



Caption

Look First

Family Matters

A Closer Look at Frank Bowling's *Middle Passage* Paintings

Grace Aneiza Ali

The wall of Frank Bowling's studio at 535 Broadway, SoHo, New York, circa 1969 (dithered detail). Digital image courtesy of the Frank Bowling Archive. Photo: Dan Johnson (all rights reserved).



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Introduction

In 1970 Frank Bowling, who was born in 1934 in British Guiana (now Guyana), produced two large-scale paintings in his New York City studio evocatively titled *Middle Passage* (figs. 1 and 2).¹ Though distinct in their color abstractions and compositions, both paintings featured images of

the artist's family. Invoking the transatlantic histories that informed his Caribbean identity, Bowling remarked:

I named the painting *Middle Passage* because I am a product of the Middle Passage.

But . . . I do not bring my images together because of the history and brutality of that terrible crossing, but rather in spite of it.²

In this brief but revealing statement, Bowling calls attention to a critical artistic gesture happening beyond the canvas: the act of naming—the intentional language of the title. The only overt signal that the painting is about the Middle Passage is in the title. In this gesture, we are invited to ask the question *What work is the title tasked to do that the painting isn't?*

The statement also reflects what Bowling is not doing. He is not embedding his images, by which he means photographs of his family and his mother's house, because of the brutality of the Middle Passage. In these words of defiance, the declaration that the paintings exist in the world "in spite of" the Middle Passage, lies an explicit refusal: although one is a product of a great terror, one is not authored by it.

