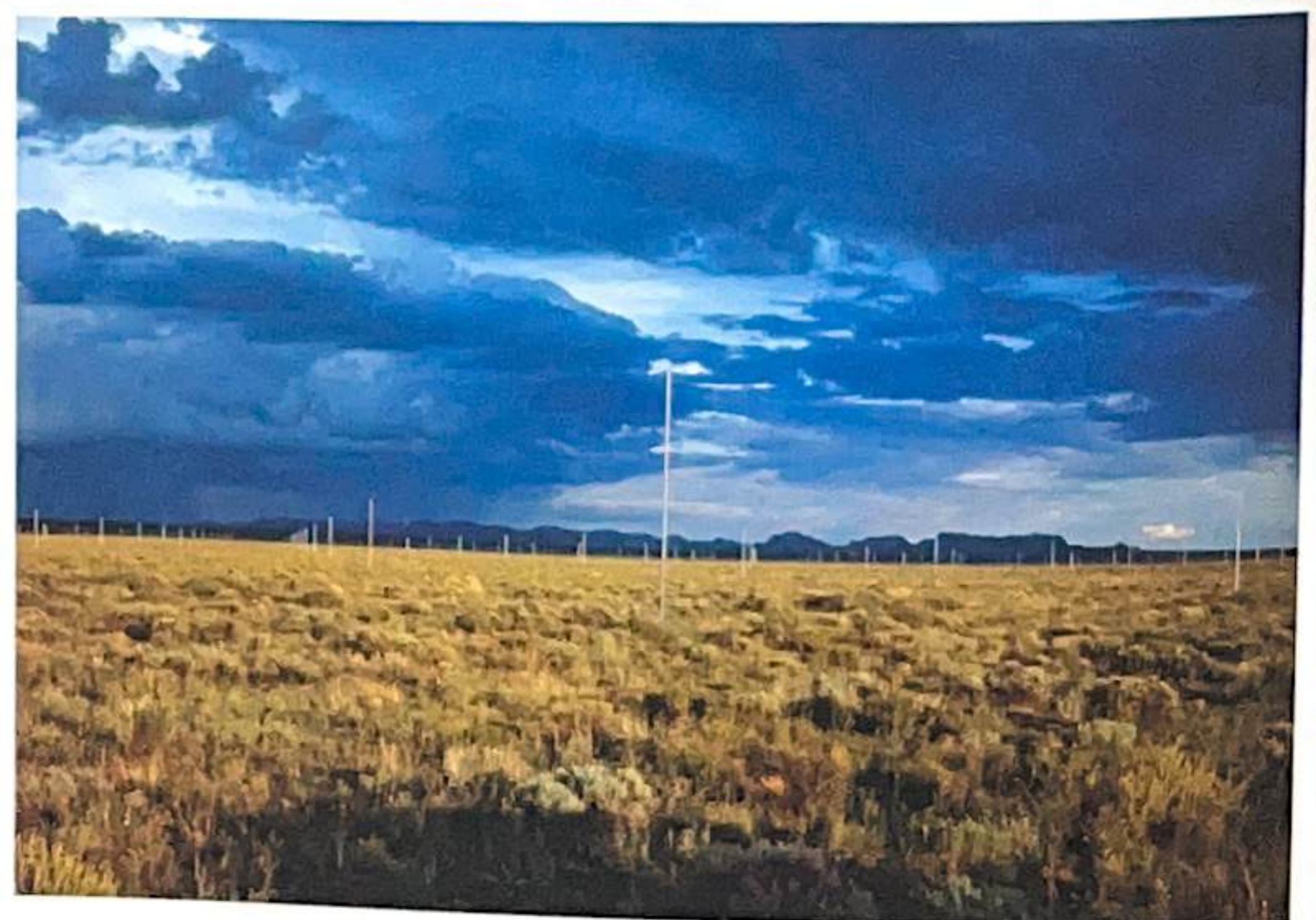


fig. 10  
Walter De Maria, *The Lightning Field*, 1977  
Long-term installation, western New Mexico

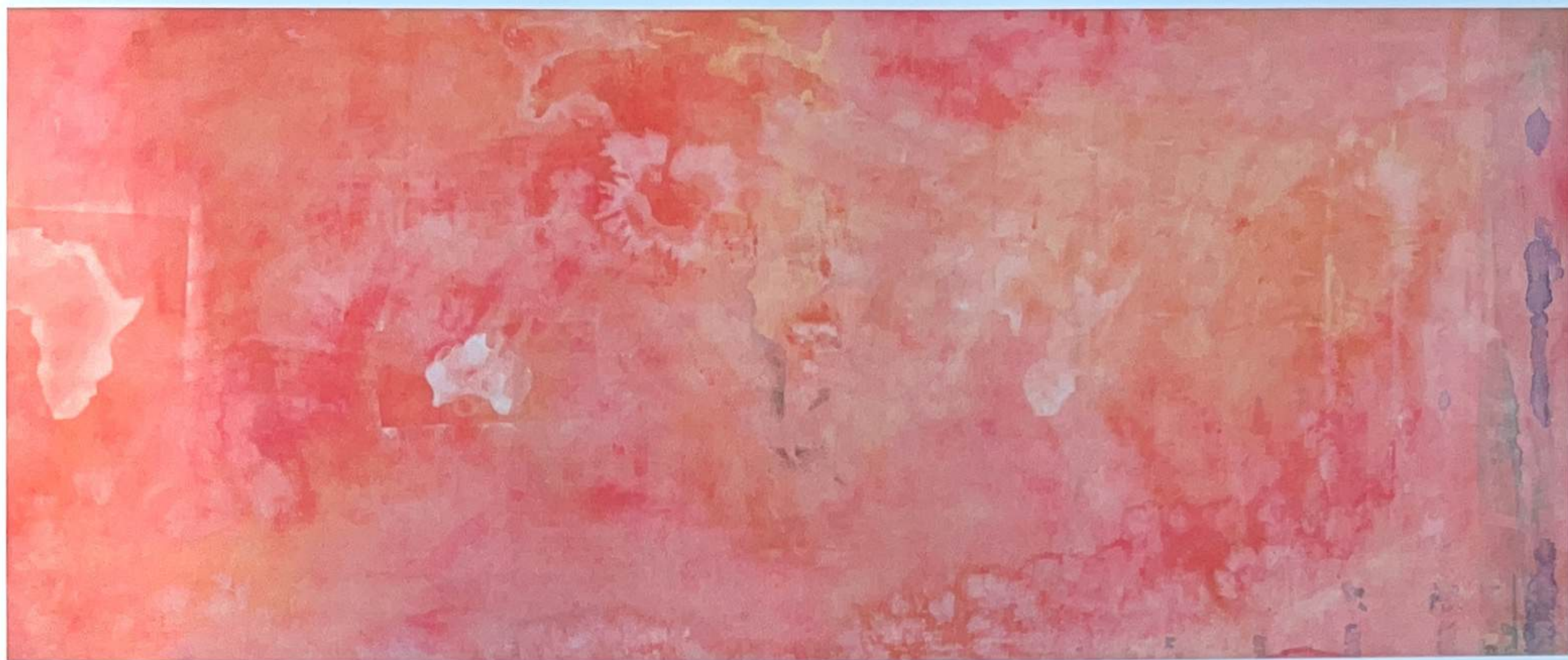


Fig. 11  
Frank Bowling, *False Start*, 1970  
Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 223 x 534 cm



fig. 12  
Jackson Pollock, *Blue Poles*, 1952  
Oil, enamel, aluminum paint, glass on canvas, 212.1 x 488.9 cm

waters," is situated on the South American mainland, bordering Brazil, Venezuela, Suriname (former Dutch Guiana), and the Atlantic Ocean. As well as being the largest of the three counties that comprise Guyana (Demerara, where Georgetown, the capital, is located, and Berbice, where Bowling's family originally hailed from, are the other two), Essequibo is also the name of Guyana's largest river. The mighty river, in its swift, swirling, serpentine course, flows north from the Brazilian border up in the south, through the entire length of the country, into Bartica, where it meets in a confluence with its major tributaries Cuyuni and Mazaruni Rivers before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. As will become clear, the primordial metaphor of rivers and their courses has preoccupied Bowling, and recalls what Simon Schama has written about the flow of myth<sup>71</sup> associated with bodies of water.

Bowling's story of origin began in the arterial mix of these rivers; then moved between three continents: South America, Europe, and North America. For nearly six decades, Bartica has functioned like a leap out of the abyss, and as a compass that serves an orientating role, both in his life and art. Its recurrence in his paintings—landscape, placid water, mud flat, storm-tossed sky—carries deep psychic meaning, but has also inspired many ambitious works. As his art evolved into abstraction, Bartica took on an imaginative melancholia, like the weight of mythic memory. Mel Gooding has written of how "its name has haunted Bowling's imagination and recurs as a kind of sign or reminder, in the titles of many of his paintings."<sup>72</sup> But why has Bartica played such a significant mnemonic and formal role in Bowling's art? Though his family spent only two years in the small town when his policeman father served there as a paymaster, it remains unexplainable why it has maintained such a strategic place in his oeuvre. Might it have to do with the fact that it represents his earliest and most pivotal memory, a time without the turbulence that would mark his adolescent and teenage years growing up in New Amsterdam?

Suppose the rivers—Essequibo, Thames, Hudson, and East Rivers—that run through his life represent a fluvial

coming together of cultures. But it seems that it is the rivers of Guyana which have exerted the strongest hold on him and his work. For five decades, Bowling has staked a claim to the riparian shores that make up the three bodies of water flowing through Bartica, staging their comingling in the arteries of such paintings as *Mazarunitankfeat* (1979), *Bartica Bressary* (1978–79), and *Devil's Sole* (1980) pp. 96–7. Another approach to elaborating the flow of myth carried by rivers in their courses is through the alluvial material deposits trapped on the picture surface, especially in later paintings, beginning in 1982. With their ridged, crackled materiality, Bowling's pictures suggest dried-up scenes of mineral and vegetal life. In these works Bowling had jettisoned the brush for palette knife, brooms, and trowels, the better to work and build up the surfaces of the paintings, which are reminiscent of seaweed, lime, and arid patches of volcanic mud, a humped mass of the anthropocene, as if a riverbed had run dry. This is clearly evident in the way the surfaces of the *Barticaflats* paintings—including *Oyster Beds* (1986)—are constructed. With their built-up impastoed surfaces molded in acrylic gel, strips of gel-impregnated polyether foam, oyster shells, wayward briny deposits, and accreted materials, they mimic geological scenes, and suggest anthropocenic topographies. On the other hand, the loose, fleshy brushstrokes, and splashes of earlier paintings such as *Barticaflat VII* (1979–80) fig. 13 and *Essequiboflab* (1979–80) exchange materiality for a vivid, swishing picturesqueness. You can almost hear the subtle music of the brush's movement, the physicality of making a painting. Even paintings such as *Richard Sheridan I*, *Richard Sheridan II*, and *Richard Sheridan III* (all 1969) pp. 78–9, convey the idea of biographical data in sensate images of cloudy whorls in corn-stalk yellow, smoldering tangerine red, metallic magenta, blue-green, and traces of saffron gilt. Generations of the Bowling family have been given this name, which extends from his grandfather, father, Bowling himself, to his late son, the novelist Dan. The name Richard Sheridan marks both origin and

heritage. Through this link Bowling lineage. He had begun painting his the triumph of modernist painting, sipation to which postmodernism practice in the 1970s, as it abjure origins and originality. In this str ideologizing identification, coulcy and cultural primacy.

Apart from early painting ther (1960) p. 143, references t appearance in his work until Royal College of Art bursary ing humanity and the destitu of beggars pp. 158–9 in his h of the beggars, who came cleaned, haunted him. H humanism that was of gr erences mentioning bot *Barticaflats* (1966–67). The paintings were cor York. Yet they still ret from London. *Bartica* sitional works bridg college days at RC *Cover Girl* (1966), (1966) fig. 16, to th *House with Bew Store* (1966). W failing marriag ly paintings w by a friend in the single m Main Street motif is a t ly employ a look b for pictu backgr triang



fig. 13  
Frank Bowling, *Barticaflats VII*, 1979  
Acrylic on collaged canvas, 67.5 x 179.5 cm

heritage. Through this link Bowling celebrates continuity and lineage. He had begun painting his abstract works, doubtless of the triumph of modernist painting, despite the encroaching dissipation to which postmodernism would subject such painterly practice in the 1970s, as it abjured modernism's privileging of origins and originality. In this story, painting as such, shorn of ideologizing identification, could take on both aesthetic urgency and cultural primacy.

Apart from early paintings such as *Portrait of my Father* (1960) p. 143, references to Bartica or Guyana had made no appearance in his work until after a trip to Guyana in 1962 on a Royal College of Art bursary. After the trip and seeing the suffering humanity and the destitute, he felt compelled to paint images of beggars pp. 158–9 in his hometown of New Amsterdam. Images of the beggars, who came to his mother's shop to be fed and cleaned, haunted him. He saw in their predicament ideas of humanism that was of great interest in his work. The earliest references mentioning both Bartica and Guyana, however, occur in *Barticabather* (1966–67) fig. 14 and *My Guyana* (1966–67) fig. 15. The paintings were completed just after he finally settled in New York. Yet they still retained vestiges of his earlier figurative style from London. *Barticabather* and *My Guyana* are clearly transitional works bridging several periods of his career: from his college days at RCA to the pop-oriented period of works such as *Cover Girl* (1966), *Palimpsest I – Mothers House DarkRedGreen* (1966) fig. 16, to the hard-edge geometric abstraction in *Mother's House with Beware of the Dog* (1966) fig. 17 and *Bowling's Variety Store* (1966). When he left for New York in 1966 (leaving behind a failing marriage and three young sons), Bowling took several early paintings with him and a series of silkscreens printed for him by a friend in Camberwell. The screen-printed images comprised the single motif of his mother's store: "Bowling's Variety Store" on Main Street in New Amsterdam. In many ways, the silhouetted motif is a transitive image. It is an idea that Bowling has effectively employed over time. But in this instance, it marked the start of a look back to Guyana, especially New Amsterdam and Bartica, for pictorial references. Printed in a variety of shades, colors, and backgrounds the picture of the building with its high-pitched triangular zinc roof served as a sort of talisman.

Though these transitional paintings retained motifs between abstraction and realism, we do find within the compositions the increasing shift to abstraction that would emerge later, especially in the first purely abstract work, *Dan With Map*. The shift to abstraction not only provided him with fresh formal ideas, it literally reshaped his career and reputation. The different paintings that enabled this breakthrough summarized (up to 1967) three representational features of his imagery: realism, pop, and abstraction. For example, the pictorial features of *Barticabather* and *My Guyana* consist of both the emerging abstract sensibility and the figurative models of the early to mid-1960s. In the paintings, he continued with pictorial aspects of photographic reproduction by using silkscreens and collaged and printed imagery against flat abstract fields. *Mother's House with Beware of the Dog*

and *Bowling's Variety Store* are defined by outlines of geometric shapes, featuring rectangles and parallelograms, in which stenciled letters inscribed in primary colors suggest, through language, the self-referential aspect of the paintings. At the same time, Bowling's search for new forms and imagery included experiments that emphasized the idea of painting as object. With their medley of expressionism, hard-edged geometric abstraction, and realism, the lozenge-shaped canvases of *Swan I* and *Swan II* are good examples, as is the large *Big Bird* (1964).<sup>73</sup> The diagonal, hard-edged chevrons, reminiscent of Kenneth Noland's hard-edged geometric designs, are defined in primary and secondary colors in *Swan I* and *Swan II*. The chevrons were designed to mimic the shape of the canvas, on top of which swiveling, dying white swans, as if in death throes, are superimposed. Complicated paintings in terms of imagery and meaning<sup>74</sup> (for example in *Swan I*, bird feathers are embedded in the surface of the painting to call attention to the idea of the dying swan rather than its depiction), the two works were part of his attempt to jettison the earlier figurative models since his days at RCA.<sup>75</sup> *Palimpsest I, Mothers House DarkRedGreen* clearly bear the influence of Andy Warhol. I am thinking here of Warhol's *5 Deaths* (1963) fig. 18. Bowling's treatment of this motif is an indeterminate painting of reds, ochers, and blacks that shift in and out of focus through subtle over-painting. It depicts three overlapping silkscreens in a dusky haze, as if the architecture is ablaze and floating on water. As we explore these paintings, it becomes clear that Bowling was

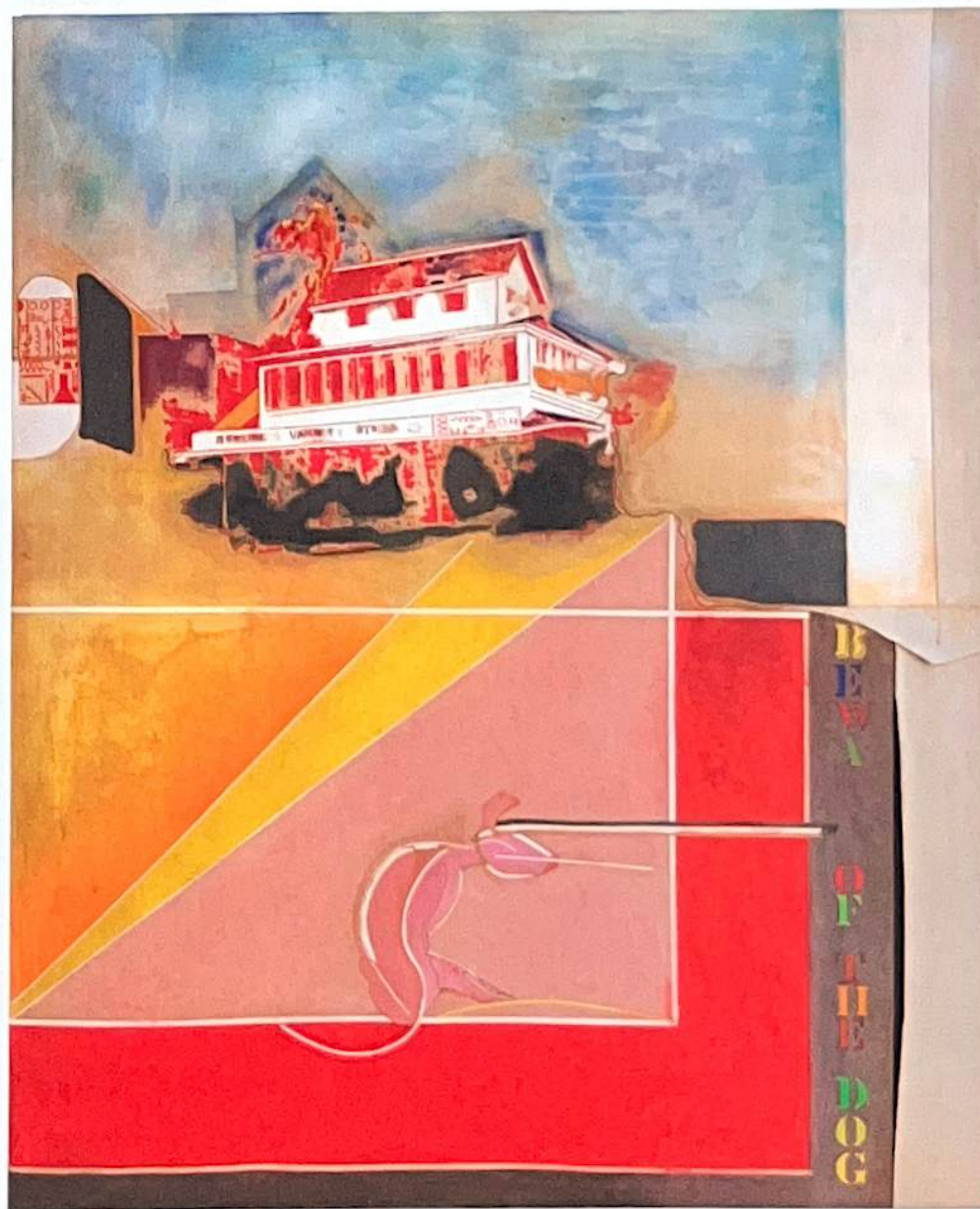


fig. 17  
Frank Bowling, *Mother's House with Beware of the Dog*, 1966  
Acrylic and silkscreened ink on canvas, 145 x 121 cm

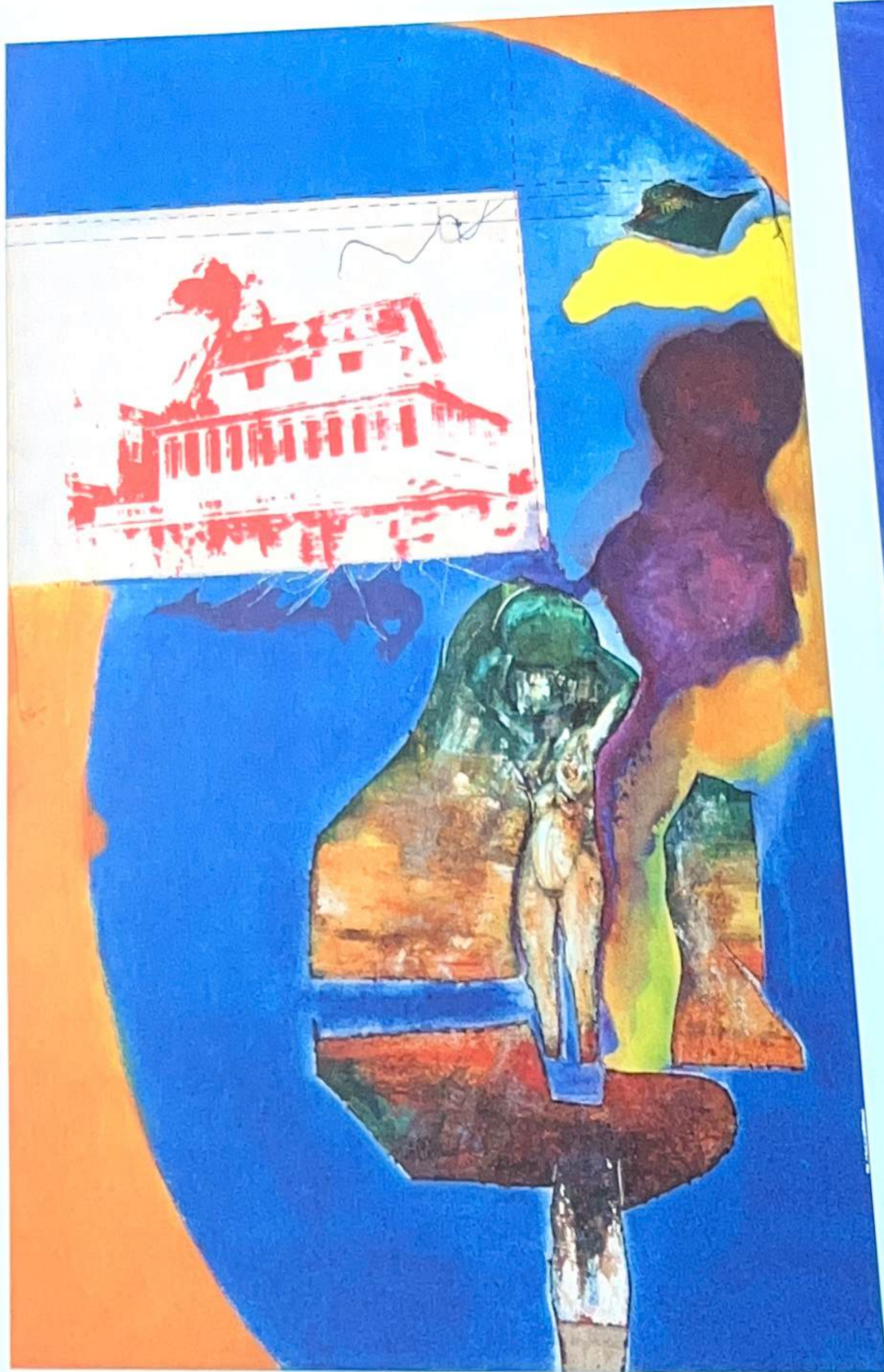


fig. 14  
 Frank Bowling, *Bartcabather*, 1966–67  
 Mixed media on collaged canvas, 148 x 102 cm



fig. 15  
 Frank Bowling, *My Guyana*, 1966–67  
 Mixed media on collaged canvas, 143.5 x 120.5 cm

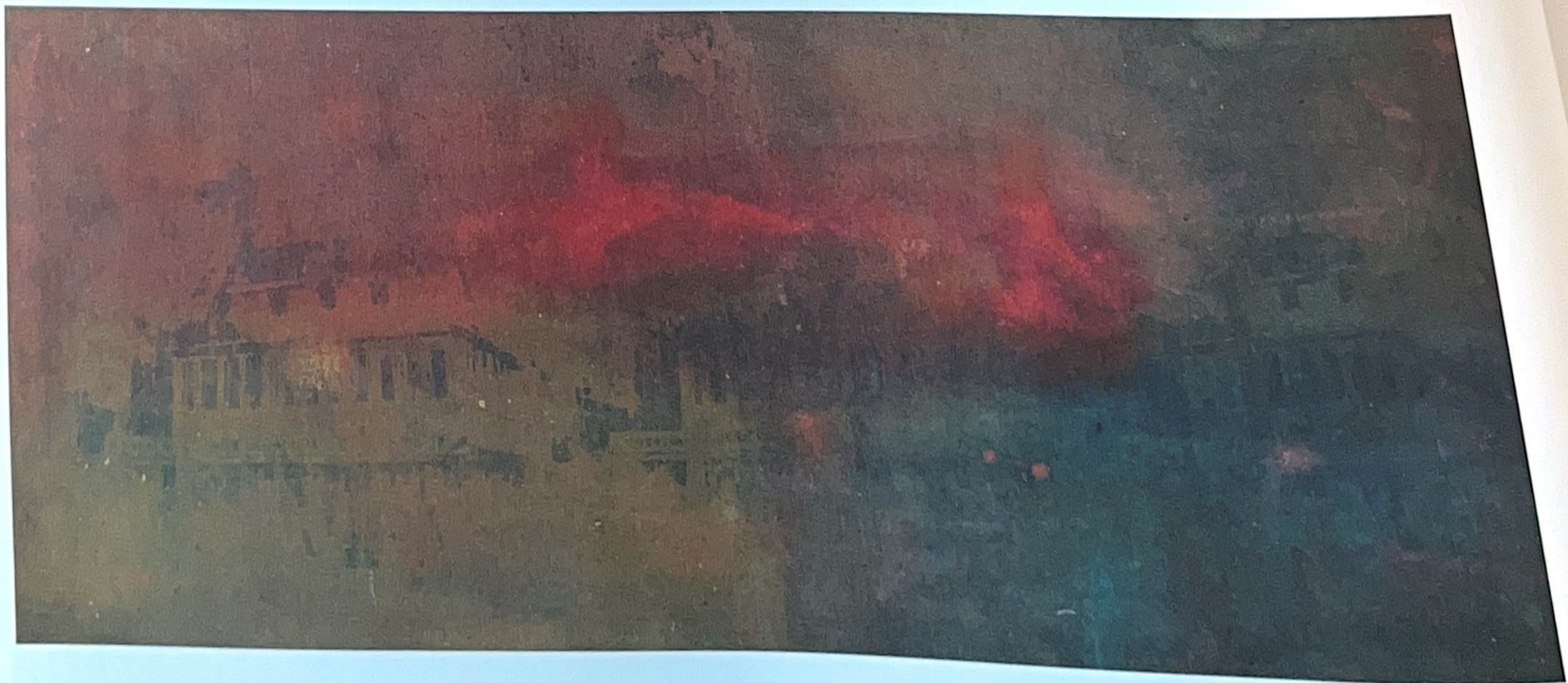


fig. 16  
 Frank Bowling, *Palimpsest I - Mothers House DarkRedGreen*, 1966  
 Acrylic and silkscreened ink on canvas, 62.5 x 172.5 cm

in the midst of clarifying his artistic intention, his approach held strong sway at this time.  
 Concurrent with this flurry of activity, Bowling's longed visits to New York in 1964 and 1965 brought him into contact with the major ideas and artists in the city, including the artist Jasper Johns, the poet Allen Ginsberg, and the Museum of Modern Art. He also met the poet Frank O'Hara, the painter Larry Rivers, a decade older than Bowling and mentor when he moved to New York, and the sculptor Fritz Koenig, who introduced him to the modernist art world. Bowling's relationship with Rivers over many years was particularly significant. Bowling and Rivers formed an especially close relationship over many years.<sup>76</sup> Bowling met him and his work in New York in 1964. Other young and emerging African American artists, including Whitten, Mel Edwards, Al Loving, and T. Williams, Virginia Jarama, and Pindell.

These African American artists of the time were in the midst of a period of abstraction, were also being supported and detracted. In the late sixties and early seventies, there was a period of a substantial and serious headway. These debates not only considered and reoriented cultural politics. Their work and their work made serious headway. he would have to text that could ed in the insu

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in the midst of clarifying his artistic intention, as no one painting approach held strong sway at this time.

Concurrent with this flurry of activities, several prolonged visits to New York in 1964 and 1965 had exposed him to the major ideas and artists in the city. The visits had brought him into contact with the artist Jasper Johns, poet and critic John Ashbery, and the Museum of Modern Art curator and poet Frank O'Hara. Larry Rivers, a decade older than he, was both a friend and mentor when he moved to the city. He may have been introduced at this time to the modernist critic Clement Greenberg, with whom he formed an especially close and contentious relationship over many years.<sup>76</sup> But what made a lasting impact on him and his work in New York was linking up with a group of young and emerging African American artists such as Jack Whitten, Mel Edwards, Al Loving, Daniel LaRue Johnson, William T. Williams, Virginia Jaramilo, Joe Overstreet, and Howardena Pindell.

These African American colleagues and friends, who at the time were in the midst of working out their own ideas about abstraction, were also beginning to attract notice, as camps of supporters and detractors formed in the Black Art debates of the late sixties and early seventies. Finally, Bowling was in the midst of a substantial and substantive intellectual and artistic debate.<sup>77</sup> These debates not only mattered, they also challenged him to reconsider and reorient his engagement with contemporary art and cultural politics. The encounters with African American artists and their work made it crystal clear that if he was to make any serious headway in his work and advance his career as a painter, he would have to seek a new horizon, enter a broader artistic context that could nourish his ambition, which was becoming stunted in the insular London art scene.

#### Between New Amsterdam and London

If the town of Bowling's birth marked a reflection on the convergence of landscape and memory, New Amsterdam, the city where he spent his formative years, and where his family prospered, thanks to his mother's entrepreneurial skills, represented a location of lived experience. It evokes a glutinous attachment to a troubled past, both personal and collective. It fed his need for errantry, the ambition to discover locations larger in both imagination and physicality than the provincial city riven by colonial hierarchies. The idea to escape the cramped ambience of a colonized society, to gain a passage, and follow the ranks of urban cosmopolitans outside Guyana, engendered in him the restless desire to translate his dreams into another experience. Nevertheless, New Amsterdam held an important mnemonic grip in his artistic repertoire. It translated a complex manifestation of feelings. As he recounted to Gooding:

*New Amsterdam for me is ... [and] remains ... apart from London, which is much more important in my life than*

*any place else I've ever been in, perhaps New York, the most important place, and it reappears all the time, even in my quiet moments it reappears. It's a town that was full of terror, at the same time it was marvelous, marvelous.... It was open and easy to negotiate.<sup>78</sup>*

One aspect of the terror that he speaks about might perhaps be ascribed to his relationship with his father.<sup>79</sup> Bowling remembers his father, Richard Sheridan Bowling, unlovingly. A stern, taciturn policeman and accountant, he was a cruel presence that for him was uncomfortable to be around. The bodily, almost sadistic violence he inflicted on him left physical and emotional scars.<sup>80</sup> The elder Bowling's attitude towards his eldest son, his almost visceral displeasure at his very presence,<sup>81</sup> created an irreparable estrangement and emotional rift between father and son. However, for his enterprising dressmaker and milliner mother, Agatha Elizabeth (Chrissie), nee Franklin, no praise is high enough: "My memory of my mother is very colored by the fact that she was the most ambitious woman in town I would say, and she was always being talked about..."<sup>82</sup> This memory sometimes took on raw intimacy, mixing desire and admiration:

*I mean, I really liked being close to my mother ... I had reason to say to a friend, an American artist when we were talking about parents, and I heard myself say that, you know, the thing I loved about my mother was her smell, and you know to this day ... It was a combination of cologne, smelly perfume type thing she wore, and sweat ... She was always well turned out, but in that hot, hot country, she was always working.<sup>83</sup>*

Families and their social dynamics are sometimes hard to explain. Just as the cruelty and disapproval of Bowling's father could have left a debilitating, stunting effect on him, it was his mother's hard work and ambition, her bold spirit and irrepressible striving that instead left a positive mark.<sup>84</sup> But was Richard Sheridan Bowling simply a self-loathing, violent man, whose life, colored by an ab-

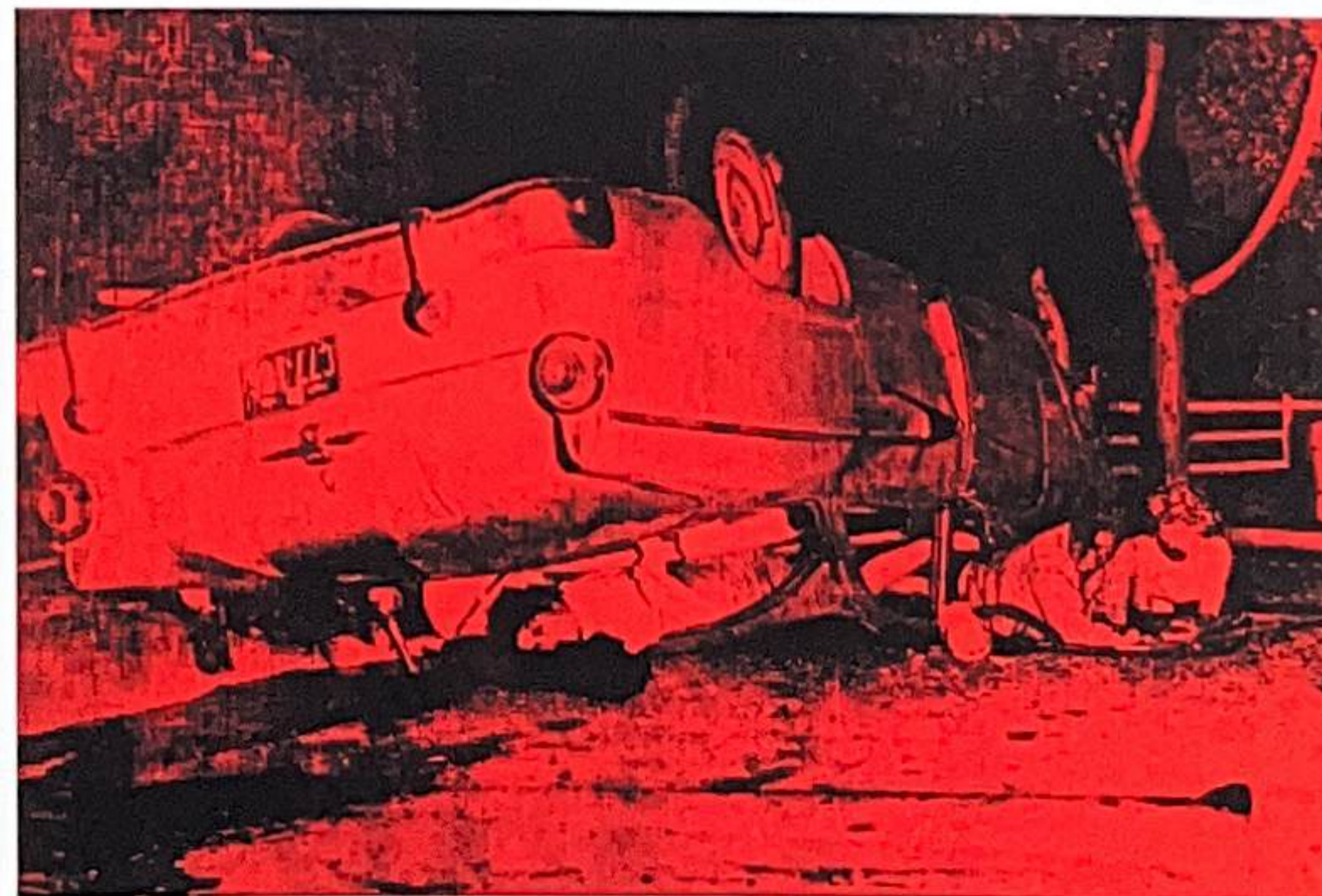


fig. 18  
Andy Warhol, *5 Deaths*, 1963  
Acrylic and silkscreened ink on linen, 51.1 x 76.2 cm

sence of pleasure and a sense of colonial repression, made him unredeemable? Or might one examine his cruelty in relation to the psychic violence of the slave economy and colonial plantation system of sugar production, from which men of African descent had only just emerged barely two generations ago? Bowling recalls the family migration history from Barbados to Guyana: "The story is, they came from Barbados. I would think my grandfather probably ... his father was a slave, I would say."<sup>85</sup> He then attributes his father's physical violence to the residual effects of the brutality endured by enslaved Africans. This attribute might not be unrelated to the way in which the colonial imaginary has shadowed much of Bowling's career as an artist across sixty years.

In New York, the recurring presence of Guyana (along with the friendships of younger Guyanese immigrants such as his long-term friend, the photographer Spencer Richards) both alleviated and magnified his own cultural homelessness, as he found himself constantly inhabiting other people's cultural models. From then on, Guyana and South America became significant mnemonic devices, both as subjects of his difference within African American cultural debates, but also as historical anchors, whilst he developed a mature voice as an artist. Writing on the importance of the themes of memory and the emotional and spiritual imprint of Guyana on the artist, de Caires noted:



fig. 19  
Gerhard Richter, *Birkenau*, 2014  
Oil on canvas, 260 x 200 cm

"Bowling was born in Bartica, Guyana – at the time still a British colony – and spent the early years of his life in this small town which rests at the confluence of the Essequibo, Mazaruni and Cuyuni rivers. The question of identity (never mind the psyche) of the Guyanese is a hugely problematic area, and in relation to Bowling's work has not previously been discussed. I would maintain that it is a subject that he has long been interested in and that its investigation has been a central theme of his work over the last twenty years."<sup>86</sup>

The deliberate and immersive plunge into the metonymic space of painting led to a range of major works. Bowling's persistence with the themes of memory reminds me of Gerhard Richter's recent treatments of German memory, especially in the four-part abstract paintings, *Birkenau* (2014) fig. 19, in which complex layering, erasures, and repeated overpainting on the photographic image of the Birkenau concentration camp transformed the pictorial distinctiveness of the imagery into an indecipherable abstract surface of brushed and dragged marks. The paintings display a model of working through an idea and an image of inscrutability. The distinct dynamic of Guyana – like that of other colonized societies – with its hierarchies of race and class, the legacy of slavery, and the helotry of the indenture system which brought Indians and the Chinese into the sugar-production economy, have been similarly, but just as inscrutably imprinted in Bowling's work. But it is Guyana's verdant and spectacular landscape that has left the most indelible mark on Bowling's abstraction. The imprint of memory, like the racial experience of his African American contemporaries, is an open question, rather than deterministic.

It is surely a slippery slope to psychoanalyze an artist on account of formative experiences. As Richter's *Birkenau* paintings show, they are not so easily accessible in the work itself, particularly through the artist's insistent veiling and scrubbing technique. Certainly, Bowling's abstraction, when gleaned through the surfaces of paintings, with telltale details, references, and recurrent imagery alluded to in the titles, has left clues for us to speculate upon and decipher, to learn from and interrogate. The subtle and explicit mnemonic registers that fill works such as *Sacha Jason Quails Nest* (1987) pp. 120–1, which refers to his sons, *Towards Crab Island* (1982 and 1983) pp. 104–5, 106–7, a series of paintings referencing an island in the middle of Berbice River, *Potarovines* (1983), another reference to a large estuary of the Essequibo River, and the cycle of eight *Cathedral* paintings (1986–87) that were inspired by the English writer Evelyn Waugh's novel *A Handful of Dust*<sup>87</sup> enable the treatment of themes that are accessible rather by their title than from literal pictorial references. This does beg the question of the extent to which ambitious abstract painting can open up larger cultural vistas and social maps without becoming subordinated to social commentary and facile identitarian politics.

It seems important to examine the early cartography of Bowling's colonial memory for what it might reveal and articulate in

relation to painting. For the purposes of this exhibition it might prove fruitful to explore the significance and the role of the colonial imaginary in his thinking; how it has inflected his wayward approach to abstraction in a way that is cognitively different from those of his African American peers such as Whitten, Edwards, Gilliam, Loving, and Williams, all of whom he was intimately linked to. Or to the paintings of Jasper Johns who earlier deployed the iconography of flags and maps as readymade, pre-existing objects, visual signs, and representational systems within a specific American narrative.

Bartica and Guyana have served similar functions in Bowling's own abstract systems. However, their features are repeatedly occluded, except as imaginary entities, or a kind of visual anamnesis. The visual support they serve can be grouped into three broad clusters: first is the engagement with history, nation, and family; second, the exploration of location, distance, and absence; third, and finally, the cosmopolitan links between New Amsterdam, London, and New York. If we intersect these tripartite relationships in his paintings, Bowling's artistic enterprise appears specular. We begin to see the sublimation of painting into the stormy channels and turbulence of the Black Atlantic through the Middle Passage, as black bodies circulated as cargo between Africa, the Americas, and Europe. The painting *Middle Passage* (1970) p. 81 clearly references and alludes to the Black

Atlantic and the Middle Passage, which haunt the black experience in the New World. The explicit visual agitation of this work takes one by surprise. Painted in a fiery conflagration of hot reds, volatile oranges, and blazing yellows, the painting is a palimpsest of imagery and gesture. The painting's incongruities are alleviated by its deep intensity. One's eyes literally tremble before the presence of its firestorm. Bowling began the painting with a light colored ground across which screen-printed photographs were distributed. The composition repeats several images in multiples across the surface of the painting. It features pictures of his parents, young sons (Dan and Sacha), architectural motifs, landscape, relatives, a drummer playing at a political rally, and acquaintances from his hometown. For example, there is a hard to see image of two boatmen—one of whom is a relative—who worked on the ferry crossing the Berbice River from Rosignol to New Amsterdam and back.<sup>88</sup> Bowling's interest in layering and subsuming this pictorial material with gestural overpainting could be seen not merely as a painterly strategy, but also as an exegetic device, compelling the acid of memory to act upon the archival residue on *Middle Passage's* surface. Linking all the disparate parts of this complex work are the ghostly forms of Africa, South America, and North America, so subtle and evanescent they register as spectral pictographs. The painting was produced towards the end of the cycle of the *Map Paintings* when Bowling started feeling confined by the looming formulaic nature of the maps. He explains the concerns and dissatisfaction he was having about the direction of his work at this time:

*It was all part of my attempt to break down and away from the Guyana preoccupation, you know colonial stuff? It's a mixture of maps and money and family. My relatives, my sons, my mother. It's full of reference. "Middle Passage" was the Atlantic right? They brought all these people in chains in the holds of boats. Middle Passage was this dangerous journey. Anyone who survived Middle Passage had to be very, very strong. 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, about things like the "Middle Passage." Night Journey (1968-69) p. 51 was about the same time and Mother's House on South America (1968) ... I was screening all these images and then painting over them. A palimpsest you know. Whiting out some of the images and then leaving some. It was a process of erasure. I was always trying to erase them. Make something out of them other than what they are. I was not actually doing anything to be accurate. ... I was moving into what I thought painting was about and handling the material. I was working in a very different way. This painting is a very good example ... and a transition picture.<sup>89</sup>*

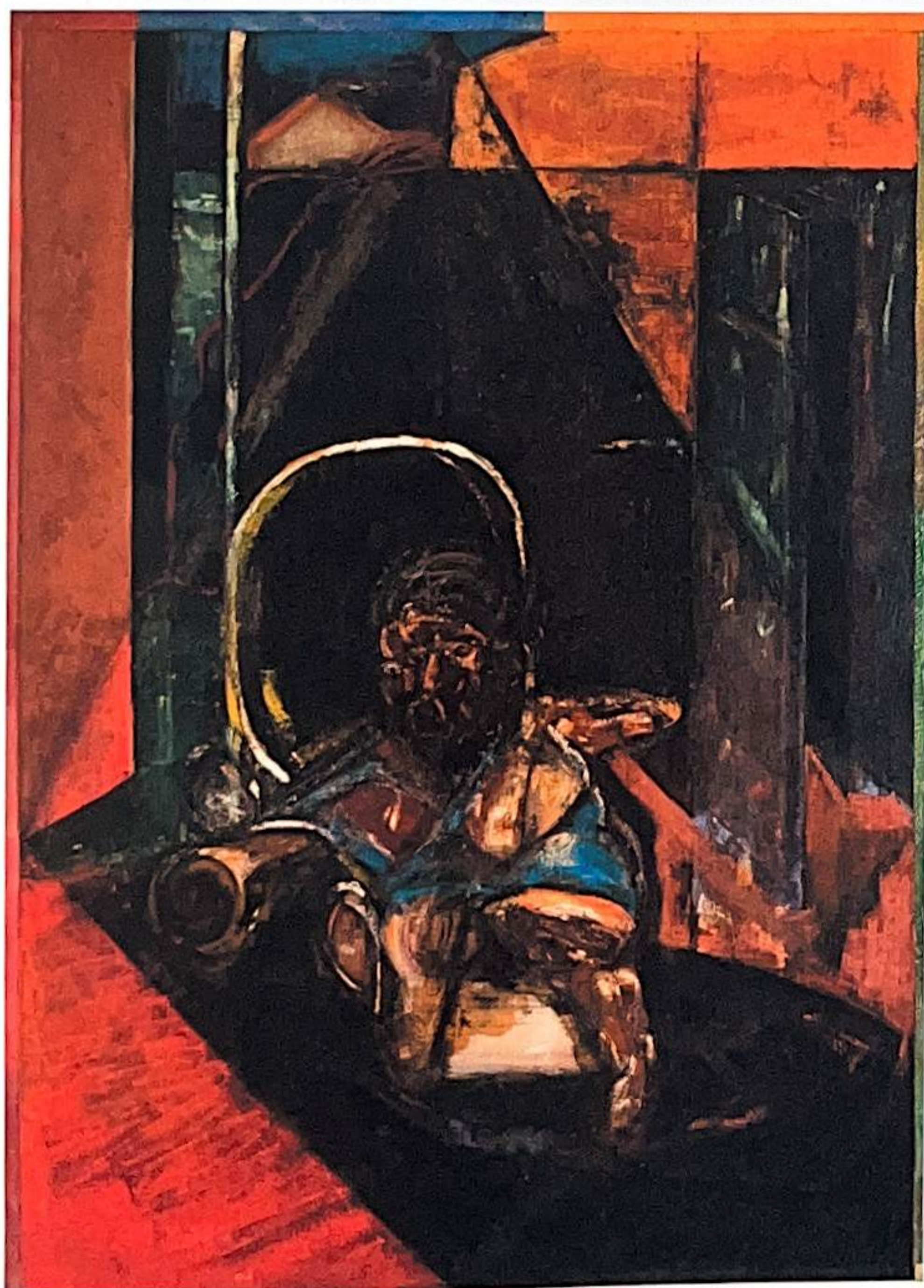


fig. 20  
Frank Bowling, *Beggar*, 1962  
Oil on linen, 170 x 126 cm

These were trying times. It was an epic struggle with painting. But on Bowling's terms alone. Years earlier, the "Middle Passage" had formed the foundation of an émigré identity that took several years to unfold. But as his artistic maturity evolved, it furnished his itinerant search for an artistic identity in New York with renewed vigor as he worked out his ideas on abstract color painting. The shift opened up fresh possibilities of painting freed of the mid-twentieth century's residual crisis of figuration and realism. Having given up working with oil paint, with its oleaginous, slow-drying viscosity, he began experimenting with thin puddles of the quick-drying acrylic paint that he oriented in mottled daubs and vaporous washes, sustained staining, across vast expanses of untreated canvas. In doing so, he was able to achieve the aque-

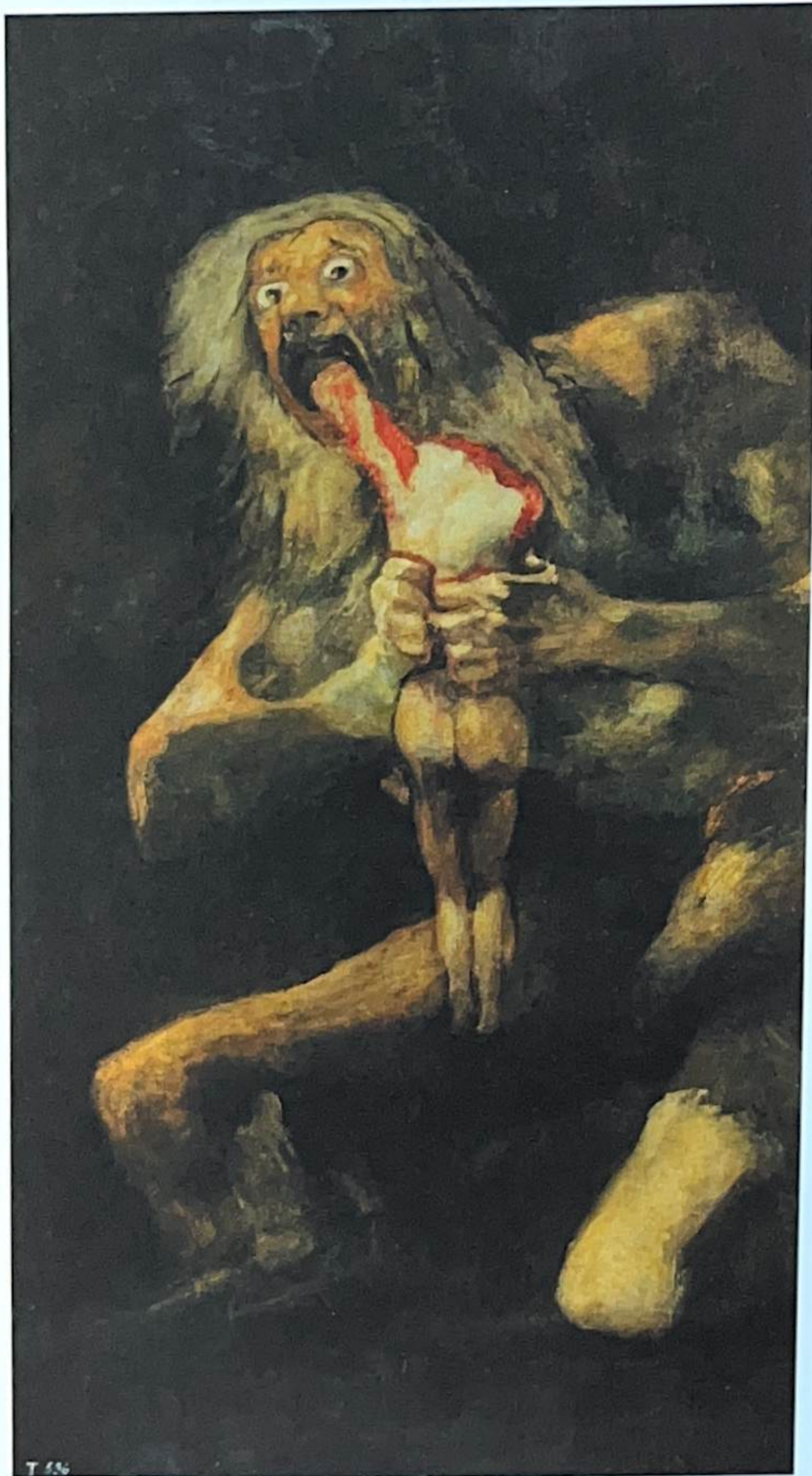


fig. 22  
Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Saturn*, 1820-23  
Mixed method, 143.5 x 81.4 cm

ous flow of liquid matter. With the controlled flow, Bowling began to master the laws of his material's chemical structure, as thinned paint gently spread, pooled, sloped, and soaked through the canvas into fingers and veins of shimmering incandescence. The turn to abstraction was also a way for Bowling to engage color, not merely as chromatic or liquid substance surfacing images, but as subject matter buttressing deeply held philosophical and formal ideas of painterly subjectivity. The paintings resulting from this shift can be read as counter-proposals to his earlier figurative work, with their brooding, Goyaesque figures matched against blazing bright colors, or dark-hued pigments in which pallid shapes float, and torsioned human anatomy is set within dramatic interior scenes.

Nevertheless, the phenomenology of Bowling's disquisition on color and his emergent mastery of abstract formalism did not announce contentlessness. Nor was it something that emerged suddenly as he set about to reorient and reposition his practice. There was already in the early paintings such as *Beggar* (1962) fig. 20 and *Beggar Number 6* (1963) p. 158 the tussle between abstraction and figuration.<sup>90</sup> This is boldly foregrounded in the planar shifts of red, orange, yellow, green, and washes of lilac against which expressionistically and vigorously painted solitary figures huddle in relief within a geometric field. The pair of paintings *Afternoon Nap I* and *Afternoon Nap II* (both 1962) p. 154, fig. 21 depict pairs of saturnine figures in a gory mess of flailing limbs that belie the seeming domesticity of the scenes. The imagery recalls Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Children* (1819-23) fig. 22. Similar effects of the representation of the body are just as palpable in the anguished contortions of *Birthday I* (1960) p. 149 and *Birthday II* (1961) fig. 23 and *Untitled* (1960), while some others such as the carnivalesque *Martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba* (1961) fig. 24, with its slashing brushstrokes, tenebrous tonality, and pasty white figures, inhabit a macabre touch of James Ensor. But while the ground where the twisted figures in the two *Afternoon Nap* paintings wriggle against a flat depthless backdrop of yellow and orange appears unresolved, they intimate the sense of color that would become fully developed in later paintings.



fig. 21  
Frank Bowling, *Afternoon Nap II*, 1962  
Oil on canvas, 122 x 183 cm

These exercises in deploying and foregrounding color as a principal animating element are borrowings from early modernism. It would eventually transform Bowling's work.

### Maps and Mapping

As the turbulent 1960s came to an end, the issue of painting, and more specifically the relation of abstraction to the struggles of black peoples in the United States became more than just a topic of aesthetics. Cultural politics, specifically black artists' committed connection to post-civil rights racial politics became front and center in assessing that commitment. In recent years, a type of revisionist art history and curatorial thinking has started exploring and interrogating the discursive ferment of politics, representation, and abstraction of the period. This is due partly to an intense interest by museums in the art of the artists whose works were most engaged in these debates. Recent surveys such as Kellie Jones's magnificent exhibition of avant-garde black art in Los Angeles<sup>91</sup> between the mid-1960s and 1980 and the retrospectives of Sam Gilliam, Betye Saar<sup>92</sup>, Jack Whitten<sup>93</sup>, and Mel Edwards<sup>94</sup> have presented several focal points to address these issues.<sup>95</sup> As Mark Godfrey writes of the debates on black art in the late 1960s and 1970s, "The artists undoubtedly felt the pressures of the situation. In 1969, Bowling wrote: 'any black artist who does

not want to be identified by the color of his skin could be indulging in a subtle form of "passing."'"<sup>96</sup> Or as Binstock writes with regards to Gilliam's racial self-abnegation, "he sets himself apart from his detractors and the 'blacker than thou' mind-set..."<sup>97</sup> However, the dissociation of abstraction from blackness is not the same thing when articulated beyond the African American experience in the United States. Artists of African heritage, such as Bowling, from elsewhere in the Americas—the Caribbean and South America, and even Africa and India—perhaps have other ideas about blackness that may counteract American exceptionalism when it comes to social responses to blackness. After all the largest population of diasporic Africans in the hemisphere is not in the United States but in Brazil.

The onset of Bowling's map paintings may have been a way to extricate himself from the essentializing discourse of American black art debates. Starting in the late 1960s—at a time when it seemed that the prospects of abstraction as a dominant language of postwar painting was in decline—Bowling took a different turn. Like Gilliam, he initiated a committed experimentation with the idioms of abstract painterliness. Employing saturated stains, streaked drips, modulated washes, coagulated pours, granular spatters, translucent sprays, skittering skeins, stamped stencils, and printed silkscreens, he committed himself entirely to creating paintings of unabashed grandeur, mediated lushness, and temporal absorption. Staking a ground around the idea that

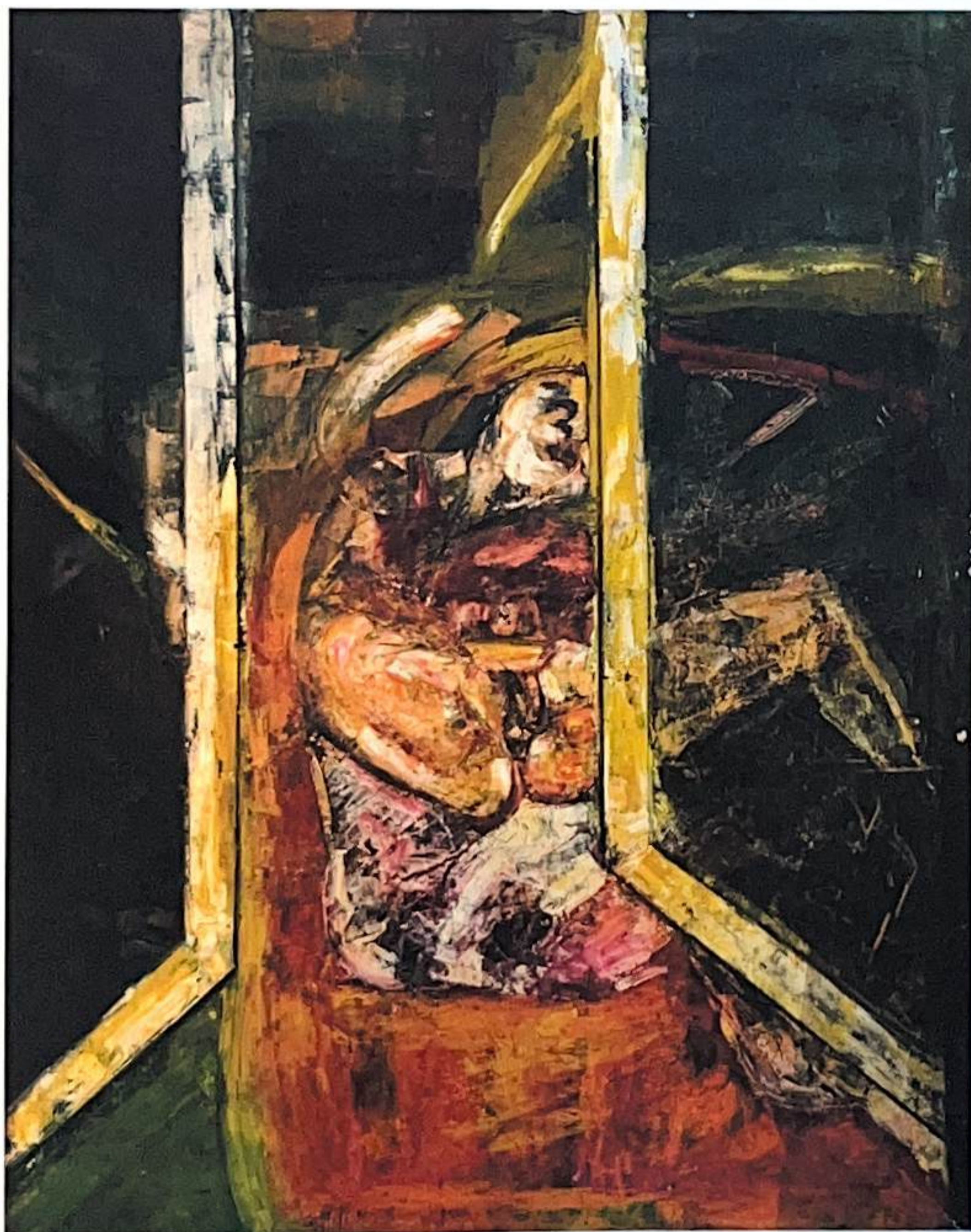


fig. 23  
Frank Bowling, *Birthday II*, 1961  
Oil on canvas, 127 x 101.5 cm



fig. 24  
Frank Bowling, *The Martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba*, 1961  
Oil on canvas, 183 x 152.4 cm

painterly abstraction need not be disunited from content, especially as it intersects cultural experience and historical subject matter, Bowling increasingly experimented with diverse modes of building a painted surface. His painterly experimentation led him to consider how abstract painting could be invested with social, cultural, and personal meaning without losing the essential and formal principles still open to the medium. For him, the conditions and possibilities of painting needed to surpass the rigid geometries of the pictorial field and its support.

Bowling writes of the paintings of Whitten as good examples of work capable of signaling the kind of immediacy he saw as part of the experience of abstract painting: "the work of an artist like Jack Whitten, for instance, has to be experienced directly. No black and white photo or color reproduction is going to give his 'feeling' (from seeing) that this is a world of demanding urgency."<sup>98</sup> In this regard, a telling response by David Hammons to the 1970 Whitney Museum of American Art's exhibition of Melvin Edwards' suspended draperies of chains and barbed wire, either floating free as rectangular volumes in space, or employed as linear abstract compositions to create and define the corners of the space, is apposite fig. 25. For Hammons, Edwards' sculpture reflects the tension between abstraction, content, and the black experience. Upon seeing the exhibition he noted:

*I was influenced in a way by Mel Edwards's work. He had a show at the Whitney in 1970 where he used a lot of chains and wires. That was the first abstract piece of art that I saw that had cultural value in it for black people. I couldn't believe that piece when I saw it because I didn't think you could make abstract art with a message.<sup>99</sup>*

Despite the fact that artists such as James Rosenquist and Barnett Newman had each used barbed wire in works that preceded Edwards's, Hammons nevertheless is pointed in linking a certain type of abstraction with black people, and thus dissociating abstraction made by white artists from the experience of *black peo-*

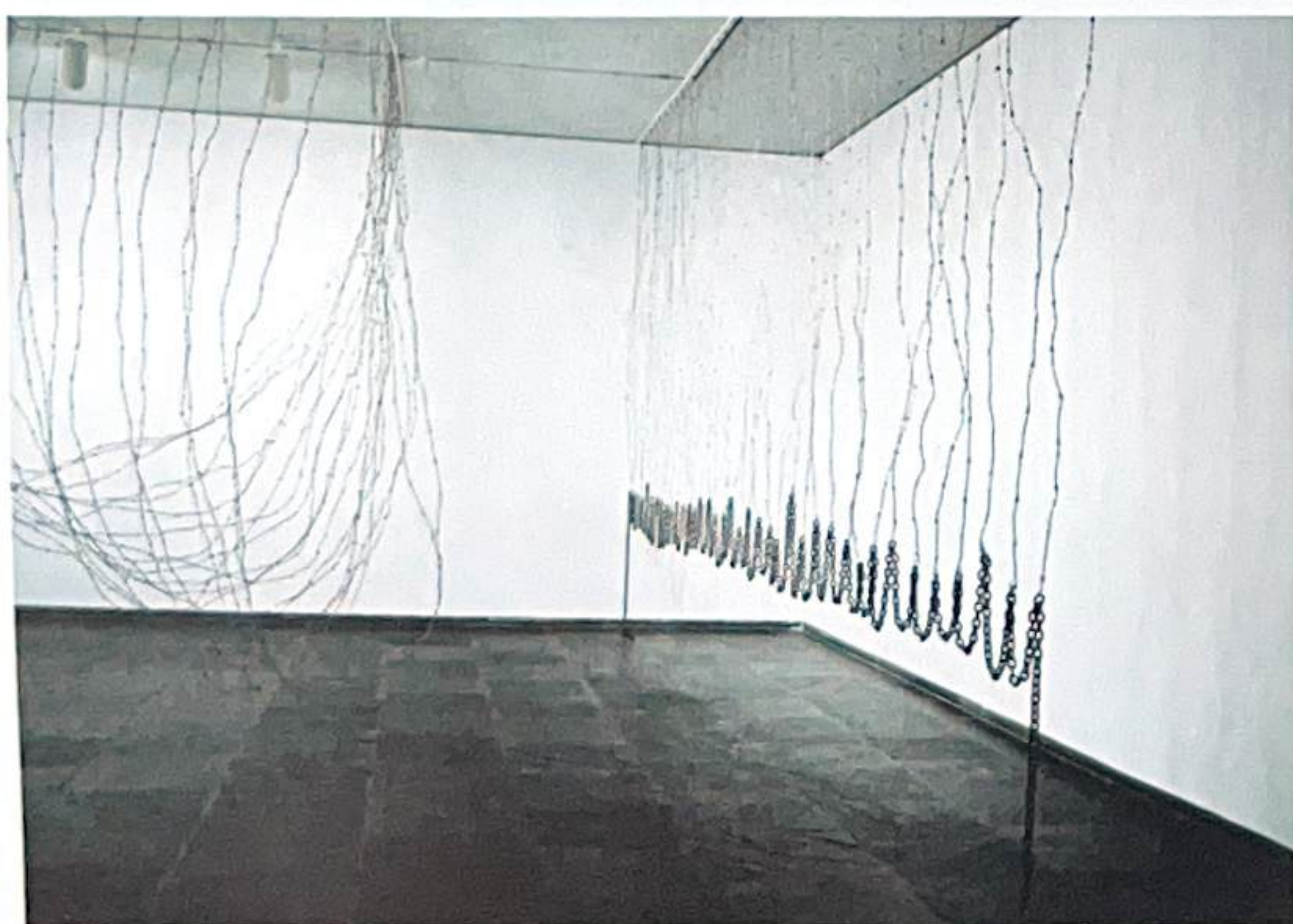


fig. 25  
Installation view: left to right: "Look through mind's mirror distance and measure time"—Jayne Cortez and Curtain for William and Peter by Mel Edwards (Mel Edwards: The Works [March 2-29, 1970]). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

*ple.* Exploring abstraction without the schism between white and black artists at this time seemed like a fool's errand.<sup>100</sup>

But let us return to the transformation occasioned by the paintings for a moment. The decisive year for the shift in Bowling's artistic practice was 1967, when he moved to a new expansive loft studio on lower Broadway, in downtown Manhattan. Other artists such as Agnes Martin and Jasper Johns were nearby. When the size of his working space increased, so did the scale of his paintings, and with it the ambition of the idea of painting liberated from earlier referential imagery, the more to focus on and foreground color as the principal material of his emergent experimentation. The scale of the new paintings enabled the eyes to roam across the expanse of canvas while giving the beholder a sense of both temporal and spatial orientation. One glimpses in the optical modulation of Bowling's new abstract paintings of this period a motile world of moving shapes, rather than fixed locations.

In this case, painting had to move out of the programmatic quagmire of the non-objective picture, in order to become a vital and revivifying field, an ebullient force that generated a sensorial and visceral presence, not just of lived experience but of mythic memory, not merely a pictorial surface but an agonistic space. To produce such an intensely absorbing visual and somatic drama, especially one charged with optical and physical sensations, Bowling developed a chromatic repertoire of dazzling colors and muted tones, hot intensity and cool temperatures, contrapuntal layers of density and tactility, transparency and opacity. Though nominally abstract, Bowling's paintings were nevertheless about places and things, objects and their representation, memory and absence. The paintings make direct reference to nature, evoking vibrant seascapes, geological landscapes, liquefied magma, and anthropocentric fields.

These considerations about subject matter and representational specificity form part of the view of the later paintings from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. In *Spreadout Ron Kitaj* (1984-86) pp. 110-1, *Pockknockers's Dawn* (1996) p. 127, *Alluviumworld* (1985) pp. 112-3, and *Rockface* (1985), painting is transformed into matter and material, hybridized, defying procedures of collage or assemblage. Neither pictures nor sculptures, they are objects-cum-paintings. The ridged and terraced surfaces, accreted clusters, and atomized grounds express images of territory and fractured landscape, with molecular and ambient features. Some of these features are achieved through the use of varied material (oil paint, gel, damar, beeswax, fluorescent chalk, ammonia, metallic dust, Christmas glitter, plastic toys, oyster shells, crabs claws, costume jewelry) applied with spatula and palette knife to create disrupted, ruptured impasto through glazing, speckling, smearing, and accumulated deposits that find their way onto the surfaces of the paintings. The thick globule, composed of a compound of material, is then mixed in with liquid paint until they form a sloughed paste, and a slow, painstaking upward drag of the canvas allows the volatile material to slide, shift, and settle as the weight of the canvas moves incrementally downwards from the top.<sup>101</sup> This way of making a painting is akin to the way a sculpture is

shaped by employing the malleability of the material to describe and invent a rich, textured shape and form. Reviewing an exhibition in which paintings derived from this slow process were first presented, the critic Margaret Garlake describes them “as far removed as is possible to be from the relative lucidity of collage and assemblage; it produces something much closer to *matière* painting and is what identifies these works as paintings rather than objects.”<sup>102</sup> These paintings, which emerged from a highly productive and experimental period – between 1981 and 1990 – summon ideas of archeological sites. Concurrently, Bowling worked on paintings which in their aura and splattered surfaces feel like terrestrial or lunar landscapes. *Moby Dick* (1981) p. 99, *Odysseus Footfalls* (1982), *Made At Maclise* (1982) p. 101, and *Ah Susan Whosh* (1982) p. 98 appear either volcanic or from distant galactic shores, as if they are the result of eruptions or cosmic showers. The strange beauty of the ravaged topography alludes to the technological changes and radical cultural forces reshaping Western post-industrial landscapes.

### Mappa Mundi

*Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that was particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, “When I grow up I will go there.” ... True by this time it was not a blank space anymore. But it had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an im-*



fig. 26  
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Sun Setting over a Lake*, c. 1840  
Oil on canvas, 91.1 x 122.6 cm

*mense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail in the depths of the land.*<sup>103</sup>

Joseph Conrad, the Polish immigrant turned anglophile and great English writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sets the stage for the fading grandeur of late colonialism in the novella *Heart of Darkness*. The idea of maps and mapping conjures so many images: discovery, dispossession, co-option, occupation. And terror. In Burkean terms, terror is an important aspect of the sublime. This sublime terror is what is conveyed in Conrad’s text. The text explores mentalities and the psychology of domination and cruelty, the opposition of forces between good (for example River Thames) and evil (River Congo), between white and black, Europe and Africa.<sup>104</sup> There is no doubt that late colonialism created in the feverish young mind of Charlie Marlow, the book’s narrator, a terrain of “delightful mystery” upon which the petty imperial imagination could roam; places of former blankness ripe for *la mission civilisatrice*. As Burke writes, “Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect of the sublime.”<sup>105</sup> This exhibition survey stages the epic imagination of Bowling’s painting practice at the germinal intersection of modernity and contemporaneity, civilization and barbarism, colonialism and postcolonialism. Bowling and Conrad share a certain relationship to Englishness and an anglophilic alienation, particularly at joints where the colonial imaginary and empire intersect. The difference, though, is that Bowling seeks to disinter territory from the speculative realism of domination, and thus to deterritorialize colonized space. It is for this reason that *Mappa Mundi* offers us a fresh opportunity to examine in detail the means and manner by which he accomplished the singularly challenging transformation of “blank” terrain into vast spaces of the painterly imagination.

*Mappa Mundi* presents Bowling’s conception of a Caribbean discourse (what Toni Morrison calls an “Africanist presence” in American literature) and its entanglement with the abstract sublime. It begins with the eponymous *Map Paintings*, the first mature body of work that marked a major breakthrough in his career. Working with cognitive and representational variants – between



fig. 27  
*Great Thames I*, 1989  
Acrylic on canvas, 180.5 x 320 cm

the flow and movement of paint and the delineation of form – Bowling synthesized the formal models of modernist abstract painting into psychogeographic signifiers of terrain. With this move, he sought to undermine and disalign the formless and the contentless as signs of both *terra nullius* and a seemingly disinterested, objective modernism. Here, the *Map Paintings* offer the opportunity to concretize form and content, and yet elide social commentary, while bringing into the fold of representation a determined historical awareness, the lived reality of painterly discourse.

To stand then, before the imposing presence of Bowling's immense, delicately worked, and tactile paintings, with their mists of muted colors and scumbled fiery substrates is to be replaced, to be grounded in a vast presence in which the beholder is able to generate his or her own meaning. References to the natural world abound and provide access to the vernacular and the classical. From the marsh flats of colonial Bartica to the terror of New Amsterdam; from the undertow of the Caribbean sea that he sailed to escape the claustrophobia of island existence<sup>106</sup> to the shores of the broad, mythic River Thames, where he found a home and hearth in London, the capital of empire; from the gritty, unforgiving hubbub and urban miscellany of New York, where he honed his artistic voice to the riven space of modernist painting, Bowling thematized painting as a powerful geography of experience, desire, and radical rupture.

Initially the image and representation of maps was about location and place. For example, one of the earliest map paintings, the map of South America in *South America Squared* (1967) p. 65, appears here within the red monochrome as a stenciled outline suspended in a grid at the center of the painting. From that moment on, with this defining painting, the map became a semiotic sign: the iconography of here and elsewhere (Guyana and England, South America and Europe), home and exile (Bartica and London, New York and the art world). However, maps were also about the coordinates of space, a signifier of historical narrative; of crossings and double-crossings (the Atlantic and Middle Passage); consciousness and double-

consciousness (the uncharted world of artists and the narrow straits of black art). In some ways, the "map paintings" recall J.M.W. Turner, whom Bowling deeply admired. If Turner was the painter of the English sublime, it could be stated that Bowling is the true master of the diasporic sublime.<sup>107</sup> The recurring riffs on distance and its dissolution, the illusionistic and the liminal, the cosmopolitan and the diasporic lend insight into the world-making ambition of the map paintings. In fact, it seems appropriate to compare Bowling not to his British and American<sup>108</sup> counterparts, but to Caribbean writers and thinkers of his generation such as Walcott, Lamming, Hall, Braithwaite, and Glissant, especially as their works relate more to the role of language and image, geography and narrative, landscape and origin, memory and identity, and the importance and impact of poetic insight in modern works of poetry, fiction, and theory.

The works of the *Great Thames* series (1989) fig. 27, pp. 128-33, with their silvery and marine blue-green surfaces, recall some of Turner's landscapes such as the luminous *Sun Setting Over a Lake* (c. 1840) fig. 26. Claude Monet's *Nymphs* are also important references in the conversation with the *Great Thames* paintings. References to Turner and Monet naturally saw Bowling exploring the language of the European sublime. Painting in a light-filled studio in Cable Street with a glimpse of the Thames, Bowling achieves a palpable, almost physical sense of light in his treatment of the river that is at once tactile and optical. The rhythmic floss across the canvases, which bear eddies of acrylic gel impasto spread across the surface, and strips of polyether foam impregnated with gel, produce the visual sensation of looking at fish scales glinting in the sun. In the paintings, the moral and the ethical, spiritual and metaphysical, aesthetic and physical are subjected to the structure of a painterly model. However, when contrasted with the deliberately encrusted materiality and turbid surfaces of *Wintergreens* (1986) and *Barticaflats* (1986) pp. 114-7, the sublime takes on a deeply skeptical vision with the mordant tension between transparency and opacity.

These paintings in their lofty lightness and fuscous opacity play on the dialectic of light and darkness that so clearly defined Conrad's different impressions of the Thames and the Congo rivers. Are Bowling's treatment of the light-flooded Thames and the turbid encrustations of the Bartica paintings his unconscious laid bare on canvas? Is Bowling's Thames a counterpoint to the Essequibo? Or are they ways of giving a hint of the complexity of a historical analysis that demands that we move beyond simplistic binaries of good and evil, enlightened and backward? Surveyed under Glissant's unstinting critical lens:

*Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing.*<sup>109</sup>

These dialectical itineraries are the lure of Bowling's paintings. They mark the physical and cognitive processes that he required in order to invest painting with an image of territory, heritage, and modernity. Kant's reflections on the sublime reveal the inner cognitive articulation within these art works:

*[T]he feeling of the sublime carries with it, as its character, a mental agitation connected with our judging of the object. But (since we like the sublime) this agitation is to be judged subjectively purposive, and so the imagination will refer this agitation either to cognitive power or to the power of desire. ...*<sup>110</sup>

*Mappa Mundi* examines different facets of this painterly inquiry across fifty years of the most extraordinary artistic labor, with its peaks of experimentation and formal mastery. But the question

that must be asked is: how did the Caribbean discourse and cognitive abstraction converge? At the time that Bowling began imbricating the surfaces of his paintings with the stenciled shapes of Africa, Australia, Guyana, North America, and South America, he sought to produce a new temporal and spatial measure of worldliness, of the "Black Atlantic" as a unique visual chronotope, entrancing the beholder before the riparian turbulence and oceanic drama of painterly abstraction.

The concept of the chronotope was developed by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin to foreground the idea of time and space within different genres of the novel. He writes: "In the literary artistic chronotope, temporal and spatial indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time as it were thickens, takes on flesh, and becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history."<sup>111</sup> Bowling's use of the different figures and imagery of continents, bodies of water, and landscapes indicates similar responsiveness to time, plot, and history. His maritime narratives and their entanglement with history and memory, his invocations of Duboisian "double consciousness"<sup>112</sup> transposes time and space into allegories of self and other.

Gilroy examined the temporal and spatial configurations in the context of the Black Atlantic world. Bowling gives visual articulation to the chronotopic concept by bringing historical time and contemporary mapping of space into the discursive fold of painting. If, as Bakhtin noted, "in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time,"<sup>113</sup> it could be said that in Bowling's painting its primary category is space: broad and expansive, tenebrous and light, opaque and transparent. In fact, one recurring principle of the early maps, especially in the visually coded use of misty veils, was to suggest the relationship between opacity and permeability.<sup>114</sup> However, within the space of painting, what unfolds is thick time as an absorptive, perceptual scene. Such a scene is always made up of constructed space, be it perspectival or illusionistic, depthless or three dimensional, naturalistic or geomet-



fig 28  
Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, 1914-26  
Oil on canvas, three panels, each 200 x 425 cm

ric, realist or abstract. It is the way that space folds into time that shapes its permeability within a painting.

Certainly space in Bowling's pictures traverses different representations of spatiality. What one encounters when standing before the expansive map paintings suggests more than a boundless, metaphysical vision of space, but also a sense of the thickness of time within charged, troubled, and ruptured landscapes. *Penumbra* (1970) pp. 82–3, with its drifting continents, wine-dark, ponderous core rendered in dark greens and aubergine, and contingent edges in purple and lilac, is just such a painting. The slow pan across the expanse of the canvas, like a film tracking shot, makes it feel as if Bowling had spent long visits at New York's Museum of Modern Art in front of Monet's *Water Lilies* (c. 1914–26) fig. 27. This recognition gives Bowling's work its historical consciousness within modernism. But it also does in the context of the Caribbean. For Glissant, the historical consciousness of the Caribbean is predicated on a theory of transversality and cross-cultural relationships rather than on universal transcendence. He envisions the New World in relation to its "[s]ubmarine roots: that is floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions ... through a network of branches."<sup>15</sup> Gilroy had earlier articulated a most beautiful and delicate worlding of the Black Atlantic, fusing its experience through the floating "image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean..."<sup>16</sup> This image of constant motion, flows and eddies is in consonance with what Bowling most sought to accomplish in the map paintings: the visual fusion of epic time and boundless space. Before these audacious abstract works, then, the image one sees is a mobile world beyond a purely cartographic frame and Cartesian linearity, beyond dualism. Because to frame is to fix, and to fix is to make the mobile static, the map paintings are as much visual chronotopes as they are submarine

Imagination, Toni Morrison began a critical inquiry into how to unfix the map, to shake the moribund and make it move. She lays down the task for her inquiry into the historical conditions of the American literary canon: "I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest."<sup>17</sup> At a subliminal level one can intuit that the floating image of ships, black bodies, and all sorts of cargo plying the rough seas between Africa and the New World also compelled Bowling to tackle the irresolvable idealism of mapping journeys and voyages of discovery upon which the colonization and domination of space occurred. For him the idea of maps as conceptual objects of painting made for a fitting trope through which to tackle the moribund nature of abstraction. Maps and mapping present not only the mirror of territory, but also an exploratory metaphor for inhabiting it conceptually, physically, and psychically. Though the expansive and imposing vistas of their large scale may suggest a spreading alloverness, evocative of Pollock's drips and their actions of secreted indeterminacy, what emerges under conditions of sustained viewing is that the shapes and features of the landscape dissolve into details. This was the central impression of the six large paintings exhibited at Bowling's solo debut at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971.<sup>18</sup> In paintings such as *Polish Rebecca* (1971) pp. 84–5, *Marcia H Travels* (1970) fig. 29, *Africa to Australia* (1971), *Australia to Africa* (1971) pp. 88–9, *Texas Louise* (1971), and *Travelling with Robert Hughes* (1970)—shown at the Whitney—and other paintings such as *Night Journey* and *Dog Daze* (1971) pp. 90–1, the spreading liquidity of the thin membrane of paint, running in rivulets across and down the support, is accomplished through sustained, deliberate stains, whirls, wipes, sprays, splashes, and patient layering. Another

effect is the slow dematerialization of previously legible imagery as it becomes submerged through chromatic transitions. This is foreshadowed in early map paintings such as *3 Maps Guyana* (1967), *South America x 3 at root 2 Yellow* (1967) fig. 30, *Towards Green* (1967), and *South America x 3 at root 2 Puce* (1967). The transitions engender slow perceptual shifts and drifts, charging the surfaces with an inventory of impressions, as formerly cohesive wholes and their structural cognates form archipelagos, islands, territories.

In some other pictures Bowling varies his chromatic choices, sometimes paring down and severely limiting the use of color. This approach is most effective in a series of meditations on time, landscape, and process. Produced between 1972 and 1973, the paintings are investigations of color field abstraction. But Bowling added a layer of tropical mood to the images, which range from the sunless to the light-suffused. These paintings were first shown in an exhibition at the Center for Inter-American Relations located on Park Avenue, New York in the autumn of 1973. The large scale *For Edvins* (1973) and the companion pieces, *The Weather is Clement* (1973) and *For Irja* (1973) pp. 94–5, the massive *Towards Henry's Pleasure* (1973) and the effusive, sun-drenched *Rupununi* (1971) and *Pumpkin* (1971), along with the affectionately titled *Looking at Barney and Mark* (1972) p. 165—a reference to Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko—represent both continuity and departures from the exhausted emblems of the previous map paintings. In these paintings, a restricted palette of brown, marine, and purplish blue is balanced with a joyful, even ecstatic use of color. *For Edvins* and *For Irja* are painted as horizon lines to suggest land and sea. Only the parsimonious use of flecks of gilt applied to the bottom left and top left corners of the respective pictures is able to minimize the severity of what appears to be a gloomy scene. But in other works, especially in the poured paintings which pre-

occupied Bowling between 1974 and 1976, intense and blended colors are given free rein, as they seep through, drip downward, and fuse into one another in repeated rushes and marbled pours down the canvases. However, he had experimented with bleeding cascades of paint in earlier paintings such as *Bartica Born I*, *Bartica Born II*, *Bartica Born III* (all 1967), and in *And Mother's House on South America* (1968). Beyond the formal innovations that pushed him into sustained periods of teasing out the material and alchemical processes of different series, familial connections defined some aspects of his experiments. In *Plus Mother's House* (1968) p. 71 the screen-printed image of his mother's house was resurrected from earlier pictures and combined with stenciled outlines of South America and a sprayed-in outline of the shape of Guyana beneath that of the continent. *Bartica* (1968–69) p. 76 and *Where is Lucienne?* (1971) p. 87 bear spectral imprints of photographs, map outlines of South America and Africa across the surfaces, as synecdoches of memory. The radiant surface of *Bartica* continued Bowling's deliberations on biography. The painting pulsates with saturated magenta and a blend of orange and green. Though it preceded the later painting, it is undoubtedly a pair to *Middle Passage*. At some points, the imagery swerves, and the autobiographical references dissolve into pure abstraction, while suggesting protean domains in which absorbing paintings like *Raining Down South* (1968) p. 73 and *Night Journey* could be located.

Throughout his career, Bowling was adamant about his identity as an artist deeply invested in the pleasures and challenges of making ambitious painting. But in the early 1990s he also made small scale, intimate paintings, producing works with sewn, sutured, worn, bruised, abraded surfaces, as if performing a delicate surgery, mending and binding physical and psychic wounds. The works that come to mind are such radiant paintings



fig. 29  
Frank Bowling, *Marcia H Travels*, 1970  
Acrylic on canvas, 282 x 540 cm



fig. 30  
Frank Bowling, *South America x 3 at root 2 yellow*, 1967–68  
Acrylic and spray paint on canvas, 121 x 271 cm

as *Giraffelt (For Randy)* (1992), *Beetle Grub* (1992) p. 180, *Comes a Horseman* (1993), and *Rare and Crunchy* (1993) p. 181. Yet it would be a mistake to think of these small-scale works as a retreat into an inner world, as an acknowledgment of his complex historical background as a burden. On the contrary, all evidence of his powerful art proves that the various identities of an artist are not mutually exclusive. While he was always wary of being framed and limited by his ethnicity, which would have made his important contributions to late modernist abstraction secondary, he nevertheless did not abandon the historical power of his heritage, which he distilled in a subtle, non-ideological fashion and aesthetically elaborated within the history of painting.

In many ways, 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. Within the global public sphere, the question of color and ethnic lines serve as reminders of the intense cultural politics and artistic debates in the United States. Today we are again experiencing a dialectical response among artists of African descent to the meaning of blackness in art, be it in Kerry James Marshall's spectral figurative painting or Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's invented social characters or the dialogic refractions of abstraction and figuration in Chris Ofili's recent paintings; there is no doubt that many of the issues that preoccupied artists of Bowling's generation are again part of the serious debates reshaping the understanding of advanced painting today. Fifty years ago, Bowling set out to rework, undermine, and transform the circumscribed position of the black artist through the language of color painting and abstraction, by transporting into the space of received ideas the ineluctable facts of history. At the same time he worked to extricate his paintings from the dominant discourse of African American cultural discourse. Where radical black cultural nationalists called for explicit identification with blackness both in terms of content and affect, aesthetic and ideology, he appropriated Guyana, South America, and the Black Atlantic in order to provincialize both African American artistic demands and those of Greenbergian American-type painting. Today, at the age of 83, Bowling's artistic greatness is not in question. In *Mappa Mundi*, the thrilling, radiant art he produced across fifty years of relentless experimentation is manifested in its sheer magnificence. It makes one all the more aware that the philosophical implications of other realities he injected into late modernist painting could not be more apparent, nor should they be ignored.

- 1 Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History" in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948–2013* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2014), p. 253.
- 2 There have been conflicting accounts of when Bowling arrived in Britain. Some have mentioned 1950 and others 1952. Bowling has definitively confirmed that he arrived in London in June 1953, the year and around the day Queen Elizabeth II was crowned on June 2, 1953.
- 3 It is estimated that between 1948 and 1970 around half a million West Indian immigrants moved to Britain from different parts of the British Empire in the West Indies and Guyana. For sources see, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/bound-for-britain/> accessed April 20, 2017
- 4 The boat that transported Bowling from Guiana to Port of Spain, Trinidad was one of the Booker boats. Booker, for which the literary prize Booker Award is named, practically owned Guiana and made its vast fortune as part of a vast plantocracy by means of monoculture focused on sugar production.
- 5 See Mel Gooding, *Frank Bowling* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2011), p. 18. Bowling arrived in London right around the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, who ascended to the throne after the death of her father King George VI. The Queen's ascension marked a new confident era for the shrinking empire. As it turned out, the then Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip, her husband, were on the first leg of a trip to Kenya, Australia, and New Zealand when news of her father's death reached her on February 7, 1952. It was a dangerous and tense period, just at the height of the violent anti-colonial Mau Mau uprising against British rule.
- 6 The view echoed in Walcott's poem suggests other ideas of disaster. Its equivalence in the paintings of Aubrey Williams (1926–90), a Guyanese painter, who arrived in London a year before Bowling in 1952, produced a type of figuration/abstraction that was distinctly different from that of European artists. Williams' interest in themes of dispossession, Amerindian iconography, and his identification with the suffering of colonization and annihilation, led him to produce a wide range of work around indigenous South American themes. His paintings *Death and the Conquistador* (1959), *El Dorado* (1960), and *Tribal Mark II* (1961) bring the idea of tribal memory alluded to in Walcott's poem into the scene of painterly abstraction. The paintings reveal the iconographic and archetypal ideas from the peripheries of empire that began flooding into British postwar representation.
- 7 For a study of this period in the rise of American dominance of modernism see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
- 8 Following the end of World War II, and its impact on British colonies, the Fifth Pan-African Congress was held in Manchester from October 15 to 21, 1945 to organize and coordinate the response of various nationalist and independence movements in Africa and the Caribbean to British imperialism and to demand self-rule as a consequence of the allied defeat of Nazism.
- 9 The independence of India in 1947 marked the first massive break in British colonial structure. It made the decline of colonial governance across the world inevitable.
- 10 On its maiden voyage the *Empire Windrush* sailed from Jamaica with a group of 492 men and women, plus one stowaway, in the summer of 1948.
- 11 Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 4.
- 12 Neil Spencer, "Lord Kitchener steps off the Empire Windrush," June 16, 2011. [www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/16/lord-kitchener-empire-windrush](http://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/16/lord-kitchener-empire-windrush), accessed February 10, 2017.
- 13 See Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- 14 By the end of the 1950s, the increasing black presence in London, a consequence of postwar black migration, precipitated a white British backlash. With campaigns to "Keep Britain White" far-right fascist groups such as the White Defence League and Oswald Mosley's Union Movement encouraged and exploited acts of violence against West Indians and their property. A major result of these acts of disaffection by white Britons against West Indian immigration was the Notting Hill Riots of 1958, which lasted for a week, from August 30 until September 5. For an exploration of these disturbances and the "Race Riots" against black immigrants in postwar Britain, see Perry, *London is the Place for Me* (see note 11) pp. 89–125.
- 15 See Gooding, *Bowling* (see note 5) p. 18.
- 16 For an incisive discussion on this moment and the relationship to black British culture, race, and politics of citizenship see Perry, *London is the Place for Me* (see note 11).

- 17 The term commemorates the historical voyage on the *Empire Windrush*, which transformed British postcolonial identity.
- 18 See George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). Here, the Barbadian writer, a member of the Windrush generation of West Indians who arrived in Britain in 1950, explores the dimension of exile and the immigrants' relationship to displacement, as well as effects on the sensibility of the writer who must come to terms with its meaning.
- 19 See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: WW Norton, 2006).
- 20 See Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 173.
- 21 George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 11.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 23 Said, *Reflections on Exile* (see note 20), p. 173.
- 24 First shown in West Berlin in 1958, subsequently traveling to seven additional European cities, *The New American Painting* exhibition was curated by Dorothy Miller at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and organized by the museum's International Council. It comprised a large selection of eighty paintings by seventeen Abstract Expressionist artists who were billed at the time as representing the vanguard of contemporary American art. The central and aggressive role of MoMA's International Council in the promotion of a certain view of American art during this period made it complicit in the broader politics of the Cold War between the U.S. and Soviet Union. For further reading see [www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1990?locale=en](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1990?locale=en), accessed March 11, 2017.
- 25 He had failed the initial examination for a place in the Spring term of 1959. Carel Weight gave him a second chance, after which he won a place for the Autumn term that year. See Mel Gooding, *Bowling* (see note 5), p. 20.
- 26 Held at Whitechapel Art Gallery in August 1956, *This is Tomorrow* was a seminal exhibition organized by members of ICA Independent Group. A collaborative and participatory exhibition that crossed the boundaries of visual art, architecture, urbanism, design, communication media, and pop culture, it featured twelve sections that overlapped and erased the borders between high and low. It remains one of the vital exhibition propositions of the postwar era.
- 27 Bowling was one of several RCA students profiled in the color section of *The Sunday Times*, July 1, 1962.
- 28 The headline of a profile of Bowling described his work this way: "The bold and exciting paintings of Chelsea artist Frank Bowling, have in recent months prompted enthusiastic comment in the art columns of a number of our newspapers and magazines. Already in the short time that has passed since he left the Royal College of Art last summer so far as the critics are concerned he has become a marked man." Anthony Lewis Swift, "Profile Spotlights: Frank Bowling: The Birth of an Artist," *Chelsea Post and West London Star*, January 18, 1963, p. 4.
- 29 As an active participant in RCA's "New Contemporaries" Bowling was deeply disappointed at being excluded from the influential 1961 *Young Contemporaries* exhibition that established the credentials of British Pop. He still speaks of that exclusion with regret.
- 30 The exhibition was accompanied by a small stapled catalogue with images of several paintings by both artists, and a list of works for each. See *Image in Revolt: Derek Boshier – Frank Bowling* (London: Grabowski Gallery, 1962).
- 31 Swift, "Spotlights: Frank Bowling," (see note 28), p. 4.
- 32 John Tancock, *Frank Bowling* (New York: Center for Inter-American Relations, 1973), unpaginated.
- 33 In 1962, Francis Bacon's retrospective at Tate Gallery opened to huge acclaim. Bowling, who already knew Bacon, socialized with him in pubs, and visited his studio, was duly impressed and taken by the power of the older artist's singular figurative style.
- 34 Swift, "Spotlights: Frank Bowling" (see note 28), p. 4.
- 35 David Sylvester, "No Baconians," *New Statesman*, April 20, 1962, p. 573.
- 36 Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, "Frank Bowling: A Conversation," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Spring 1996, p. 18.
- 37 The only surviving image of the work is a color photograph which shows Bowling standing on the right edge of the immense painting. According to him, after the exhibition concluded, the three paintings from the show were rolled up and stored in Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, where he was then teaching. He discovered after a few years, when he sought to retrieve the paintings, that without his

- 38 These feelings may have been amplified by his visit to Documenta III in Kassel during the summer of 1964.
- 39 The Commonwealth artists exhibition was presented in the Commonwealth Institute, which was the successor to the Imperial Institute, emphasizing Britain's shift to the Commonwealth in light of decolonization. Some of the participating artists included Bowling (Guyana), Jerry Pothrick (Canada), Billy Apple (New Zealand), Neil Stocker (Australia), Kim Lim (Malaysia), Bill Caulbert (New Zealand).
- 40 The First Festival of Negro Art and Culture was an African and diasporic cultural extravaganza celebrating global black culture. It took place in Dakar in 1966 in the midst of post-independence Africa. The giant festival brought together hundreds of artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers from Africa, Europe, North and South America, and the Caribbean. The festival featured exhibitions, concerts, performances, poetry readings, and panel discussions in celebration of African culture along the tenets of Négritude. It was organized by the influential poet, statesman, co-founder of the Négritude movement, and first president of independent Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Though he did not attend, Bowling won the Grand Prize for painting in Dakar with his large-scale painting *Big Bird* (1964).
- 41 In 1962, the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon bought two paintings from Bowling through an international grant it awards to artists.
- 42 For the show, Dinterfass, who also represented Jacob Lawrence, was introduced to Bowling's work by the sculptor Elisabeth Frink. For the exhibition she selected and showed the group of expressionist figurative paintings of beggars which Bowling had produced between 1962 and 1963. This group of paintings bridged the conceptual and formal shifts of emphasis between figuration and abstraction which preoccupied Bowling for a number of years; he finally took a decisive turn to pure abstraction from 1967 onwards.
- 43 However, tragedy marked the entrance of this pivotal moment. O'Hara, who played an instrumental role with Rivers in organizing lodgings at Chelsea, was killed in a car accident on Fire Island in July that year, just a month after Bowling reached the city.
- 44 In the early part of his career Bowling was already engaged with events related to postcolonial violence. Early paintings such as the *Martyrdom of Patrice Lumumba* and *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* were responses to the crisis in the Congo and the international scandal surrounding the murder of Congo's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba.
- 45 Enwezor and Oguibe, "Frank Bowling: A Conversation" (see note 36), p. 18.
- 46 Darby English has written a fascinating exploration of this period in African American art and its related politics, of which Bowling was a crucial figure. See Darby English, *1971: A Year in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
- 47 The idea of Bowling being both a part of and apart from his African American peers and therefore a critical go-between is confirmed by the 1969 exhibition *5 + 1* showcasing the work of five African American artists (Jack Whitten, Al Loving, Daniel LaRue Johnson, William T. Williams, and Melvin Edwards) and the Briton Bowling, which he organized at the State University of New York at Stony Brook on the invitation of Lawrence Alloway, a British curator and critic, and Sam Hunter, a professor of art at Princeton University. The exhibition was first shown in Manhattan before moving to the University at Stony Brook, where Alloway then worked.
- 48 See Bowling's three part essay "Discussion on Black Art", *Arts Magazine*, April 1969, May 1969, and December 1969–January 1970.
- 49 For another detailed and compelling study of this period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which focuses on the politics of American museums and their strategies of inclusion, exclusion, and acknowledgment of the work of African American artists, see Susan E. Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 50 Frank Bowling, "Discussion on Black Art III," *Arts Magazine*, December 1969–January 1970, p. 20.
- 51 Charles Baudelaire, "Review of Salon of 1846," in Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Vol. II (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976), p. 416.
- 52 Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux) 1990. The amplitude of Walcott's mesmerizing retelling of Homer's *Odyssey* through the framework of the Caribbean and the Middle Passage is a poetic tour de force that links literature, history, exile, nation, identity, and memory. The connections are also deeply reflected in Bowling's paintings, making him an indispensable figure within the sphere of black South American and Caribbean arts.