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## Artist Sonia Boyce Will Be the First Black Woman to Represent the UK at the Venice Biennale

The artist came to prominence in the 1980s as a key figure in the Black-British art scene.

**Naomi Rea**, February 12, 2020



Sonia Boyce. Photo by Paul Cochrane, courtesy of UAL, 2013.

The artist Sonia Boyce has been selected to represent the United Kingdom at the Venice Biennale in 2021. The 58-year-old will be the first black woman to represent the country at the art world's most prestigious exhibition.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather when I got the call to tell me I had been chosen to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale 2021—it was like a bolt out of the blue," Boyce says in a statement. "Obviously, I'm extremely honoured, excited, and nervous. I'm eager to start this creative journey, exploring the experience with others who agree to work with me along the way."

Boyce, who became a Royal Academician in 2016, is currently a professor at University of the Arts London, where she is chair in Black Art & Design. The artist and academic was a key figure in the Black-British art scene in 1980s Britain. Her deeply personal work often reflects on the country's relations to race, class and gender. Her practice spans performance, drawing, print, photography, and audio-visual elements. She often collaborates with other artists and the public, and since the 1990s her work has also had an improvisational tenor, as she invites a wide range of people to speak, sing, or move in relation to the past, and the present.

The artist was commissioned to present a major solo exhibition at the UK pavilion by the British Council. The council will name a mid-career associate curator to work alongside Boyce on the exhibition later this year.

"Boyce's work raises important questions about the nature of creativity, questioning who makes art, how ideas are formed, and the nature of authorship," Emma Dexter, the British Council's director of visual arts, commissioner, and chair of the British pavilion selection committee, says in a statement. "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."



Sonia Boyce in front of her work at Apalazzogallery. Photo by Kate Brown for artnet News.

Selection committee member Hammad Nasar, curator and senior research fellow at the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art, said in statement: “In her drawings, multimedia installations and performances, Sonia Boyce has consistently probed one of society’s big questions: how do we live with difference?” He added: “In times of polarisation and division, the committee felt that Boyce’s improvisatory, collaborative and participatory practice offers the potential to inject the 2021 exhibition with surprise and hopefulness.”



Boyce was the subject of a BBC documentary *Whoever Heard of a Black Artist?* in 2018, in which she traveled the country tracing the history of black artists and Modernism. Shortly after, Tate belatedly acquired examples of her work for its collection at the Frieze art fair in London; 400 black and white photographs capturing a 1997 performance in Manchester, during which Boyce had invited members of the public to try on afro wigs.

Boyce was one of the four women artists included in a groundbreaking 1989 exhibition called "The Other Story," which was the first retrospective exhibition of British African, Caribbean, and Asian Modernism. At the time shows of work by the mainly white YBAs dominated the headlines.

"The legacy of that exhibition really has penetrated quite far and wide within British consciousness and the art establishment," the artist told Artnet News in 2018. "Tate for a while now has been acquiring a lot of works from that exhibition as well as trying to really reconfigure and rethink its relationship to what has been taking place here in the UK."

The pavilion will be a follow up to last year's solo exhibition of the artist Cathy Wilkes, which was curated by Zoé Whitley, the incoming director of London's Chisenhale Gallery. Whitley worked with Boyce as a member of the advisory board for the Black Artists and Modernism research project. "I've witnessed firsthand her passion and commitment to expanding our understanding of British art histories, making space for acknowledging a broader spectrum of artists who have contributed to our culture and making clear that these histories do indeed belong to all of us," Whitley tells Artnet News.

“Sonia’s not only actively re-writing the canon through her own dynamic practice, but she models a generosity of spirit in collaborating with artists and institutions across the country and internationally. She exhibited at Chisenhale in 1988 as part of the landmark exhibition Essential Black Art. Her voice and her work are no less essential today.”



Sonia Boyce, installation view of “In the Castle of My Skin,” (2020).  
©Sonia Boyce. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2020. Photo by  
Stuart Whipps.

The 59th Venice Biennale will take place between May and November 2021. It is not Boyce’s first time in Venice. She was included in the late curator Okwui Enwezor’s main exhibition “All the World’s Futures” in 2015. She is currently the subject of a solo exhibition “In the Castle of My Skin” at Birmingham’s East Side Projects, which is due to travel to Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art later this year.

Notable recent exhibitions include a solo exhibition at the ICA London in 2017, and a solo at the Manchester Art Gallery in 2018, which caused a stir when she temporarily removed a 19th-century painting from the galleries in a comment about the depiction of women's bodies in art history.