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Artist Frank Bowling on how he paints

Frank Bowling
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Image: Kitty, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 172.72 x 68.58cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Rollo Contemporary Art, London

It was in 1966 that I first thought the future lay in abstraction. At that time I was painting pieces that were tied to my childhood. Later I realised that the figuration had waned almost completely; abstraction and colour dominated.

In London, my work had been very figurative. In 1959, I went to the Royal College of Art, and worked in the life room; I thought I needed that academic background, and working from life did help me understand how to structure the figure and work with tone and light. I did still life too: I painted wine bottles and glass vases, working with a white table in front of a white wall so that I could study colour more closely.

But moving to New York and meeting the influential art critic, Clement Greenberg, had a big impact on me. Being a British-trained artist, it felt like abstraction was a no-go area. But he made me realise that the information I was getting in London was misguided and that the future lay in colour painting. He encouraged me to go to museums in places such as Philadelphia and Boston and to look more seriously at the paintings of the impressionists and American colour field painters such as Mark Rothko.

I moved into a studio in downtown New York and started working on a 30ft platform. I

laid my canvases on it and worked at floor level, drizzling, dripping and spilling the paint. I mixed the colours in jars, then poured them on in a thick liquid state. It was always the same process and the paint would spread and bleed. I would readjust the painting according to the geometry, or to Fibonacci and Jay Hambidge, or something like that, but sometimes chance played its part. I'm very open to accidents. I know they will happen, so I try to go along with them and see where they lead.

Recently I have had to restrict my movements. I am no longer easily able to work on the floor. I have to be upright now, so I have a table that has been made to the right dimensions to allow the paint to run right down the middle. I did once have in my mind that I would go back to working with still life, but to be honest I'm not yet ready for that. I still get a lot of juice out of abstraction, especially Barnett Newman's Zip Paintings.

- Frank Bowling is a Royal Academician. He was born in British Guiana, South America, in 1936. His exhibition, *Zippers: New Works by Frank Bowling RA*, will be on at [Rollo Contemporary Art](#) from 11 September to 9 October.