

Sonia Boyce

Manchester Art Gallery

23 March – 22 July 2018

Sonia Boyce is fascinated by what people do when they come together. Focusing on work from the late 1990s to the present, this retrospective exhibition reflects on Boyce's move away from earlier drawing and collage which explored her own position as a black British woman, towards more improvised, collaborative ways of working. Since the 1990s Boyce has worked with people in collaborative and often unrehearsed situations, exploring power relations and the intersections of gender, sexuality, race and class. She works with the documentation or the 'leftovers' of these unpredictable encounters to make artworks in media such as photography, film and wallpaper.

Masquerade: dressing up and acting up

'I find it interesting how our histories and bodies interrelate to produce the excesses and prejudices that shape our imaginations, how 'cross-dressing' and 'trespassing' in its widest sense, pokes at our cultural anxieties.'

Sonia Boyce

The Audition 1997

Black & white photographs mounted on aluminium

The making of *The Audition* took place at Cornerhouse (now HOME) in 1997 as part of a residency by Boyce at The University of Manchester. An open call invited participants to go to Cornerhouse to try on an afro wig. Each individual was photographed with and without the wig and a collection of photographs was made. For the participants, the act of putting on the wig was a kind of performance, with the introduction of an element of supposed 'otherness' opening a space for discussion and exploration of identity as unfixed and collectively constructed. A short film was made documenting the process and is shown here with a selection of around 400 photographs, which have been specially printed for the exhibition.

Crop Over 2007

Two-channel video installation
15 mins

This two-screen film explores the annual Crop Over harvest festival in Barbados, which historically marks the end of the sugar cane season. The film begins at Harewood House, near Leeds, built by the Lascelles family who made their wealth in Barbados and Jamaica by trading in plantations and slaves. The film reminds us that the wealth generated by the exploitation of African slave labour fuelled the British Empire and underlies the annual Crop Over celebrations.

Cultural historians comment on folk characters associated with the festivities, such as Donkeyman, Mother Sally, Shaggy Bear and Stilt Walker, as these folkloric figures occupy both Harewood House and the plantation house in Barbados with their improvised performances. Masquerade and the carnivalesque are used in playful subversion, revealing the legacies of interconnections between African, Caribbean and British histories.

Courtesy Barbados Museum and Historical Society

Group agency, collective knowledge and collaboration

'I have learned to never underestimate the capacity of the group to generate something astonishing'

Sonia Boyce

Six Acts 2018

Six-screen film and wallpaper installation
15 mins

Boyce has worked with the Manchester Art Gallery team, invited artist-collaborators and gallery visitors to make a new commission for the exhibition to explore how the politics of gender, race and sexuality in the gallery's 18th and 19th century painting displays can be reconsidered for today.

The starting point for the new work was conversation. In Spring 2017 a series of group discussions began between Boyce and members of the gallery team about the gallery collection and how it is displayed and interpreted, particularly displays of 18th and 19th century artworks which have remained the same since the gallery re-opened in 2002. The conversations developed and expanded to include more and more people: gallery staff, volunteers, gallery visitors and artist-collaborators.

As part of this process, in January 2018, an evening gallery takeover took place. Wearing a long white dress, artist Lasana Shabazz performed in response to a number of artworks on display to fictionalise the character of Ira Aldridge, a renowned 19th century Shakespearean actor, stepping out of his portrait *Othello the Moor of Venice* 1826 by James Northcote. Drag, an acronym for 'dressed resembling a girl' and also thought to refer to the weight of a skirt dragging on the floor, is often associated with the Shakespearean period of theatre when female roles were exclusively performed by males. Aldridge was the first black actor to play white roles and would "white up" or paint his face white to play characters such as Macbeth, Shylock and King Lear. As part of his performance Shabazz sang *Camptown Races*, written by Stephen Foster in 1850 to mock the speech patterns of African-Americans. It later became the basis for a football chant *Two World Wars and One World Cup* after England won the World Cup against West Germany in 1966.

Contemporary drag artists Anna Phylactic, Cheddar Gorgeous, Liquorice Black and Venus Vienna were invited to respond to artworks of their choice and the title of one of the galleries, *In Pursuit of Beauty*.

One of the six performative acts that night was the temporary take down of a painting, *Hylas and the Nymphs* 1896 by JW Waterhouse, replacing it with a series of questions and deliberately leaving a space to encourage further conversation. The takeover was filmed and photographed and Boyce has worked with this documentation to create a film installation. Each of the six screens represents an 'act' that took place during the gallery takeover: the five performances by invited artists and the temporary removal of the painting.

Act 1. Lasana Shabazz as...Ira Aldridge as... God Save the Queen Abolitionist version as... Whiteface Minstrel as...Football Hooligan

Performance in response to *Othello the Moor of Venice* 1826 by James Northcote and artworks in Galleries 6 - 9

Act 2. *Hylas and the Nymphs*, JW Waterhouse 1896...Gallery staff

Act 3. Michael Atkins as...Cheddar Gorgeous as...Unicorn

Performance in response to *Eve Tempted* circa 1877 by John Spencer Stanhope

Act 4. Dan Wallace as...Anna Phylactic as...The Mad Hatter as...The Fairground Master

Performance in response to *Syrinx* 1892 by Arthur Hacker

Act 5. John Roberts as...Liquorice Black as...Sappho

Performance in response to *Sappho* 1877 by Charles-August Mengin

Act 6. Kathryn Simpkins as...Venus Vienna as...Nymph as...Selfie

Performance in response to *Hylas and the Nymphs* 1896 by John William Waterhouse

Boyce often acts as a catalyst for collective action, deciding when and where to set parameters within which a group dynamic comes into play to make things happen. In this case, a group of gallery staff

initially came together with Boyce to explore their own responses to outdated interpretation and contextualisation of collection displays at the gallery. These issues and questions have subsequently become more public. With *Six Acts*, the boundaries of the artwork have become fluid as the film installation sits within an ongoing process for the gallery team and gallery visitors exploring issues of representation and the role of the institution. All the conversations, actions and responses which have come about could be described as part of the work, while also merging with and becoming part of a valuable longer-term process of collective thinking about the role of the gallery and its public collection.

Thanks to everyone who has been involved in the making of this work.

Devotional Series ongoing since 1999

The *Devotional Series* also explores what can be created collectively, in this case over years rather than months. *Devotional Collection* is an archive of names, music, wallpaper and ephemera relating to black British women in music which began in Liverpool in 1999 when Boyce was invited by FACT to collaborate with a group called Liverpool Black Sisters. As with *Six Acts*, this project started with a conversation. Boyce asked the group to think about black British women in music who had influenced or inspired them. It was only after about ten minutes that someone thought of Shirley Bassey. The project grew from there, initially with this group in Liverpool and the collective knowledge of their friends and family, then through word of mouth. Now, whenever Boyce shows or talks publicly about this work, more names and ephemera are given to her and she holds an archive of over 300 named performers, over 1,000 music items and many paper items. Initially, Boyce was uncomfortable with the responsibility of holding an archive, but as she says,

'as an artist, I can keep a fluid relationship between an institutional structure like an archive and an art practice. The process is also about making collective knowledge apparent.'

The earliest name in the collection is Amanda Aldridge (1886), the daughter of Ira Aldridge who features in the painting *Othello* by James Northcote. This was the first painting bought for the collection of the Royal Manchester Institution in 1827. The RMI later became Manchester Art Gallery. For the Manchester exhibition a collaborative playlist has been made on Spotify where visitors can listen to black British women artists included in Devotional and add artists, tracks or albums.

<http://bit.ly/devotionalcollection>

Cacophony: difference and 'matter out of place'

'To be matter out of place is to be perceived as operating outside of and thereby threatening the established order.'

Allison Thompson in Sonia Boyce, *Thoughtful Disobedience*, 2017

Exquisite Cacophony 2015

Single-channel video

35 mins

Improvised collaborative performance has become a key part of Boyce's practice in recent years. *Exquisite Cacophony* is a film of an improvised encounter between indie rock rapper Astronautalis and experimental vocalist Elaine Mitchener at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The two performers play with ideas of identity and difference, with Astronautalis beginning the performance referring to his southern American roots as a "white boy rapper". Mitchener emerges from the audience, disrupting his flow with abstract guttural sounds, she confronts him playfully with her body language and shifts between British and Jamaican accents. As the improvisation develops the mood shifts, at times harmonious, funny, combative and flirtatious. There are moments of tension and discomfort as the performers act out the idea of trying to create something coherent for an audience, their humorous encounter touching on a variety of taboos.

Boyce is interested in the relationship between jazz scat and Dada sound performances, which both date from the early 20th century. Jazz scat is a form of vocal improvisation rooted in an African-American response to plantation life. The Dada movement emerged during the First World War in Zurich and was intentionally open to unexpected outcomes with collaborative performances which challenged the barriers between art and everyday life. Boyce sees connections between these two traditions through their radical challenges to social and political hierarchies and the violent, traumatic times in the USA and Europe within which they emerged. Both made reference to the other with a deliberate playfulness, involving experimentation and seemingly nonsensical language, the legacy of which can be seen in Boyce's work.

For you, only you 2007

Three-channel video installation

15 mins

Boyce invited experimental sound artist Mikhail Karikis to make a new sound work with early music group Alamire. The work combines a Renaissance choral work, *Tu solus qui facis mirabilia* (*You alone can do wonders*) by 15th century Franco-Flemish composer Josquin Desprez and Karikis's abstract, fragmented vocal performance. Beginning with a kind of call and response between Karikis and the choir singing extracts from *Tu solus*, the piece develops into a blending of styles and voices. Karikis intervenes as an unfamiliar presence in the choir, bringing the influence of Dadaist performance, jazz scat and the call and response associated with black music traditions. By bringing together Karikis and the choir, Boyce introduced an element of disruption, allowing relationships of difference and supposed "otherness" to play out through their collaborative performance.

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Sonia Boyce is a British artist who lives and works in London. Recent exhibitions include *We move in her way*, ICA, London, 2017, *Paper Tiger Whisky Soap Theatre* (Dada Nice), Villa Arson, Nice, 2016, *All the World's Futures*, 56th Venice Biennale, 2015. Boyce is Professor of Black Art and Design at the University of the Arts London and is the Principal Investigator for a 3 year AHRC-funded project 'Black Artists and Modernism'. She received an MBE in 2007, and in 2016, she was elected a Royal Academician. In 2018 the Royal Academy celebrates its 250th anniversary.



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