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## Reciprocal Gestures: Mark Godfrey on Melvin Edwards and Frank Bowling in Dallas

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Mark Godfrey, May 2015



**View of “Frank Bowling: Map Paintings,” 2015**, Dallas Museum of Art. From left: *Texas Louise*, 1971; *Marcia H Travels*, 1970.

“**THIS EXHIBITION** is devoted to commitment,” wrote curator Robert Doty in the catalogue for the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 1971 survey “Contemporary Black Artists in America.” He continued, “It is devoted to concepts of self: self-awareness, self-understanding and self-pride—emerging attitudes which, defined by the idea ‘Black is beautiful,’ have profound implications in the struggle for the redress of social grievances.” In fact, the Whitney’s own commitment to presenting the work of African American artists might not have been as readily secured without the prompting of an activist organization, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. The BECC had been founded in 1969 to protest the exclusion of painters and sculptors from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s documentary exhibition “Harlem on My Mind,” and that same year, several of its members had requested a meeting with the Whitney’s top brass, commencing a dialogue that was to go on for months. The back-and-forth was at times frustrating for the BECC’s representatives—artist Cliff Joseph, for example, was to recall that the Whitney leadership resisted the coalition’s request that a black curator organize the group exhibition. But unlike many art institutions at that time, the museum did recognize the strength of work by contemporary African American artists—and did bring that work to the public, not only in Doty’s survey but also, beginning in 1969, in a series of groundbreaking and prescient monographic shows.

In Dallas, two new installations based on these previous shows are now on view only yards from each other. At the Nasher Sculpture Center, in the Melvin Edwards retrospective “Five Decades,” expertly curated by Catherine Craft, a gallery is devoted to a reprise of Edwards’s March 1970 Whitney show. Across the street, at the Dallas Museum of Art, curator Gavin Delahunty has installed five of the six “Map Paintings,” 1967–71, that appeared in Frank Bowling’s Whitney show in November 1971, together with one other work from the series.

The two Dallas exhibitions were not planned to coincide, so this is a remarkable stroke of luck, especially since the sculptor and the painter enjoyed a rich dialogue in the late 1960s and ’70s. They arrived in New York within a year of each other, the Guyanese-born Bowling relocating from London in 1966 and the Houston-born Edwards from Los Angeles in 1967. They must have gotten to know each other fairly quickly, since one of Bowling’s paintings from 1968 is titled *Mel Edwards Decides*. Along with Al Loving, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams, Edwards was one of the young black artists Bowling championed in his critical writings, defending their decisions to resist militant black leaders’ calls to make overtly political images. The serendipitous juxtaposition in Dallas is valuable not only in providing the opportunity for a focused consideration of the exchange between these two artists but also because (thinking back to Doty’s reductive rhetoric) the confluence makes it possible to see that though Edwards and Bowling may have created work from their own particular experiences as subjects, they did not make art that was simply about “concepts of self” or “the idea ‘Black is beautiful.’” In other words, the contrast makes the distinct complexities of each of these practices all the more visible.

Edwards’s Whitney show, which is more or less faithfully re-created in Dallas, was an environment comprising four barbed-wire sculptures. Collectively, these works represented a move away from the heavy welded pieces Edwards had made in LA, such as the large-scale *The Lifted X*, 1965 (which was included in Kellie Jones’s revelatory 2012 exhibition “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980” and has since been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York). Their scale, meanwhile, marked a shift from the focused intensity of the “Lynch Fragments,” 1963–, the small, stark, welded-metal assemblages for which Edwards is perhaps best known. One of the barbed-wire works, the delicate yet imposing *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*, 1969, consists of two pyramidal volumes, one upright, the other inverted, each delineated by strips of wire stretched horizontally across a corner. *Corner for Ana*, 1970, is similar, though here the shape created by the stretched wires is a triangular prism. *Curtain for William and Peter*, 1969, originally exhibited in 1969 in a show curated by Bowling for the Art Gallery at Stony Brook University, is a row of single strands of wire hanging from the ceiling, their bottom ends connected by drooping swags of heavy metal chain. And in the final barbed-wire piece, “*Look through minds mirror distance and measure time*”—Jayne Cortez, 1970, wires are attached to the ceiling at both ends so as to produce a suspended net or hammock.

Edwards’s environment is a somewhat ethereal affair, with its thin, glinting metallic strands crisscrossing the viewer’s eyeline, but the material is all the more menacing for its apparent lightness. Originally from Texas, the artist was familiar with barbed wire’s everyday use by ranchers and farmers, but there are of course far more loaded connotations: prison camps, police barriers, state power. Barnett Newman had activated all of these associations in his *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley*, 1968, a forbidding barbed-wire grid made in response to the riots during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In Edwards’s work, the material, especially when combined with chains, has even more potent resonances. His reference in the 1970 exhibition pamphlet to barbed wire’s “brutalist connotations” obliquely conjures not just state responses to the civil unrest of the ’60s but also a deeper history of the oppression of

black Americans. His intent, it seems, was to put all the cultural meanings of the material into play in sculptural arrangements that evoked confinement or violence but that, curiously, also conveyed a sense of protection or repose (a curtain, a hammock). In the case of *Pyramid*, another contradiction lies in the association of the titular form of monumental architecture with slave labor *and* the most majestic spectacles of African kingship. It is interesting that the three other sculptures have personal dedications: Ana is Edwards's daughter; William and Peter are his painter friends William T. Williams and Peter Bradley; and the poet Jayne Cortez became his wife in 1975. It is as if Edwards wanted to acknowledge injustices and atrocities past and present but also to suggest that in spite of these conditions, friendship, community, and love could still create havens.

Edwards's Whitney show was hardly noticed at the time, and it was criticized in this magazine by Robert Pincus-Witten for being an unoriginal fusion of "geometrical minimalism and anti-form"; Pincus-Witten took the Whitney to task for "so obviously sponsoring the career of a young artist over those of the many artists who are responsible for having brought that style into being: Hesse, Andre, Flavin, Rosenquist . . ." It is true that Edwards's work shared a formal language with pieces like Hesse's 1969 *Right After* (which was actually first presented in November of that year at New York's Jewish Museum, some months after Edwards's first barbed-wire sculpture had been seen at the Studio Museum in Harlem). But just as clearly, the artist deliberately deployed Minimalist and post-Minimalist language to his own ends, not only activating barbed wire's richness as a signifier but also making tactical use of its inherent physical properties, which departed from and even resisted the conventions of the movements cited by Pincus-Witten. A double-stranded, twisting, linear material with intermittent sharp protrusions, barbed wire could never be stretched into a perfectly straight Minimalist line. Nor could it fall freely under its own weight, as could Robert Morris's felts or Richard Serra's rubber *Belts*. Any barbed-wire line would always have an irregularity—and this was a material kind of refusal of art's dominant language.

It was only with Bowling's essay "It's Not Enough to Say 'Black Is Beautiful,'" published a year after Edwards's Whitney show closed, that a serious response to these sculptures emerged. Bowling attended not to the resemblances between Edwards's work and Minimalism or post-Minimalism, but rather to the art's short-circuiting of the putative transparency of both of those styles and, crucially, to its fragmentation and differentiation of the homogeneous, generic (i.e., white male) audience implicitly posited by most of the advanced art of the time. Claiming that "the traditional esthetic of black art, often considered pragmatic, uncluttered and direct, really hinges on secrecy and disguise," Bowling argued that Edwards was continuing a tendency in black art to "turn . . . such things as language inside out." With "controlled criticisms gone beyond anything Minimal or anti-form art had achieved," Bowling contended, Edwards was signifying different ideas to different audiences: "He reroutes fashion and current art convention to 'signify' something different to someone who grew up in Watts rather than to 'signify' only in the meaning of Jack Burnham and his colleagues."

But Bowling did not rate Edwards's show a success only because of what Edwards did with Minimalist or post-Minimalist idioms; he also saw in the artist's practice a route that departed from the activist realisms then called for by such African American leaders as Emory Douglas, the culture minister of the Black Panthers, who exhorted "all progressive artists" to depict "fascist lawyers, judges, generals . . . being punished for their criminal acts." Edwards's "unforced delivery is the opposite of political-realist art," Bowling wrote. "This work was like taking the Classical tradition and Humanism by the ear and making them face reality from the inside. The trouble is if your gaze is elsewhere, only an act of violence

will redirect you, and, as I've pointed out elsewhere, *don't burn the museum down*; this will only bar you from the art experience. Watching the museum burn is *a spectator sport*. Tangling with barbed wire hurts."



**Frank Bowling, *Africa to Australia*, 1971**, acrylic on canvas, 9' 2 5/8" × 21' 10 1/4". From the series "Map Paintings," 1967–71.

**AS HE WAS WORKING** on this article, Bowling was preparing his own Whitney show, which opened in November 1971. It was the first major gathering of his works since his arrival in New York in 1966, and it is interesting to consider how the strategies he assigned to Edwards were at work in his own paintings. Just as Edwards torqued Minimalism and post-Minimalism, so Bowling rerouted the material and chromatic language of Color Field painting and the appropriations of Pop, perhaps particularly the cartographic imagery of Jasper Johns, who at the time was working on his *Map (Based on Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Air Ocean World)*, 1967–71, which Bowling might well have seen while visiting the artist.

What is certain, in any case, is that Bowling, having learned from Larry Rivers how to use an epidiascope, projected images of continents onto paper and made stencils from them. In his Broadway studio, he laid out huge canvases on the floor and then poured and spread waves of thinned acrylic paint on them. He then elevated the canvases to the vertical and affixed the stencils, spraying paint around them in a new color, before taking the stencils off and adding fresh applications of paint. In the finished works, all that remain are faint outlines of the continents, recalling the edges of objects or bodies in solarized photographic prints. Sometimes Bowling only used stencils of Africa, the Americas, and Australia, but in looking at the works, it is impossible to tell whether, say, Europe and Asia have disappeared under washes of color or whether they were never there in the first place. Unlike maps created by European cartographers, these paintings emphasize a geography of the South and, consequently, they suggest a critique of Eurocentrism and colonialism. Bowling's maps could also be read in the context of debates ongoing in the black community in the '60s and '70s. While many of the artists, musicians, and writers he had been meeting in New York were beginning to call themselves African Americans and were developing a sometimes romanticized Afrocentrism, Bowling presented a more expansive, mutable, and ambiguous geography, one without centers or points of origin or destination.

Some critics have argued that Bowling's approach to source imagery was related to the way Johns used maps and that for Bowling, the map was primarily a functional and familiar ready-made figure, valuable

only insofar as it provided structure for his color pours. But this implies an arbitrariness belied by the work. It seems to me that Bowling put color and the liquidity of paint to work *against* the fixed authority of cartography. In *Marcia H Travels*, 1970 (dedicated to artist Marcia Hafif), rich arrays of plums and purples overwhelm the map imagery, and the continents appear like tiny masses adrift in wine-dark hues; in *Texas Louise*, 1971, an area of fuchsia abuts another of deep maroon, creating a divide that has nothing to do with a line like the equator. Islands and archipelagoes of color with no relationship to real landmasses appear in *Polish Rebecca*, 1971, while another passage in the same painting resembles an aerial view of a mountain range, presumably because the canvas was crinkled or rippling as acrylic paint washed over its surface. Here and there on all the canvases paint creates a terrain of rivers and tributaries. Scanning these imaginary landscapes, one feels the hold of preconceived notions about the world and the systems that organize it loosening.

Earlier in the year of his Whitney outing, Bowling had worked with Rivers on “Some American History,” an exhibition sponsored by the Menil Foundation and mounted at Rice University in Houston. Bowling had introduced Rivers to younger black artists (Williams and Joe Overstreet among them) who were invited to contribute to the show, and had sent his own *Middle Passage*, 1970, a painting populated with continental shapes and silk screens of faces and places, to be displayed alongside Rivers’s large construction *A Slave Ship and Slaves*, 1970. Bowling’s title of course evokes the millions of deaths that took place as enslaved people were transported across the Atlantic, but the “Map Paintings,” with their liquid geographies of luscious color that overwhelm and melt the continents, to me suggest possibility rather than loss. These canvases intimate what it might mean to be truly cosmopolitan. Having moved from Guyana to London to New York, Bowling lived this cosmopolitanism, though this is not to say that the paintings are autobiographical. Rather, they offer an idea of existing beyond borders, one that ran counter to the demands of some African American activist groups that were fighting for principles of nationalism.

The prescience of this vision is obvious—and, in fact, one of the striking commonalities between Edwards and Bowling is the way in which both anticipate future theories and practices. Bowling’s works have already been related (notably, by Kobena Mercer and Tanya Barson) to Paul Gilroy’s seminal account of the black Atlantic. In his 1993 book of that title, Gilroy wrote that “the history of the black Atlantic . . . , continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory.” This is precisely the cosmopolitan complexity that is articulated in Bowling’s painterly gestures and in the dynamic, changeable geography they produce: To look at his maps is to be reminded of many transatlantic passages, and not just those ending in the US. Bowling’s argument about signifying, and his claims that black artists redirected established meanings, predates some of the arguments in Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s influential 1988 study *The Signifying Monkey*. Meanwhile, Edwards’s barbed-wire works anticipated the current practices of many artists, from those who have used similar materials in formally similar ways (Mona Hatoum, Adel Abdessemed) to Theaster Gates, who has created abstract paintings from fire hoses, the weapons used against children marching in civil rights protests. Forty-five years ago, difference—as a condition of meaning, as the manifold to which signifying addresses itself, and as an antidote to essentialism—was routinely elided in art’s reception, such that a Whitney curator and a minister of the Black Panthers could find common ground in flattening distinctions among practices that, while perhaps engaged in a complex interrelationship, are not at all the same. Thanks in part to precisely

the kind of expansive and “unforced” criticality advanced by Edwards and Bowling, art’s multiple audiences are now better equipped to apprehend the work of these two artists and those who followed them.

*“Melvin Edwards: Five Decades” is on view at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, through May 10.*

*“Frank Bowling: Map Paintings” is on view at the Dallas Museum of Art through Aug. 2.*

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