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Sonia Boyce becomes first black woman to represent Britain at Venice Biennale



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RICHARD YOUNG/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

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Britain's first post-Brexit cultural flag-bearer has issued her clarion call: collaboration is the future.

Sonia Boyce has been named this morning as the artist charged with parading Britain's wares and boosting its cultural capital at the world's most important visual arts platform.

Ms Boyce, who becomes the first black woman selected to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale, said that while her name may be above the British Pavilion, she would be “encouraging other people to get involved”.

“There are serious questions about how people can come together, particularly when there might be tensions around differences,” Ms Boyce told *The Times*. “But through art it is possible.”

She said there was an inevitability that Brexit would shape the thinking of her and her collaborators as they prepared for the 2021 Biennale, an event which pitches the countries of the world against each other in what has been described as the “Olympics of the art world”.

“One doesn’t want to go completely off the rails,” she said of her fledgling plans to promote Britain on the global stage before adding. “One wants to make it enjoyable and exploratory.”

Her selection by a committee assembled by the British Council comes as Britain’s cultural community — which was overwhelmingly against Brexit — grapples with the consequences of the departure from the European Union.

The artist said the Biennale was a “spectacular platform”, adding that it was pertinent to think about the country’s place in the world.

“There is this question about nations and nationality and that is how it [Biennale] was set up; to promote the so-called best of what was happening any given country or nation. I don’t know if it is anachronistic but I still think it is important in the time we are in to think about what nation means,” she said.

[Ms Boyce](#), who already stands as the first female black Royal Academician and who, in the mid-1980s, became the first black female artist whose work was acquired by Tate, said that she would be bringing other people into her Venice schemes which are likely to include sound and performative aspects.

She summed up her approach as: “I like people and I like making things with people.”

Emma Dexter, the council's commissioner of the pavilion and chairwoman of the selection panel, said that at "such a pivotal moment in the UK's history" an artist had been chosen "whose work embodies inclusiveness, generosity, experimentation and the importance of working together".

Ms Dexter added that Ms Boyce "brings people together" adding however that unlike previous artists selected to represent Britain — who included luminaries such as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Lucian Freud and Steve McQueen — the "outcome is not known".

"It depends on how many elements of chance Sonia chooses to integrate into her process," she said. "It might evolve as the show goes on."

The Biennale, which brings the world's most influential curators and artists to Venice once every two years and which helps shape artistic practice around the world, has become a "calling card" for British culture, which is recognised in government quarters as a crucial tool in establishing what it hopes will be a post-Brexit powerhouse.