

As Castlefield Gallery celebrates its 40 year anniversary this exhibition continues four decades of the gallery working with artists to ask what it is to make and experience the art of our time.

40 Years of the Future: Jo McGonigal x Frank Bowling brings together two artists who are committed to exploring what painting is and what it can do. They have pushed the boundaries and our understanding of formalist and abstract painting by taking inspiration, tactics, and properties from other disciplines, particularly sculpture and architecture.

Jo McGonigal believes that paintings should activate the body as much as the eye. Her works often leave the constraints of the canvas behind, to interact directly with their environment. For *Old Earth* (2024) and *As Far as the Eye Can See* (2024) McGonigal has applied layers of gesso onto the gallery walls. Traditionally gesso which is made from animal glue and marble dust would be used to form a base or primer to be painted on. For McGonigal the idea of gesso as the subterranean layer of painting further links its materiality to the natural world and its landscapes made from layers of sediment and material deposits. McGonigal has introduced horizon lines of coloured chalk to these smooth bone coloured surfaces along with other elements such as brass, piles of ground pigment and ceramics. The resulting works both expose and revel in the physicality of painting and its use of materials produced over long periods of geological time.

In the lower gallery a series of framed works on paper by McGonigal combine quick freehand gestures with more controlled decision making. The 30 cm squares capture a few seconds of brush marks which are then overlaid with grids, dots or lines. These layers

Handout

40 Years of the Future: Jo McGonigal x Frank Bowling
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create a sense of depth but perhaps also a sense of movement, an optical tension that energises the surface. These studies have been developed to inform the larger spatial paintings in which McGonigal arranges multiple components, including a section cut into the gallery wall, into 3D compositions, singular works framed by the gallery's architecture. All these works invite visual but also other kinds of sensory engagement with the tactile, spatial, durational and imaginative capacities of painting.

Sir Frank Bowling OBE RA has been exploring the possibilities of paint for over six decades. Renowned for his engagement with formalist and abstract painting, his technically pioneering works mix many materials and methods. In the late 1980's Castlefield Gallery invited Bowling to exhibit his work alongside a contemporary sculptor. A straightforward proposition for one artist to make work for the walls and the other to use the floor space. However, around this time Bowling had produced a series of welded steel sculptures largely put together from the by-products of an engineering firm next to his studio. He responded to the gallery's invitation by saying that he could also provide the sculptures for the exhibition himself, which led to a solo exhibition in 1988. Like his paintings these sculptures have multiple influences, playfully mixing references from high modernism, classical African sculpture, cubism and Russian constructivism. In his book *Frank Bowling: Sculpture* (2022), writer and curator Sam Cornish explores the importance of these works which were made at a pivotal time when Bowling was reconsidering how he was communicating imagery, content and materiality in his painting. This exhibition and Cornish's book argue that these sculptures (which have rarely been seen in public since 1988) offer unique insights into Bowling's

paintings. Bringing *Bulbul* (1988) and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1988) back to the gallery alongside a more recent sculpture *What else can you put in a Judd box* (2022) and a number of Bowling's paintings allows us an opportunity to consider the sculptural elements in Bowling's painting. This might include: the rich and expansive grided surface of *Sasha's Green Bag* (1988); the density of acrylic gel built up in the surface of (1993/2004); the monolithic poured painting *Sentinel* (1976) that suggests a complex interiority within its wildly coloured surface and in Bowling's particular use of marouflage (a technique for attaching layers of canvas onto a surface) in *Nessie* (2002) and also with the objects collaged into *Mummybelli* (2019).

Speaking about the upcoming exhibition Bowling has said: 'Returning to Castlefield Gallery after all these years feels like revisiting an old conversation with new words. My sculptures and paintings are both a reflection and continuation of the ideas I've explored for decades around geometry and form. Having first exhibited here in 1988, it's invigorating to now present my work alongside Jo's spatial paintings, which will offer a fresh perspective to both our practices.' McGonigal like Bowling is fascinated by how it feels to be in front of or with a painting, speaking about this exhibition she has said: 'I am interested to see how the dense physicality of Frank's paintings, how they are built, his attention to edges and boundaries through techniques such as marouflage, will interplay with my own concerns of deep materialities, figure-ground relationships and painting's spatiality.'

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