

Sonia Boyce Reader

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Sonia Boyce MBE is a British Afro-Caribbean artist and educator who lives and works in London. She went to art school aged 15, making large pastel drawings and photographic collages, exploring issues of race and gender in the media and everyday life. Since then, her practice has expanded to incorporate a wider variety of media, including performance, film, installation and sound - but her true medium is people. In 2007 Boyce was awarded an MBE for services to the arts, and in 2016 was elected a Royal Academician. Boyce is Professor of Black Art and Design at the University of the Arts London.

“In the broadest sense, my research interests lie in art as a social practice and the critical and contextual debates that arise from this burgeoning field.

Since the 1990s my own art practice has relied on working with other people in collaborative and participatory situations, often demanding of those collaborators spontaneity and unrehearsed performative actions. Working across media, mainly drawing, print, photography, video and sound, I recoup the remains of these performative gestures – the leftovers, the documentation – to make the art works, which are often concerned with the relationship between sound and memory, the dynamics of space, and incorporating the spectator.” - *Sonia Boyce, University of the Arts London*

At age 23, her 1985 painting *Missionary Position II* was the first artwork by a black artist



acquired by the Tate collection – and only the 5th work by a female artist in the collection.

Sonia Boyce: 'Gathering a history of black women' - Tate, 27/07/18
(<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/sonia-boyce-obe-794/sonia-boyce-gathering-history-black-women>)

Transcript (abridged)

SB: I started to be very much part of what became known as the 'Black Arts Movement' in the 1980s, trying to highlight questions around race and cultural difference; that became another tense area but it's been the terrain in which I've worked from a very early age.

SB: I started making works with hair that I bought from ... Afro-Caribbean hair shops, and I started making these very strange objects.... This particular exhibition that I've made was called 'Do You Want to Touch?'...Usually it can be a stranger coming up to someone wanting to touch their hair. It harks back to a very long memory of the African body being public property.

SB: (on 'The Devotional Project') This project has been going on since about 1999, where I've been gathering a history of black women that might be across a range of ethnic groups who've worked in the music industry, and it consists at the moment of a wallpaper, where there are 200 names.

SB: I wanted us just to name some Black British female singers that people knew, and it took about 10 minutes before anyone could think of anybody, and actually the very first person that was remembered was Shirley Bassey.

SB: This project has not only been about naming these performers, but also kind of remembering their music, and collecting their music.

SB: People do often want to kind of mothball me in that 1980s moment, but I of course have continued to make work, and other questions have emerged... I'm trying desperately not to tell people what to think, versus what I think the early works were because that was all of these things that I had to say.

The British Black Arts Movement

Tate: The British black arts movement was a radical political art movement founded in 1982 inspired by anti-racist discourse and feminist critique, which sought to highlight issues of race and gender and the politics of representation.

The movement has its origins in the West-Midlands-based BLK Art Group; the name under which a group of four influential artists chose to exhibit their collective work under. These were Keith Piper, Marlene Smith, Eddie Chambers and Donald Rodney, who belonged to the British African-Caribbean community and offered dynamic conceptual art that tackled bold political themes, namely inter-communal, class and gender relations in the UK. The movement quickly became an important part of the Black Cultural Renaissance; it articulated notions of black beauty, pride and citizenship in the face a hostile political climate (think Enoch Powell).

Boyce became a closely associated artists to the movement owing to the similarity in themes and issues discussed in her works. Group works such as *Black Woman Time Now*, Battersea Arts Centre, London (1983) were central to pursuing the aims of the movement. Although Boyce's work has certainly evolved, both in terms of style and medium, race as subject matter is still central to her artistic expression.

In a 2017 episode of the BBC Radio 3 series 'Free Thinking', Boyce discusses the influence of the Black Arts Movement alongside Isaac Julien (installation artist and filmmaker), Harold Offeh (artists, curator and Fine Art Lecturer) and Eddie Chambers (founding member of the BLK Art Movement, art historian, curator and educator).

Free Thinking, The Influence of The Black Arts Movement, Radio 3, Wed 18 Jan 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b088jl62>:

Transcript (abridged)

Anne McElvoy: What is relevant to what's going on around us in the Artworld today?

EC: I think the work of the black artists in the 1980s by and large had this very important strand of identity. Now when I went to art school, the dominant view of the art school tutors was that work should be about colour, it should be about form, it should be about perspective, about still life drawing and so on and so forth. This idea that you could make work about your own place in the scheme of things or your own interests; this was something that the art school was not in favour of. Now, 30 or 40 years later, we see the extent to which the script has been well and truly flipped, and artists are making work about their own identities, their own lives. This is very much a foundational aspect of art at the present time, and has been for a number of years now.

AM: Sonia, as Eddie says there, it is quite complex - the whole argument about how separate you want to be, and having a strong identity as black artists, and also wanting to be taken seriously in the mainstream. You've exhibited, for instance, in a huge range of places: the Africa Centre in London, Oxford University, the Venice Biennale. How much have you thought about the separate spaces question that Eddie raised?

SB: I think it's very difficult, the ways in which artists get framed. The idea that an artist is in one space, and not in another. I agree with him, actually, that artists don't want to be separated off; at the same time, artists might choose to self-identify with some kinds of ways of thinking and ways of making. Where I would differ from Eddie, and it's become a bit of trope - the way in which the socio-political is seen as *versus* aesthetics - I don't think that's true. Actually, what's happened in the past 30 years, out of work that is not only Black art, is that somehow the work gets eclipsed by a discussion; whether it's a question of identity, whether it's a question of socio-political context, that actually what we need to look at is the means by which the work produces meaning. My experience of the work of that period of the '80s, and since, is that it's highly aesthetic, it just chooses a particular kind of aesthetics.

AM: And that throws up the question of the term 'Black Art'. Is it a term, Harold, that you feel that you can identify with, or that you have some quibbles about?

HO: Growing up in the '80s, for me it was quite important to try and map out practices by black artists, you know, that search for visibility. At the time, I really identified with it, as a frame for looking at a whole group of artists who were engaging, and producing work.

AM: A useful frame? Or something that just struck you, that that's a grouping.

HO: It is useful, because I think it highlights structural inequalities, but I also agree with what Sonia was saying about that idea of allowing people not necessarily to talk about the work. Immediately I think people talk about issue of representation, rather than looking at what is going on within the work and how the work is communicating. I think that's where it becomes problematic, but I wouldn't just dismiss it out of hand; I think what's going on at the moment, what's happening with these two exhibitions going on in Nottingham at the moment, is a good opportunity to look at that again.



Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great, 1986 by Sonia Boyce. Photograph: © Sonia Boyce.

AM: And Sonia, were there many platforms available to you as a young, black, female artist at the time in the 1980s?

SB: I was part of that '80s moment, where everything was very much D.I.Y: do it yourself, come together, and don't wait for things to happen. Get up and do something, and do something with others. Actually it's become a format that particularly during the '90s, became the way in which a lot of the young and emerging artists found a platform. So I was very much a part of that cultural activism, you could say. Whether that was working with other women, or working with other black artists - but I'm going to slightly differentiate between the question of Black art and the question of Black artists. But also the term 'Black' itself, that we have to also recognise the way in which the term 'Black' itself was being brought together by the end of the '70s; it was about African and Asian artists coming together; a kind of unity and understanding of a very similar kind of position. Being a 'Black artist' was the way in which people got framed, whether their work was trying to deal with the social, political or not.

Sonia Boyce: "If we can go to Mars, we can send more kids to art school," Anna Coatman, RA, 28-7-17, (<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/as-i-see-it-sonia-boyce>)

I started going to art school when I was 15. I always used to draw in the margins of books, on any surface I could find, on tables, walls, on everything. My art teacher, Mrs Franklin, picked up on it and said: "You have to go to art school." Art was a door that hadn't been opened to me before.

I don't make drawings anymore. People are often melancholic about that, but I was only making them for about three years during the 1980s. I remember distinctly that while I was making the pastel drawing, *She ain't holding them up, she's holding on (Some English Rose)* in 1986, I just knew it was the last of these kinds of works I was going to make. In those early works I was always the central figure and I was addressing the audience, so the performative element has always been there in my work.

You could say I'm an artist with a suitcase. There is this 19th-century idea of an artist in their studio that we're unable to let go of. It's true that for most artists I know, the studio is a space of production, but because I work with people I usually go to where those people are. I'm on the road all the time.

There is an untapped story about diversity in the UK which has been happening very quietly, but which has not yet been publicly acknowledged. There are a great deal of works by African and Asian artists in public collections – even though they may only constitute a tiny, tiny percentage of the work collected overall.

I'm leading on 'Black Artists and Modernism', a three-year research project which has been funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. We're trying to create a trail for future researchers who are interested in African and Asian artists and the contributions they have made not only to British art but also to the story of 20th-century art in general.

Sonia Boyce: 30 Years Art and Activism. Interview with Jennifer Higbie - Frieze, 29/05/18 (abridged) - (<https://frieze.com/article/sonia-boyce-30-years-art-and-activism>)



Jennifer Higbie: *What was the rationale behind your week-long removal of John Waterhouse's painting *Hylas and the nymphs* [1896] from the Manchester Art Gallery at the end of January?*

Sonia Boyce: Many of the people who work at the gallery had never had a conversation about the collection, discussed the rationale behind what was chosen to be on show or been asked what they thought of the paintings. The group grew to about 30 members of staff and many of them mentioned how the representation of women in the galleries, in particular *Hylas and the Nymphs*, made them feel uncomfortable.

SB: Apparently, Waterhouse's painting – which depicts Hylas, a character from Greek mythology and the lover of Heracles, who was lured to his death by a group of seven nymphs – seems to attract two groups in particular: middle-aged men and teenage girls, who like to take selfies in front of the painting.

SB: In the final discussion session, the consensus was to temporarily take down *Hylas and the Nymphs* at the end of a public event. It was replaced with a text that asked members of the

public to write their thoughts about the painting and the representation of the female form on Post-it notes, which were stuck to the wall where the painting had been hung. The gallery's aim was to encourage public debate about the gesture.

JH: *The removal and subsequent re-instatement of Hylas and the Nymphs raises questions about the symbolic power of what is hung – or not – in a gallery. What was the response to the removal of the painting?*

SB: One of the audience members was an artist who was concerned about why the painting had been temporarily removed; we had a long conversation about it. He went to the press and it blew up into accusations of censorship and political correctness.

SB: Very few media outlets actually discussed the context of the painting's removal and what had replaced it. No one mentioned it was an action that had developed from months of discussions with the gallery's staff... The main question for me was: who has the right to an opinion about art and its display?

JH: *How important is the site in which your work is made and then shown?*

SB: The space the work is shown in can inform a reading of it... I often go to a place not knowing its history and making art is a way of unearthing that. My mother is from Barbados and, when I started to visit there in my late 20s, I'd see folk characters turn up at events. It seemed surreal to me: no one else was disturbed but I was like: 'What is going on?' This led me to make *Crop Over* [2007], a film exploring the annual festival that celebrates the sugar cane crop being brought in.

SB: I wanted to film it in the plantation properties in Barbados, which are called Great Houses, but I didn't know that the folk characters, who are working-class archetypes, were traditionally banned from entering these spaces because of the conventions and codes of the plantocracy. When we started filming inside one of these homes, the Barbadian woman who looked after the house was really angry with me. She kept mumbling: 'This is wrong. They're not meant to be here; they should be in the yard, not inside the house.'

JH: *How has your work evolved over the past 30 years or so?*

SB: It has become progressively less didactic. I'm preoccupied with investigating how the artwork can have a life of its own that transcends the need to tell people what to think. This is my challenge. How to move the work beyond tight readings and how to embrace the seepages

that occur. I've been trying to be more playful and elastic with my material, so that the work can find its own rhythm and life.

NB: [Gallery denies censorship after removing Victorian nymphs painting](#) (BBC, 1-2-18)

Manchester Art Gallery has taken down Hylas and the Nymphs by JW Waterhouse.

Curator Clare Gannaway said there were "tricky issues about gender, race and representation" in the gallery. "But we want to talk about that with people."

She denied accusations that the gallery was censoring the 1896 picture.

The decision has already sparked a heated reaction, however, with many on social media accusing the gallery of being puritanical and too politically correct.

The painting was one of a number of similar pictures in a gallery area titled In Pursuit of Beauty, which Gannaway described as "very old-fashioned" because it depicts women as "either as passive beautiful objects or femmes fatales".

Migrations: Journeys into British Art. Interview with Sonia Boyce. Angela Hodgson-Teall - Studio International, 16/05/2012 (abridged)

(<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/migrations-journeys-into-british-art-interview-with-sonia-boyce>)



AHT: *Your image 'From Tarzan to Rambo' uses many processes including drawing, multiple self-portraits, wallpaper patterns, collage and grids to tell a story of someone divided between a jungle of experiences, part of Britain and yet with roots elsewhere. The image is working on several levels.*

SB: On approaching this artwork again, two very distinct thoughts come to mind: that the work derives from a series of quotations; and, with hindsight, it's possible to see the trajectory that my work has since taken...

SB: The format of *From Tarzan to Rambo* draws directly from photomontage and the modernist trope of the grid often used by surrealists. René Magritte's *I do not see the ... hidden in the forest* (1929) is a good example. If André Breton's framing of surrealism was meant as a dialogue with the 'other', then I thought that I was a representative figure - already cast as that 'other'.

SB: Inspired by Susan Hiller I also used the photo-booth to create a series of self-portraits. I wanted to explore, to exorcise, to create strategies of resistance to the mainstay of racist and sexist imagery I'd grown up with of jungle savages, mammies, servants, golliwogs, native Indians, all agog, rendered unable to articulate themselves in the face of whiteness and modernity; and of whiteness as heroic and all-mastering of the untamed, hinting at the racism underneath Romanticism's project.

AHT: *There are undertones of violence in your work, whether direct or indirect: can you talk about*

how and why you go about creating this effect.

SB: The violence that you speak of, for me, points to the violence that those prior images exerted and continue to exert. The golliwog occupies a very pervasive place within Western Culture. On the one hand, it represents a cosy familial sign of childhood stories - as a rag doll it was often used as a comforter. On the flip side it is a gross and scary caricature of Africans. Its iconography comes out of slavery (the mammy doll) and minstrelsy (the dolls are often dressed in the armory of travelling minstrels). This is where humor and violence mingle. I am always drawn to this bitter-sweet, and paradoxical coupling.

AHT: *How does the image refer to other works in the exhibition? Can you talk about any of the works that have a dialogue or relationship with the 'From Tarzan to Rambo piece'?*

SB: I am really happy with my work being contextualised as part of a continuum of British art practice that announces a new set of paradigms. It's great to see Donald Rodney's painting *How the West was Won* (1982) and the recent acquisition by the Tate of Keith Piper's *Go West Young Man* (1987). It was also really interesting for me to get a sense of the debates that Jewish artists were having about modernism in the early part of the 20th century.

AHT: *Can you say more about the debates between Jewish artists and modernism and how some of those works may have affected you?*

SB: I am particularly interested in the division amongst those artists between "naturalistic" paintings of everyday life versus embracing the non-representational modes of modernism. In some ways I am reminded of some of the debates that raged in the 1980s within feminist art practice (painting versus non-traditional forms of art making) as well as amongst black artists (positive/negative imagery versus deconstructing representations). Quite oppositional stances really.

AHT: *What were the important steps in the practice of inviting others to be involved in your later work and how has that helped you achieve what you want?*

SB: My interest in the performative has broadened out beyond imaging myself to a more socially-engaged dialogue with other people, which always brings much more to the work that I can plan for or imagine. The beauty and problem with working with others is that one cannot predict the outcome.



Sonia Boyce, *We Move in Her Way*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2017



Sonia Boyce, *Wallpaper / Performance*, Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 2017