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Fighting Forgetting, With a Venice Biennale Win

Sonia Boyce triumphed with a work about the erasure of Black women artists. She greets the trophy with a mix of gratitude and circumspection.



By **Farah Nayeri**

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LONDON — Sonia Boyce is used to breaking down walls.

Last month, she became the first Black female artist to represent Britain at the [Venice Biennale](#), the world's oldest international art exhibition. The [work she presented in the British Pavilion](#) won the top prize, [the Golden Lion](#). Six years before, she had been the first Black British woman to get [elected to the country's prestigious Royal Academy of Arts](#).

Yet Boyce's career path has been anything but a straight line. Past breakthroughs have been followed by years of oblivion, such as when she became the first Black British woman to enter the collections of the Tate museum in 1987, then disappeared from the spotlight. She has made invisibility and cultural amnesia a focus of her art. Her Venice pavilion — an installation of sound, video and memorabilia — is all about the erasure of Black British female singers of the past.

Even her Golden Lion fits in with her practice. It's a reminder of the invisibility endured by generations of artists who weren't white and male, and went unrecognized.

So, as she said in a recent interview, she greets the trophy with a mix of gratitude and circumspection.

"It seems almost ridiculous that it takes into the 21st century for a Black British female artist to be invited to do Venice," said Boyce, sitting in her sunlit south London studio. The studio bore traces of her winning installation: glitter, plywood, wallpaper and discounted vinyl records of Black female singers.



Glitter in Boyce's studio. "Feeling Her Way" features gilded geometric objects based on the shape of pyrite, a mineral also known by the colonial-era term "fool's gold." Suzie Howell for The New York Times



Records and CDs by female Black performers that Boyce bought at thrift stores. Album covers, cassettes and memorabilia feature in "Feeling Her Way." Suzie Howell for The New York Times



Plywood cutouts left over from making the gilded pyrite shapes in Boyce's Venice pavilion. Suzie Howell for The New York Times

“To be the first suggests that there wasn’t space for anyone like me before,” she said, adding that she hoped that her Venice victory wasn’t just “some kind of blip,” and that “the door stays open for more to come through.”

“[Feeling Her Way](#),” the work on view in Venice (through Nov. 27), is a tribute to forgotten British female singers of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage. A cacophony of sounds wafts through the pavilion as four female vocalists each sing, whistle, hum and wail on video screens. The screens hang in rooms lined with tessellated wallpaper; arranged throughout the pavilion are gilded geometric objects based on the shape of pyrite, a mineral also known by the colonial-era term “fool’s gold.” In one gallery, Black British vocalists of the past are remembered through a display of album covers (with marked-down price tags), cassettes and memorabilia.

“Different voices trying to negotiate the space in which they’re in,” said Boyce: “This is the essence of my practice.”



Boyce's "Feeling Her Way" features recorded vocalists, tessellated wallpaper and gilded geometric objects that are arranged throughout the British Pavilion. Sonia Boyce; All Rights Reserved, ARS and DACS/Artimage 2022; Gus Powell for The New York Times

Boyce recalled that “Feeling Her Way” grew out of a 1999 project in Liverpool, England, in which artists co-produced work with members of the local community. She teamed up with the Liverpool Black Sisters, a women’s center in Toxteth, a Liverpool district that was the site of race riots in the 1980s. Boyce asked the women to come up with a list of Black British female singers whose music they had grown up with. But in the first session, “it was very, very awkward,” said Boyce, “because it took literally about 10 minutes before anyone could think of anyone.”

“This is what I mean about collective and structural amnesia,” she added. The women were embarrassed, and after consulting family and friends, came back with 46 names which became the basis for the exhibition that Boyce staged. Boyce continued working on the project herself, expanding it to include more than 300 performers.

Boyce was born in London to parents of Caribbean descent and grew up in a household covered with patterned wallpaper and fabrics. Her father was a tailor, and her mother, a nurse and seamstress. As a girl, Boyce was fascinated by the wallpaper motifs, which seemed to come alive at night, she said.

She started studying art at 15 and went away to college near Birmingham, England. A visit to the 1981 exhibition “Black Art an’ Done” at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery was a revelation, she said, because she discovered that “there were these young Black artists” making “very political work.”

Inspired by Frida Kahlo, she began picturing herself in rich oil pastels, wearing patterned dresses and gazing at the viewer. In one four-part piece — “Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great” (1986) — she drew her unsmiling self against the backdrop of Victorian-era wallpaper with emblems of empire and of Britain’s colonies.

Her pastels got her noticed and collected by the Tate and made her one of the pioneers of the Black British art movement, which focused on race and cultural difference at a time of discrimination, rioting and police violence.



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Yet to Boyce, the self-portraits became a “cul-de-sac,” she said. She didn’t feel comfortable making work with herself at the center, she said, and switched to representing “multiple identities: a social practice where I’m instigating the possibilities for other people to say who they are and what they do.”

To her contemporaries, that decision made sense.

“I am a huge fan of her early works,” said Isaac Julien, the Black British filmmaker and installation artist, “but I also recognize that you want autonomy and a certain freedom.” Boyce “was a star very early on,” he added, “and her practice evolved in a way in which she followed her own sense of experimentation.”

From the early 1990s, Boyce started working as a “social practice” artist, involving members of marginalized communities — whether based on race, class or gender — in shaping her work. The purpose of social practice art is to “shed light on and retrieve people’s experiences and narratives from oblivion, because they haven’t been archived, or because they’ve been overlooked,” said Anna Colin, a lecturer on curating at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Boyce’s new work was perplexing and unpalatable to the mainstream art world in Britain at the time. (Times change: Last year, all nominees for the country’s highest profile art award, the Turner Prize, [were socially engaged collectives](#).) Boyce and fellow Black British artists were further sidelined by the emergence of the Young British Artists, who were fixated on conceptual art and dominated media, museum and market attention in Britain for decades.

Yet Boyce kept doing what she was doing.

Relationships and collaboration have been “really the hallmark of everything she’s done,” said Alex Farquharson, the director of Tate Britain and [a co-curator of “Life Between Islands,”](#) a recent survey of British Caribbean art that included works by Boyce. “She has pursued a practice that is marked by generosity and real experimentation,” he added.

Boyce’s friend, the French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, said the two had bonded through yet another collaboration: a Black women artists’ study group, which they co-founded in London in the early 1990s. It met each month to discuss the work of an artist.



The recorded vocalists in "Feeling Her Way" sing, whistle, hum and wail on video screens, creating a cacophony in the pavilion. Gus Powell for The New York Times

The two artists were neighbors for years in the Brixton district of south London; their children played together in the park. By a twist of fate, they were also neighbors at this year's Venice Biennale, where [Sedira is representing France](#) in the pavilion next door to Britain's. Sedira won a special mention for her film installation there.

The Venice Biennale was a game changer for Boyce long before her Golden Lion. She was invited in 2015 to show a performance work in the main Biennale exhibition, curated that year by [Okwui Enwezor](#). It put her back on the art-world radar, and she was elected to the Royal Academy the following year.

In 2018, a survey of her work opened at the Manchester Art Gallery. Over the year leading up to the show, Boyce engaged museum staff in discussions about the collection, which includes John William Waterhouse's 1896 painting of bathing nudes, "Hylas and the Nymphs."

After female staff members spoke of being sexually harassed near the painting, compared to the nymphs and approached by male visitors, Boyce temporarily removed the Waterhouse in a performance, and replaced it with texts she had recorded in the group discussions, such as: "This gallery presents the female body as either a 'passive decorative form' or a 'femme fatale.' Let's challenge this Victorian fantasy!"

This performance epitomized Boyce's type of social art practice, said Grant Kester, a professor of art history at the University of California, San Diego. She engaged with staff members, visitors and others to "make that dialogue part of the project," Kester said. It was all in the belief, he added, "that individuals outside the institutional art world have legitimate opinions and views and insights to offer."

Yet Boyce's attempt to involve more people in the curatorial process was also viewed as censorship of a beloved Pre-Raphaelite painting and sparked national outrage. [Writing in The Guardian](#), the art critic Jonathan Jones said Boyce had made "a crass gesture that will end up on the wrong side of history."

Looking back on the episode, Boyce said the uproar was because the performance involved "a 19th-century painting, i.e., proper art, by a white male, recognized as a proper artist."

Boyce herself is now enjoying similar recognition — and still getting used to it.

She recalled standing on the steps of the British Pavilion on the Biennale's opening day and spotting women artists in the crowd who also deserved to have their work on display inside. "You should be in here," she remembered thinking to herself. "Why hasn't that happened yet?"

It was a moment of reckoning that she had postponed until then, she said. "I suddenly felt the weight of history."