

The Work of

Sonia Boyce

Surya Cannon, Willa Gilbert-Goldstein, Abby Johnson, Bailes
New, Nick Richard-Craven, and Grace Williams

Biographical Information and Career Overview

- ❑ British Afro-Caribbean artist born in Islington, London in 1962
- ❑ Research explores art that engages social discourse and sparks critical debate
- ❑ Main Theme: Experiences of black women living in a white society – how religion, politics, and sexuality compose that experience
- ❑ Reclaiming caricature
- ❑ Cites Frida Kahlo as one of her early influences
- ❑ Her art explores “the relationship between sound and memory, the dynamics of space, and incorporating the spectator.”
- ❑ Has taught Fine Art studio practice for more than 30 years at several arts colleges across the United Kingdom
- ❑ Chair of Black Art and Design at University of the Arts London
- ❑ Works are displayed at The Tate Modern, The Victoria and Albert Museum, The Government Art Collection, The Arts Council Collection Southbank Centre among others

Biographical Information and Career Overview Cont.

- ❑ Attended Eastlea Comprehensive School in Canning Town, East London
- ❑ Earliest works were chalk and pastel drawings depicting her friends, family, and childhood experiences
- ❑ **1979-1980:** Completed Foundation Course in Art and Design at East Ham College of Art and Technology
- ❑ **1980:** Received a BA in Fine Art at Stourbridge College in England
- ❑ Gained prominence as part of Black British cultural renaissance of the 1980s – rose out of opposition to Margaret Thatcher's brand of conservatism and her cabinet's policies
- ❑ At 21 in **1983:** Exhibition entitled *Five Black Women* at the Africa Centre in London along with Lybaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Houria Niati, and Veronica Ryan
- ❑ **1983:** *Black Women Time Now* exhibition at the Battersea Arts Centre in London
- ❑ Work involves a variety of media: drawing, print, photography, video, audio, text, mixed media, installation. Etc.
- ❑ *Big Women's Talk* 1984, *Auntie Enid – The Prose* 1985 and *Missionary Position II* 1985 address issues of race and gender in quotidian life
- ❑ **1985:** at 25 Tate Modern bought her drawing *Missionary Position II* making her the first British Black female artist to enter the collection

Biographical Information and Career Overview Cont.

- ❑ **1989:** *The Other Story* exhibition – first retrospective exhibition of British African, Caribbean, and Asian Modernism
- ❑ Emphasis on collaboration since **1990**, involving spontaneous performative actions
- ❑ **2007:** Awarded an MBE (Most Excellent Order of the British Empire)
- ❑ **2016:** inducted into the Royal Academy, preeminent institution in Piccadilly, London dedicated to the betterment of the arts in society
- ❑ **2015:** Included in Okwui Enwezor's "All the World's Features" exhibition
- ❑ **2018:** Her first retrospective exhibition took place at the Manchester Art Gallery – created new work in dialogue with the collection's 18 and 19th century galleries including a performance piece in which participants took down J.W. Waterhouse's celebrated naked nymphs painting – a statement on giving people a say in curatorial choices
- ❑ **2018:** Subject of BBC 4-Part documentary film: *Whoever Heard of a Black Artist? Britain's Hidden Art History*
- ❑ **2019:** Appointed ORE – officer of the Order of the British Empire
- ❑ In February **2020** she was selected by the British Council as the first black woman to represent Britain in the **2022** Venice Biennale

Notable Works

- Multidisciplinary – photography, video, installation, performance, printmaking, sound, drawing
- “The way I work is quite organic and meandering and playful, I hope—not just with materials and ideas, but through collaborating with people.” – Art Newspaper in reference to *In the Castle Of My Skin* at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 2020
- Work seeks to upend dominant racial narratives and center the “black body” as core subject

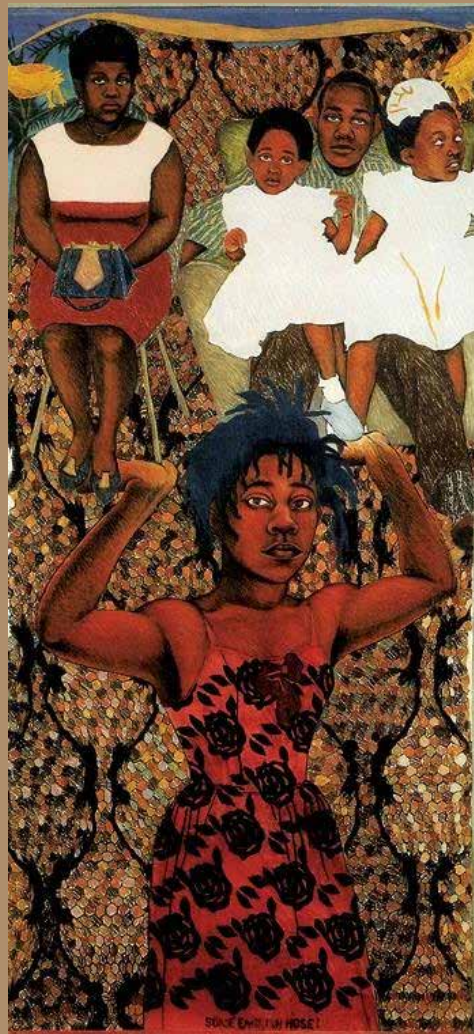
Early Works; Pastel, Paint, Drawing



Sonia Boyce, Missionary
Position I – Lay Back,
1985, pastels on paper.



Missionary Position II –
Position Changing, 1985,
pastels on paper



Sonia Boyce, *She Aint
Holding Them Up, She's
Holding On (Some
English Rose)*, 1986,
Pastels on Paper.

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. There was no rhyme or reason why I felt like this, but I just knew. 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. (2017)

I was the performer in those works and there was a clear, direct, engagement with the audience. It was quite frontal: 'I am speaking to you.'

But because they were drawn from my own subjective position, some people saw them as some form of authentic diary or autobiography. I realised that people were happy for me to talk about myself – supposedly myself – but couldn't imagine that I might talk about anything else. Somehow, the question of being black and female, particularly coming out of the context of feminist art practice as well as what became an emergent black art practice, is that you talk about yourself, and you tell your story, and that is the only story you can tell. So, that was one of the reasons why I started to look at the ways in which I could include other people performing identities and masquerades. (2018)

A Shift to the Collaborative

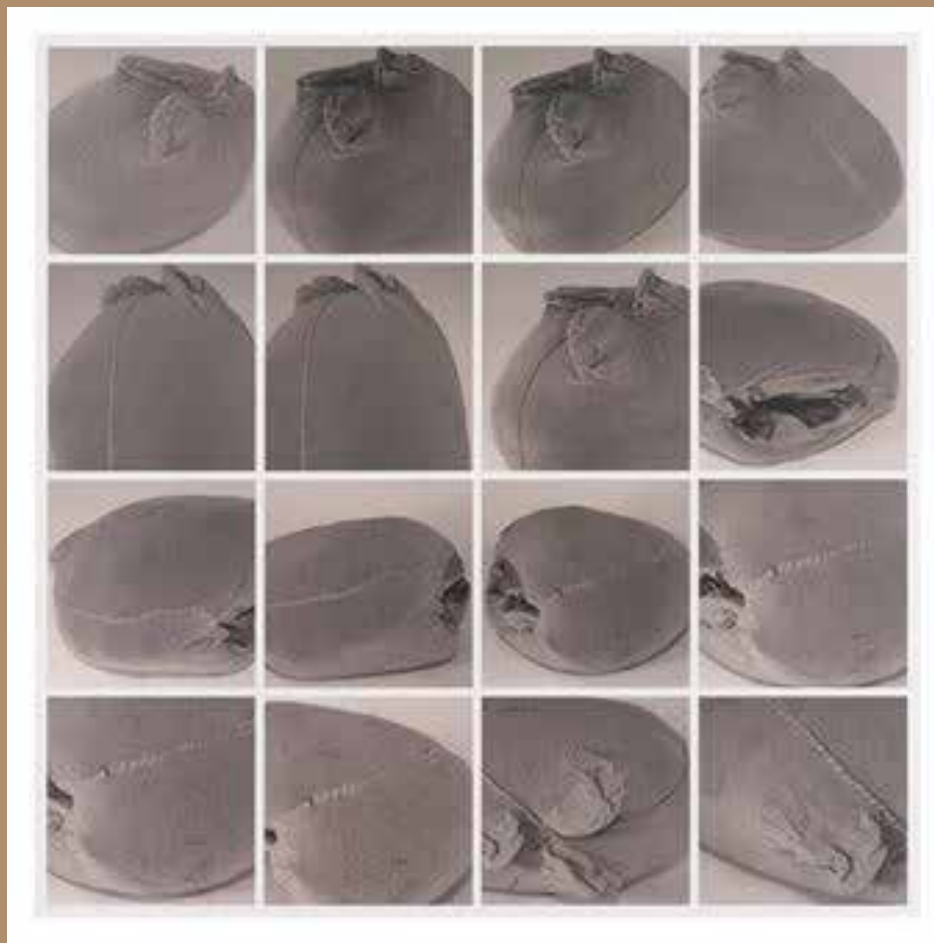




Sonia Boyce, *The Comforter*, 1993, hair, beads and velvet



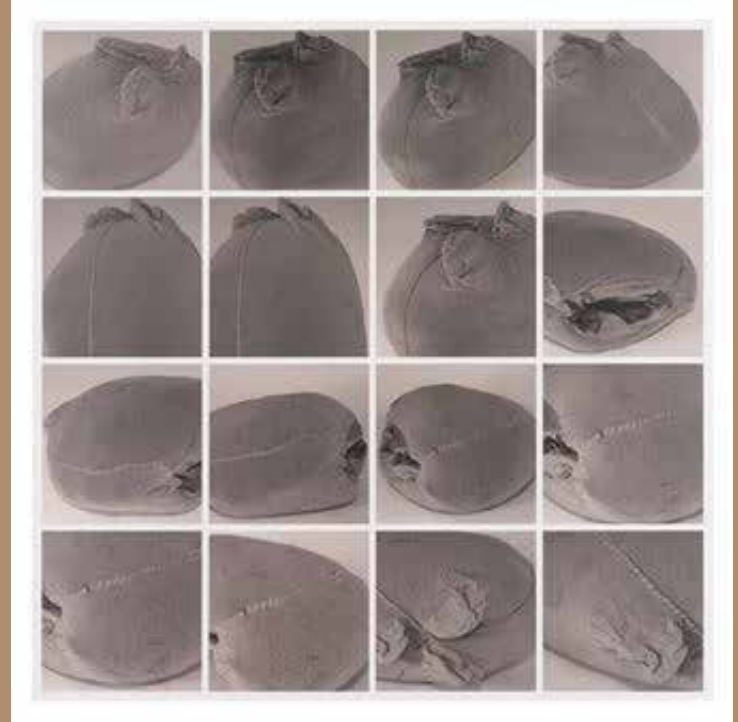
Sonia Boyce, *Black Female Hairstyles*, 1995, collage.



Sonia Boyce, *Three Legs of Tights, Stuffed With Afro Hair* photographed in 1994, printed in 2015

Sophie Orlando's *Sonia Boyce: Post-1989 Art Strategies*

“It evokes a fetish, a doll, black, desired, with no identity, in the photographic triptych *Three Legs Stuffed with Hair* (1995) made up of close-ups of curly black hair, and hairs caught in the intimate folds of a woman's stocking. The stocking acts as a screen hiding the dark skin, a “racialized” object of desire according to Frantz Fanon in *Peau noire masque blanc*, written in 1952, or a “dark continent” according to the feminist Mary Ann Doane. [...] The framing cuts and even decapitates, it separates the subject from her identity. [...] Sonia Boyce links sexual politics to the modernist gesture.”



Sonia Boyce, *Three Legs of Tights, Stuffed With Afro Hair*
photographed in 1994, printed in 2015



Sonia Boyce, *The Audition*, 1997, printed 2018, 390 photographs, C-prints on paper, face-mounted to acrylic glass



The Audition (detail) © Sonia Boyce, Courtesy Manchester Art Gallery

Sonia Boyce, *The Audition (Detail)*, 1997, printed 2018, 390 photographs, C-prints on paper, face-mounted to acrylic glass



Sonia Boyce, *The Audition in Colour*, 1997/2020
75 photographic panels Fuji Crystal archival prints
under matt Acrylic, mounted on 3mm Alu-Dibond
and glazed with 2mm matt Acrylic glass

At the time, I was making a series of hair objects and sourced material from Afro-Caribbean hair shops in London but most of them didn't sell afro wigs.

One day, I was walking past a fancy-dress shop and saw that they had a lot of afro wigs in lots of different colours for sale and I realized that they're used for parody. Immediately, there's a connection with clowns and minstrels: as signifiers of the African body, the afro became a trigger for hilarity and mockery. So, I put out an open call to photograph and film people putting one on. I ended up taking over 900 photographs in one day.

There was lots of laughter, which was partly to do with an unconscious response to what is actually a deep historical joke. The philosopher Simon Critchley, who has written a lot about humour, observed that someone is always the butt of a joke, however benign it might seem. Here, the afro as a fragment of the african body occupies both desire and parody. (2018)

Sonia Boyce's Removal of John William Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs*



Image from artsy.net, no photographer cited

Critique around Boyce's Removal of *Hylas and the Nymphs*



“To remove this work art from view is not an interesting critique but a crass gesture that will end up on the wrong side of history. This censorship belongs in the bin along with Section 28’s war on gay culture and the prosecution of Penguin Books for publishing *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in 1960.” (Jonathan Jones).

“But the response from some critics to the removal from public view of the painting, *Hylas and the Nymphs* by John William Waterhouse, has been a torrent of barely disguised contempt and ire, and accusations of censorship.

Such complaints wilfully obscure the role that art institutions play in shaping our cultural identities through exhibitions and displays. Who chooses these important narratives and determines what is, or is not, a legitimate part of the national cultural story?” (Gilane Tawadros)

It troubles me that some people think the gesture was simply a publicity stunt – which is a mockery of how I work, examining how we process the present and its relationship to the past.

The thing is, if we're going to talk about censorship – which is what I was accused of – other questions need to be asked: what is held in the collections of the country's museums and galleries but not shown? What does the quiet authority of such institutional structures reveal? Are museums and galleries proud of a narrative that frames women as equalling death or as silently beautiful? All I'm asking is that we give ourselves space and time to discuss other possibilities. I don't think anyone gets harmed by that. (2018)

For you, only you: Mikhail Karikis, Alamire, Sonia Boyce, April 2007
(usually exhibited on three screens)



Black Subjectivity - Sound & Music



For a long time, I talked about my practice being parasitic – in that a parasite is a disruptor but can also give the host body what it needs but doesn't want. I often go to a place not knowing its history and making art is a way of unearthing that. (2018)

Upcoming Exhibition

- The British Council: showcases best artists, designers, and curators in the UK
- Challenges with ideas of nationalism and racism
 - “I really started to think about the anachronism of having national pavilions when art cuts against that grain of ideas on nationhood. It’s only since the invitation that people keep asking me about Britain. There are all sorts of questions within that question. I do think part of the question, as it is posed to me, is about how I’m Black and British, and what does it mean to “carry the flag”?
- Nature of her exhibit
 - 'We are eagerly anticipating her exhibition, where collaboration, improvisation and dialogue will undoubtedly play a key role. Boyce’s work raises important questions about the nature of creativity, questioning who makes art, how ideas are formed, and the nature of authorship. At such a pivotal moment in the UK’s history, the Committee has chosen an artist whose work embodies inclusiveness, generosity, experimentation and the importance of working together'.

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