

Painting and Collage, Picture and Matter: The meaning of Frank Bowling's *Wintergreens* in the Royal Academy's collection

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Abstract

The painter Frank Bowling's election to the British Royal Academy (RA) in 2005 was historic for two reasons: the Guyanese-British painter was the storied institution's first black academician in its nearly 225-year history; however, in an unprecedented turn, his choice of submission for diploma painting—a customary bequeathal by all incoming RA members—was rejected and he was asked to select another. Bowling's original submission, *Wintergreens* (1986) was nearly two decades old at the time of his election and, so the RA suggested, the artist might wish to select a more recent and representative work to join their permanent collection. The backlash from the Bowling camp was swift, with charges of institutional racism countering the RA's stated reasons for their unorthodox rejection. As one commentator posited, "perhaps it was thought that such a major work by the Academy's first black British member would be too imposing?" This paper examines the two competing narratives for *Wintergreens*' apparent unsuitability for the Royal Academy and proposes a third possibility that has heretofore gone unexamined: that, at best, *Wintergreens* is a difficult and unusual painting, given its clear anti-formalist and proto-New Materialist commitments (especially for Bowling, a self-professed formalist); or, at worst, that it threatens to undermine the very definitions of art established at the RA's inception and, by extension, imperiling the role of the viewing subject whom this art historically addresses.

Keywords:

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Wintergreens' (1986, fig. 1) encrusted surface, upon first viewing, seems designed to repel its observer. It is a large, dark painting, horizontally oriented and segmented by raised, wavering lines into an uneven grid of rectangles and squares. Overtop this structure, viscous clumps of acrylics in varying shades of dark moss, charcoal, pea green, and ochre swirl and bleed into one another, choking—in some places, totally submerging—the structure beneath. Its scale is such that taking in the entire work in one go is impossible, requiring its viewer to traverse in the gallery a long swath of muck similar to the polluted riverbed of the Thames. Various media poke out of the muddy buildup: a bottle cap, a small plastic owl, and other indiscernible detritus obscured by layers of paint. At close proximity, the sickly, uneven palette and lumpy appearance are practically feculent, making *Wintergreens* a compelling though uninviting painting to behold for a length of time.

The greatest challenges of Frank Bowling's 1986 work, though, exceed its flirtations with abjection. It may recall those aspects of the natural world or human embodiment we might normally wish to suppress, especially in the presence of art. Yet, the challenge *Wintergreens* poses to viewers also stems from its rejection of some of the medium's most fundamental conventions. Its

gridded foam understructure lifts off the canvas and gives the object a dimensionality more akin to bas-relief than painting. Bowling's close attention to surface, thick and calloused, impels viewers to observe the physical properties of his materials rather than dwell on their representational or expressive capacities. And, of course, given the various mixed media suspended within its layers, its designations by the British Royal Academy (RA), to whose collection it belongs, seem comically inadequate: "Object Type: Painting. Medium: Acrylic on canvas."¹



Figure 1. Frank Bowling, *Wintergreens*, 1986, acrylic paint, acrylic gel, foam and mixed media on canvas, 173 x 348 cm. Courtesy the artist. Unknown photographer. Royal Academy Collection. © Frank Bowling. All rights reserved, DACS 2026.

Upon his election to the RA in 2005, Bowling submitted *Wintergreens* as his diploma work, a customary bequeathal made by all of the Academy's incoming members. There, it would join the ranks of J.M.W. Turner's *Dolbadern Castle* (1798-99) and John Constable's *A Boat Passing a Lock* (1826), among countless other works by the masters of British painting. Upon its submission, however, in a shocking and unprecedented turn, it was rejected, and Bowling was asked to select another work to join the Academy's collection. Writing on behalf of the artist, Richard Gibson, an old friend of Bowling's, expressed the team's dismay that Bowling—who was already believed to be long overdue for inclusion in the RA and who, some 225 years after its inception, would be the Academy's first black member—should be denied his choice of diploma work.

Furthermore, Gibson accused the Academy of underhandedly removing *Wintergreens* from its privileged location near the Academy's restaurant where it was to be photographed and the painting's installation filmed. "Nothing was said to Frank," he writes of the debacle, "it was arranged in the dark and in the knowledge that Frank was in the United States to attend exhibitions

1 "Wintergreens, 1986," Royal Academy of Arts, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/wintergreens>.

of his work in Chicago and New York.”² Gibson went as far as to accuse the Academy of racism, convinced that *Wintergreens*’ apparent unsuitability stemmed from extrinsic factors unique to its creator rather than issues intrinsic to *Wintergreens* itself. “This strange turn of event [sic] will certainly only suggest that the old racist double standards [of the Academy] still continue,” Gibson forecasted. “Perhaps it was thought that such a major work by the Academy’s first black British member would be too imposing?”³

The Academy quickly realized their misstep in clandestinely removing *Wintergreens* without consulting the artist and confirmed to Gibson that they were proud to have Bowling among their ranks. Writing on behalf of the RA, Jenni Francis described Bowling in her reply as, “a greatly valued new member.” She briefly explained the Academy’s wariness, writing: “Council felt that although *Wintergreens* was a fine example of Frank’s earlier work [he] might wish to be represented by a more recent example of his work.” This suggestion was couched in the compromise that, “Council is now in discussion with Frank Bowling RA and are sure that the eventual choice of work will be decided by amiable discussion.”⁴ In the end, this discussion proved favorable to Bowling and his original choice of submission: ultimately, *Wintergreens* was accepted as the artist’s diploma work and has resided in the RA’s collection ever since.

The two competing explanations about *Wintergreens*’ unsuitability for the Academy on offer here—institutional racism according to the Bowling camp versus the RA’s desire for a more contemporary work—are not without their merits. On the one hand, Bowling was and remains keenly aware of how institutions, peers, and audiences have read his identity into and against his work. He attributes the shrouded racism of the early-1960s London art scene as the primary motivation for his move to New York in 1966, and has decried racial stereotyping, tokenism, and discrimination in several other instances in the interim decades.⁵

On the other hand, the RA’s request for a more recent painting is corroborated by the great many—even majority of—diploma works that hail from the years around the academician’s election. Over its 250-year lifespan, this certainly seems to be the norm, and a survey of contemporary academicians confirms that most submit diploma works created within five years prior to joining the Academy, if not from the precise year of their election.⁶ Further, Bowling’s formal experiments of the mid-1980s, emblemized by *Wintergreens*, are considered a deviation from the

2 Richard Gibson, email to Jennifer Francis, April 12, 2006, 14:27pm, Frank Bowling Archive.

3 Richard Gibson, email to Jennifer Francis, April 12, 2006, 11:08am, Frank Bowling Archive.

4 Jennifer Francis, email to Richard Gibson, April 16, 2006, 19:22pm, Frank Bowling Archive.

5 “Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi – Eröffnung,” posted June 23, 2017 by Haus der Kunst, YouTube video, 55:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDMpYX6SD5o>; In his critical writings for *Arts* magazine, Bowling also decried being pigeonholed as a “Black artist” upon arriving to the U.S. In his writing, he also prefers the lowercase “black” as opposed to capitalized “Black,” which I use here in deference to Bowling’s preference; Frank Bowling, “It’s Not Enough to Say, ‘Black is Beautiful,’” *Arts* magazine, April 1971, republished in ARTnews, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/from-the-archives-frank-bowling-on-why-its-not-enough-to-say-black-is-beautiful-in-1971-8668/>. As recently as the press tour for his 2019 Tate retrospective, Bowling decried institutional tokenism and exploitation on the basis of his race; Frank Bowling, “Frank Bowling on BBC News at Ten,” YouTube video, 2:36, June 1, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_Vb6pe6oxw.

6 “The Diploma Collection at the Royal Academy,” *Art UK*, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://artuk.org/discover/curations/20th-century-spotlight-the-diploma-collection-at-the-royal-academy-london-adams-to-irwin/template/storyline>; Of the outliers who have submitted works made a decade or longer before the academician’s nomination—of which there is a non-negligible minority—the span between 1986, when Bowling painted *Wintergreens*, and 2005, when he was elected to the RA, does appear to be among the longest.

artist's *modus operandi*.⁷ It is at least plausible that the Academy took notice of Bowling because of his more recent paintings and expected his admission to their ranks to be illustrative of these contemporary developments.

In the past twenty years, these two narratives have become enshrined in institutional history and personal memory, and to date none have questioned their Manichean division. Yet, fluttering between these accounts, a third explanation has gone uninterrogated. Without discounting the material fact of the RA's racial exclusiveness, while also recognizing the Academy's request to Bowling was not baseless, we might consider the extent to which qualities intrinsic to *Wintergreens* motivated the initial rejection. What if more than (or alongside) Bowling's racial identity, the failure of *Wintergreens* to impress the Academy stems from the fact that as a painting it is, at best, heterodox and, at worst, flagrantly undermines the medium to which it purportedly belongs (at least for a self-professed formalist like Bowling)? That is, what, if any, formal and aesthetic aspects of *Wintergreens* might have disqualified it from joining the ranks of great British masterworks—indeed, of constituting the official canon of British painting?

To answer these questions, we must first understand how *Wintergreens* departs from the artist's customary approach. The protruding surfaces of Bowling's mid-1980s series, the "sculptural paintings" to which *Wintergreens* belongs, are not the only instances in his career where impasto and multi-media take centerstage but do represent the most dramatic examples of these impulses. Up until the early 1980s, Bowling's work was of a flatter, more conventional ilk. Influenced by his time amongst the American avant-garde between 1966–75, as well as his deepening



Figure 2. Frank Bowling, *Courteous Shade*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 193 x 155 cm. Courtesy the artist. Photographed by Charlie Littlewood. © Frank Bowling. All rights reserved, DACS 2026.

relationship with friend and mentor Clement Greenberg, Bowling had, as late as 1976, self-identified as a formalist.⁸ The series emblemizing this approach, the *Poured* paintings, revel in the material properties of (specifically acrylic) paint, especially its color and liquidity. For these works, Bowling poured layer after layer of acrylics onto the canvas and then tilted and turned the surface to coax the paint into directions he could direct though never fully control.

Consider the opposing forces on display in *Courteous Shade* (1974, fig. 2), where gravity and paint's viscosity press against the rectangular frame Bowling stenciled onto the atmospheric coral and mauve background. In the canvas's center, denser layers of tangerine, yellow, and lime overlay one another, and left of center a ghostly vertical line of light pink and orange suggests a boundary the central mass only acknowledges, though fails to fully obey. We might also consider how these wholly abstract works are indebted to the tradition of figure painting, such as *Julia* (1975, fig. 3). The density of the central vertical pours contrasts the background's airy washes of blue and indigo,

7 Sam Cornish, *Frank Bowling: Sculpture* (London: Ridinghouse, 2022), 113.

8 Kobena Mercer, "Atlantic Errantry," in *Frank Bowling's Americas: New York, 1966–75*, ed. Reto Thüring, Akili Tommasino, and Debra Lennard (Boston: MFA Publications, 2022), 33.

creating something like a figure-ground relationship. Bowling stops short of articulating a human form (the titular Julia) and a voluminous, three-dimensional world she could inhabit. Yet the sense that this work is about paint's representational capacities persists, even in the absence of recognizable iconography.

This series situates Bowling as the preeminent inheritor to formalism, even though its heyday passed some decade and a half prior, and there is little doubt to which category of art these works belong. They are unmistakably paintings, overtly concerned with the mechanisms and materials of their own production, and directed towards the viewer's "eyesight alone."⁹ Aesthetic judgments about the series might debate Bowling's jarring combinations of colors or their serialized format. None, however, can deny these works belong to the tradition of Euro-American avant-garde painting and reside squarely within the medium's parameters. Furthermore, Bowling's deployment of pictorial conventions signals to viewers that these works, despite their opacity, are engaged in processes of representation—that these pours are not merely an invitation to lose oneself in the kaleidoscopic cascades, but that the form color takes and how Bowling structured the picture bears historical meaning which transcends the sublimity of color.

By the early 1980s, Bowling had relocated back to London, where, in another anachronistic swerve, the tradition of landscape painting reinvigorated his stagnating practice. While a new generation of artists in Germany, Italy, and New York resurrected figuration, British artists lagged in adopting Neo-Expressionism and, as Tony Godfrey observed, were also reticent to engage with the rich tradition of the English landscape.¹⁰ Bowling, conversely, cut a discrepant figure. He cited Turner and Constable as his primary inspirations, rather than adopting the frenetic styles and defiant affect of the ascendent younger generation. "It's exciting and challenging to work in London, Turner's town," he wrote in the late 1980s, "and the pressures of the weight of British tradition are exhilarating."¹¹

Yet Bowling's homecoming saw him eschew nearly all recognizable conventions painters typically use to delimit a composition or to imply dimensionality and space, treating the canvas as a site for material buildup rather than pictorial illusion and representation. Paired with a geographic and growing emotional distance from Greenberg,¹² Bowling also shed the doctrine

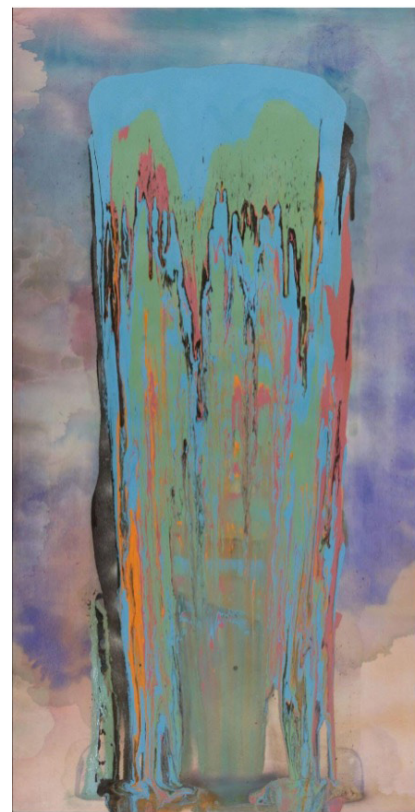


Figure 3. Frank Bowling, *Julia*, 1975, acrylic on canvas, 233.7 x 119.4 cm. Courtesy the artist. Photographed by Damian Griffiths. © Frank Bowling. All rights reserved, DACS 026.

9 Clement Greenberg, "Sculpture in our Time," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 59; Greenberg would espouse the virtues of painting that appealed to eyesight in numerous other instances, but the quotation "eyesight alone"—which has become infamous in part due to Caroline Jones' monograph on the critic with the same title—hails from this 1958 essay on sculpture.

10 Tony Godfrey, *The New Image: Painting in the 1980s* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1986), 89–101.

11 Mel Gooding, *Frank Bowling* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2021), 109–110.

12 Correspondence archived in both the Clement Greenberg papers (Getty Museum) and Frank Bowling Archive reveal that the two fell out of touch for a little over a year in both 1985 and 1988.



Figure 4. Frank Bowling, *Rockface*, 1985, acrylic, acrylic gel, metallic (gold) paint and polyurethane foam on canvas, 178.5 x 358.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Hauser and Wirth. Photographed by Damian Griffiths. © Frank Bowling. All rights reserved, DACS 2026.

that governed his strictly formalist approach and began affixing to his canvases all manner of extraneous materials. Long strips and chunky blocks of foam, like those in *Rockface* (1985, fig. 4) regularly adorn his surfaces, drawing attention to their literal dimensionality and their varying topographic effects. Strips of polyurethane foam and packing peanuts like those

embedded in *Sand Circle* (1983, fig. 5) mimic natural phenomena like silt buildups and seashells. Elsewhere, newspaper clippings, children's toys, and other detritus from the world make their way onto his surfaces and transform not only the look of these works, but their aesthetic impacts.

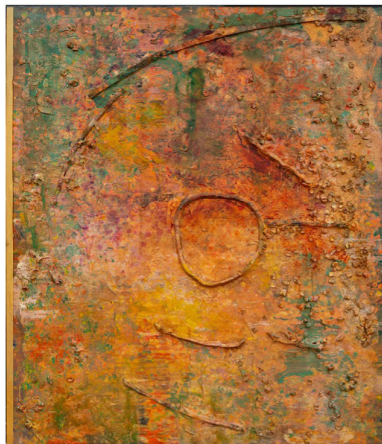


Figure 5. Frank Bowling, *Sand Circle*, 1983, acrylic, acrylic gel and polyurethane foam on canvas, 210 x 180 cm. Courtesy the artist and Hauser and Wirth. Photographed by Damian Griffiths. © Frank Bowling. All rights reserved, DACS 2026.

Whereas the *Poured* paintings evince a Greenbergian-modernist sensibility, one could reasonably view the sculptural paintings of the mid-1980s as a direct repudiation of formalism. Instead, they welcome the postmodern embrace of interdisciplinarity and what Donald Kuspit calls “material togetherness” that “has to do only secondarily with issues of representation and abstraction.” Instead, he posits, such collaged surfaces are “about the establishment of a particular kind of artistic, subjective concreteness” realized by the literal fact of the materials’ physical presence and appearance.¹³

While Kuspit’s invocation of concreteness may have been a nod to the broader history of Concrete Art or *arte povera*, which were being revitalized by the global Neo-Expressionist movement, it is also an apt description of the agglomerated surfaces favored by many artists at this time, Bowling included. Peers like Jules Olitski and Larry Poons, among others in the group Kenworth Moffett eventually dubbed the “New New” painters, inverted paint’s subordination to iconography, insisting it stand as a material fact, valid in its own terms.¹⁴ These “New New” paintings are hard—aesthetically, but also quite literally, caked

13 Donald Kuspit, “Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art,” in *The New Subjectivism: Art in the 1980s* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 507.

14 William Zimmer, “A Dozen ‘New New’ Painters and a Sculptor, Too,” *New York Times*, December 29, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/29/nyregion/a-dozen-new-new-painters-and-a-sculptor-too.html>. Though never formally organized as a movement, Moffett exhibited artists displaying this trend towards heavy paint build-up in a 1992 exhibition called “New New Painting.”

with such thick layers of paint that any pictorial space is smothered by brute materiality, optical abstraction traded in for blunt literality (figs. 6 & 7).



Figure 6. Jules Olitski, *The Beauty of the Queen Sheba*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 142.87 x 142.24 cm. © [1989] Jules Olitski Art Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

does not seem all that interested in the perceptual processes pictorial conventions typically elicit from the embodied beholder. Instead, canvas is a surface upon which one is expected to relish the literality and vibrancy of matter, both natural and artificial, and the processes, both physical and chemical, that matter undergoes in the hands of the artist. As Gooding concludes, paintings like *Wintergreens* are “the result of natural actions, interactions, and physical contrarities . . . allow[ing] no illusion, no pretense: means and effect are one.”¹⁷

Representation’s demoted status might have precedents from earlier in the century (e.g., Cubist collage, Dada, Neo-Dada), but Gooding underplays the seismic shift Bowling’s sculptural paintings signaled, especially for the Royal Academy. Even if the

In his sculptural series, Bowling’s emphasis on paint coincided with other material explorations, blurring the lines between painting and collage, picture and matter. Mel Gooding highlights their “material togetherness,” claiming the sculptural paintings are “an enthralling spectacle of simultaneities,” wherein the “image [is] coterminous with the beautiful singular object that bears it.”¹⁵ Gooding’s conflation of image and object recalls the kind of “object-painting” Christos Joachimides described in a 1981 Royal Academy exhibition as constituent of the “New Spirit of Painting.”¹⁶ In this calculus, canvas is no longer portal nor screen; it is not the site of representations nor the analogies they enable. In fact, the finished work

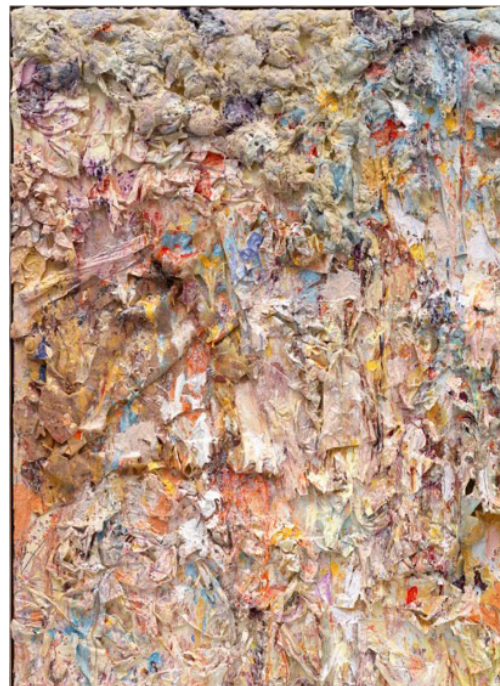


Figure 7. Larry Poons, *Carioca*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 221 x 170.2 cm. © [1986] Larry Poons / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

¹⁵ Gooding, *Frank Bowling*, 106–107.

¹⁶ Christos M. Joachimides, “A New Spirit in Painting,” in *A New Spirit in Painting* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1981), 15.

¹⁷ Gooding, *Frank Bowling*, 106–107.

RA was open-minded enough to host in *A New Spirit in Painting* the rising stars of Neo-Expressionism, the British contingent was largely culled from already established (i.e., institutionally vetted) artists like Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud.¹⁸ The implication, Godfrey suggests, is that the RA, while hip to the trends of the day, was more comfortable playing temporary host to the foreign insurgent youth, while remaining committed to the words of the Academy's first president, Joshua Reynolds, from 1771:

The works, whether of poets, painters, moralists, or historians, which are built upon general nature, live forever; while those which depend for their existence on particular customs and habits, a partial view of nature, or the fluctuation of fashion, can only be coeval with that which first raised them from obscurity. Present time and future may be considered as rivals, and he who solicits the one must expect to be discountenanced by the other.¹⁹

This excerpt brings into high relief the essential scandal of *Wintergreens* with which the Academy may have taken greater issue than its creator's racial identity: the fact that it trades in "general nature" for something less abstract than literal, more particularized than eternal. That is, despite its apparent physical similarities to the earth, *Wintergreens*' view of nature is only "partial" insofar as it, as a painting, fails to register its viewer's perceptual capacities. *Wintergreens* may



Figure 8. Frank Bowling, *Traingone (Mahaicony Abary)*, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 96.5 x 210 cm. Courtesy the artist. Unknown photographer. © Frank Bowling. All rights reserved, DACS 2026.

understand *what* the individual sees in the world ("natural actions, interactions, and physical contrarities") but fails to reflect on *how* the individual perceives that world: a world of forms with varying borders and densities, spaces with determinate limits, and a viewing subject whose eyesight is their first line of defense in trying to make sense of the interplay between the two. Moreover, Bowling's diploma work

traffics in the explicitly verboten: the "fluctuation of fashion," particularly those anti-formalist, postmodern, Neo-Expressionist, and/or proto-New Materialist trends endemic to the penultimate decade of the century.²⁰

It is hard to imagine that the Academy's skepticism towards Bowling's choice was not

18 Godfrey, *The New Image*, 89.

19 Joshua Reynolds, "A Discourse: Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy on the Distribution of the Prizes, December 10, 1771, by the President" in *Seven Discourses on Art*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2176/2176-h/2176-h.htm>.

20 Though I have insufficient space to examine the early tremors of New Materialism, we might consider the shimmering, detritus-filled surfaces of the sculptural paintings commanding, "attention in [their] own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects." Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.



Figure 9. Frank Bowling, *Icarus*, 2005, oil on canvas, 51 x 63.5 cm. Courtesy the artist. Unknown photographer. © Frank Bowling. All rights reserved, DACS 2026.

fueled by patronizing or discriminatory attitudes. Yet, it is perhaps even harder to imagine that the Academy would accept without contestation, from any incoming academician, black or otherwise, a work as subversive or attuned to the “fluctuation of fashion” as *Wintergreens*. Its apparent ambivalence towards viewer perception flies in the face of centuries of Academic convention, and its material experiments, though not uncommon for the time when Bowling painted *Wintergreens*, are steeped in the ephemeral trends of the late 1980s.

To complicate matters further, by the 1990s Bowling resumed an approach which more evenly balanced paint’s material and representational capacities. Consider how a work like *Traingone (Mahaicony Abary)* (1996, fig. 8) sees paint retreat from its forward charge out of the canvas and recede into the picture plane. Or how

Icarus (2005, fig. 9), one of Bowling’s “white paintings” which he produced around the time of his RA election, sees the artist return to more conventional picture-making. A centralized green and yellow composition hovers mid-canvas with a density that contrasts its background, suggesting not only volume, but the existence of a space in which differences in volume between forms and the space they occupy matter.

Wintergreens refuses such functions of painting, charting a different *raison d’être* for the medium that does not neatly comply with the RA’s precedents. Yet, given Bowling’s periodic returns to more pictorial, formalist, or representational modes of painting, it is difficult to argue that its submission to the Academy belies the disillusionment for the medium which many of his peers in the 1980s exhibited. A general skepticism towards notions of originality, along with renewed interest in Freud’s anal drive and the coprophiliac undertones to Neo-Expressionism’s fetishization of materiality,²¹ meant that a growing number of painters in the 1980s approached their craft not like the quixotic heroes of the mid-century, but with a cynical, even degrading, view towards the medium, wherein “painting is seen as golden feces.”²²

Yet, in contrast to the bawdy or infantile gestures of his peers, Bowling was, with *Wintergreens*, not only offering a critical reappraisal of painting. With its submission to the RA, he also spurred the revered institution towards an acknowledgment of their implicit processes and rules; that is, towards a new level of self-awareness—of how they treat academicians of varying backgrounds, how they define their media, what aesthetic commitments their definitions of painting entail—that transcends the jejune gestures of his contemporaries. *Wintergreens* may be a hard painting—aesthetically, materially—but, Bowling indicates with his choice of diploma work, it may be a challenge to which British painting is suited and, perhaps, long overdue.

21 Hal Foster, “Between Modernism and Media,” in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, and Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), 39.

22 Godfrey, *The New Image*, 58.

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