

THE  TIMES

VISUAL ART

Sonia Boyce: 'How do we return to history and to its ghosts?'

The artist tells Rachel Campbell-Johnston about her new show and confronting our past



Next year Sonia Boyce will become the first black female artist to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale. It will be a landmark moment for cultural diversity, one that Boyce had never even imagined might one day take place. "It just wasn't on my radar," she tells me when I catch up with her on the telephone after she has spent several days installing her latest exhibition, *In the Castle of My Skin*, at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (Mima).

Boyce, 59, has become one of our foremost artists. She first came to prominence with her feminist contributions to the black British cultural renaissance of the 1980s and has played a powerful role in the repositioning of both female and black artists since. She certainly knows about making a splash. When, during a 2018 retrospective, she arranged for JW Waterhouse's iconic *Hylas and the*

Nymphs — a painting that serves as a sort of Victorian equivalent to a wet T-shirt contest — to be removed temporarily from the walls of Manchester Art Gallery, she found that she had whipped up a nationwide furore. Many — perhaps misunderstanding the point of her gesture — accused her of censorship. Boyce argued back and emerged with her reputation unscathed. The next year she was appointed OBE.

Boyce is under the strictest injunction not to give anything away about Biennale plans. But she is clearly wary about becoming a standard bearer. “The idea that I might represent all black females is ridiculous. I might speak of common experiences, but how those experiences are felt is always going to range . . .”

Among the key works in Mima’s permanent collection is a massive colourful mixed-media piece made by Boyce in 1986. Titled *She Ain’t Holding Them Up, She’s Holding On (Some English Rose)*, and drawing on a work by Frida Kahlo, it speaks of her youthful struggle to balance her Afro-Caribbean heritage with her British identity. One of her first artistic concerns, she has explained in past interviews, was that “when [she] was at art school she was black therefore [she] wasn’t there”. Her early autobiographical narratives were largely concerned with the fight of the black female artist to find her voice in a white male art world.

The art world is “still predominantly white male”, Boyce says. “But in the past 30-odd years things have changed enormously for women artists and artists of diverse backgrounds . . . because of people insisting on their own presence.” As a black girl brought up in east London, one of five children of a father who was a tailor and a mother who was a nurse, she emerged from art college into a cultural milieu that felt like a “bit of a battlefield”. But “why not me?” she thought. “I am part of a generation,” Boyce says, “that decided that I wanted to be in there: ‘That looks interesting; I will have some of that.’ ” Now, she declares, “it’s no longer a surprise that I should have exhibitions at major venues. And the time is now ripe to push the doors a bit wider.”

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Each gallery incorporates a large latticework form: a shape based on the crystalline structures of pyrites, also commonly known as fool’s gold. Pyrites particularly fascinate her, Boyce explains, because while they have clear structures they can also be sprawling. These lattices are covered in wallpaper, a material that has interested Boyce since her days as a student. “It is seen as being this background thing that we use in domestic interiors, but often it also speaks of the outside world,” she says, suggesting William Morris as an example.



Boyce's pyrite structures frame or display pieces by a dozen other contemporaries, among them [Bridget Riley](#)'s op art prints; Kev Howard's photographs of prosthetic limbs; Harold Offeh's invitation to visitors to explore the show via selfie sticks and cameras; and Boyce's own newly commissioned video about skateboarding girls.

The first thing that you will see in the show is a large sail-like structure, like the wing of an aircraft set upright. It is covered in a wallpaper, *Dada Migrant*, a design scattered with figures in vigorous motion. Alongside each the title of a song is written: Bob Marley's *Get Up, Stand Up* for instance. "It's a song about standing up for your rights. There's a play between song and movement and social relations," Boyce explains. "But because it's called *Dada Migrant* one has also to think about the question of the migrant's position." At the base of this structure is a 1950s bronze sculpture by Lynn Chadwick — "two figures that look as if they are rushing to get somewhere". Chadwick, particularly in this bronze, Boyce says, speaks of a sense of new beginnings after the Second World War.

Boyce doesn't have the solutions to today's pressing questions, she insists. When I ask her what she thinks should be done, for example, about the Oriel College statue of Cecil Rhodes, she replies that the question we should be asking is not about public sculpture but about the history that underlies it — the accepted version of the past that such sculpture endorses. "The question is what do we do about that history: how do we return to it and to its ghosts and to the impact of how it plays out in our times. You could put the sculpture in a museum, but that still wouldn't alter the perception of history. What we need to confront and come to terms with is the social system that put that sculpture there in the first place. Let's face the history bit rather than the bit of bronze or stone."

The answer, she suggests, is an open mind. "We need to be brave enough to have the conversation: a public conversation that really addresses everything that the sculpture represents. Let's have the open conversation about what to do with our past."

It is this new way of thinking that her 2022 Venice Biennale exhibition will presumably set out to embody. "And it will not necessarily be an act of guilt," Boyce insists. "It can be an act of growth too."

***Sonia Boyce: In the Castle of My Skin* is at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (01642 931232) to October 10**