

**Sonia Boyce: Beyond Blackness**

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**Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, Number 45, November 2019, pp. 62-73 (Article)**

**Published by Duke University Press**

In music, the term *transposition* refers to the process by which a composition is written or performed in a key other than the original or given key. The starting point, or the pitch, of a chord is restated at a different level from the original piece of music, and its effect is to generate new musical material that is still related to an original theme.<sup>1</sup> In this article I present an art-historical transposition, whereby I examine a series of works by internationally renowned British artist Sonia Boyce (b. 1962) in such a way as to bring forth a different perspective of her early oeuvre from that typically found in existing scholarship.

During Boyce's thirty-year career, her artworks have entered numerous public and private collections in Britain, and her inclusion in the fifty-sixth Venice Biennale in 2015 and election as a Royal Academician in 2016 evidence the increasing value being placed on Boyce and her work. Despite her position within the art establishment, and perhaps because of her role in raising the profile of black British artists, critical and art-historical readings of her early charcoal and pastel drawings have typically overlooked questions of form, materiality, and artistic strategy and, instead, centered on the way the works represent black domestic life and engage in identity politics. This approach to reading her early works has been typical of the way black artistic practices are received in the fields of art criticism and art history. In a 1992 interview with Manthia Diawara, Boyce commented, "Whatever we black people do, it's said to be about identity, first and foremost. It becomes a blanket term for everything we do, regardless of *what* we're doing."<sup>2</sup> In his discussion of how this process has similarly developed in the North American context, art historian Darby English has warned that a consequence of circumscribing an artist's entire body of work in relation to questions of identity, race, and representation, or of sealing an artwork "in black representational space," is that the artwork rarely "serves as the basis of rigorous, object-based debate," causing it to gain "little purchase on the larger . . . cultural . . . and aesthetic formations to which it nevertheless directs itself."<sup>3</sup> As Boyce herself expressed in 1992, "when attention has been paid to black British art, there hasn't really been a discussion of the work. There's [only] been discussion of things *around* the work."<sup>4</sup> My objective, then, is to address this absent component in appraisals of black British artistic practices by conducting an object-based discussion that temporarily brackets off questions of cultural background, blackness, and identity in order to explore how Boyce's early works speak to more general developments in twentieth-century art and the aesthetic formations of modernism in particular.<sup>5</sup>

Informed by an interview I conducted with Boyce in 2015, I start by charting some of the key moments and contexts in the first years of her career, including the artists and practices she encountered and the guidance she received at art school. I then discuss how the artistic interests and concerns she developed at art school crystallized in three specific multimedia drawings: *Auntie Enid—The Pose* (1985), *Missionary Position II* (1985), and *Big Women's Talk* (1984).<sup>6</sup> My discussion of these artworks elucidates the particular artistic strategies Boyce employed in their production and the ways she

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<sup>1</sup> Readers wishing to learn more about transposition may find the following introductory text informative and accessible: Stefan

Kostka, Dorothy Payne, and Byron Almén, *Tonal Harmony* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Boyce and Manthia Diawara, "The Art of Identity: A Conversation," in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 308.

<sup>3</sup> Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 31, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Boyce and Diawara, *The Art of Identity*, 307.

<sup>5</sup> In this article, modernism refers to the wide-scale developments in the visual arts that occurred over the course of the twentieth century.

<sup>6</sup> These three works were shown in *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, a 1985 exhibition at the Bluecoat in Liverpool.

engaged with, and positioned herself in relation to, high modernism. The objective is not to deny the significance of blackness (in terms of experience, politics, or aesthetics) in these three works, but, as the title of the essay suggests, to look beyond it and offer a different, object-focused interpretation of Boyce's early oeuvre that sits happily and productively alongside existing interpretations—an art-historical transposition.

Boyce spent her formative years in Canning Town, East London, and undertook her art foundation course at East Ham College of Art and Technology between 1979 and 1980, where she was introduced to the work of feminist artists Margaret Harrison, Kate Walker, and Monica Ross.<sup>7</sup> Collectively known as Fenix, the three artists used gallery spaces as studios and combined drawing, photography, text, magazine clippings, and images of everyday objects in collage-based works. This approach to art-making was a revelation for Boyce, challenging her perception of what art could be and inspiring her to pursue a career as an artist. Determined to adopt a feminist and issue-based conceptual practice that would take her personal and cultural background as a starting point, she began combining found images of black women in magazines with her own drawings in collages that explored the depiction of the black female figure in popular media.

When Boyce began a degree course in fine art at Stourbridge College of Technology and Art (now known as Birmingham Metropolitan College), she soon learned that referential, issue-based practices were not favored by her tutors when she witnessed them encouraging other students engaged in such practices to continue their studies in a separate print and photography annex a mile away from the fine art department. When Boyce's tutors observed that she, too, was pursuing an issue-based practice, her place in the fine art department became uncertain. She recalls, "They thought that I was not doing well on the course and they wanted to get rid of me." She promptly changed her approach. "I realised that in order to get on in the course I had to change drastically what I was going to do . . . so I started to do these very formalist abstract works . . . a whole series of drawings using playing cards, rectangles, and parallelograms . . . very systematic drawings of squares and rectangles, very muted black-and white charcoal drawings."<sup>8</sup> Although Boyce felt this extreme change in practice had been forced upon her, it initiated an interest in the formal techniques of high modernism that she would later employ as a means to anchor herself in a white and male-dominated lineage of twentieth-century artists.

That Boyce's tutors were not in favor of referential, issue-based practices was at odds with developments that had been occurring in the art world at large. The high-low divisions and hierarchies of modernism, which to a great extent had been promoted by art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, underwent critical revision at mid-century.<sup>9</sup> Avant-garde artists began to contest the modernist concept of autonomy, or art for art's sake, becoming intent on making explicit reference to external realities in their artworks, as seen in pop art of the 1960s and in conceptual and feminist

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<sup>7</sup> Sonia Boyce, interview by author, London, June 26, 2015. The art and design foundation diploma (commonly referred to as an art foundation course) is an introductory, bridging course that helps students in the United Kingdom make the transition from secondary education (equivalent to the US high school) to specialist art and design education in a higher education setting. In my interview with Boyce, she explained that she had taken this course at "East Ham College of Art and Technology"; however, various sources suggest this college may have been known by other names, including East Ham College of Technology, East Ham Technical College, or simply East Ham College.

<sup>8</sup> Boyce, interview by author, London, June 26, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Clement Greenberg (1909–94) was an American essayist and art critic primarily associated with mid-twentieth century modern art in America, aesthetic formalism, and his promotion of abstract expressionism as the pinnacle of modernism in visual art. Similarly, the art historian and modernist art critic Michael Fried (b. 1939), who was mentored by Greenberg, championed aesthetic formalism in his writing and is perhaps best known for his scathing critique of minimalist sculpture in his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" (first published in *Art Forum* 5, no. 10 (1967)). Like Greenberg, Fried contended that the constituent formal elements of a work of art are autonomous and disconnected from the surrounding world. For further reading, see *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988–93); and Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

practices that followed in the 1970s. By the time Boyce had started her art education, it was common for artists to combine text and images from everyday life in artworks, although painting as a single medium remained at the top of the hierarchy in fine art.

During Boyce's second year at college, three crucial encounters with work by other artists took place that would instill a confidence in her to reject the orthodoxies of her art school and, instead, pursue the practice for which she would later become known. In 1981 she discovered the work of Susan Hiller at an exhibition at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham. Hiller was combining text and image to produce works that addressed the lives of ordinary people, as evidenced in her 1981 multimedia installation *Monument*. That same year Boyce became aware of the Wolverhampton Young Black Artists Group, which would later become known as the BLK Art Group. She visited the group's first exhibition, *Black Art An' Done* in nearby Wolverhampton Art Gallery, and their work made a significant impact on her: "I was just really astounded by this work, which seemed really urgent, really speaking about now, and in a way that was really testing the medium of art, the art's materials and a way of putting things together. . . . It was the counterculture of art school . . . these works that were issue-based . . . and almost antiformal."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, these artists could be said to be pushing the possibilities of what art could do in terms of combining different high and low artistic strategies in highly referential and political artworks. The third vital encounter took place when she visited an exhibition of work by Frida Kahlo at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. What struck Boyce was the way Kahlo employed her own image to explore both personal and political issues. These three encounters constituted a pivotal moment in Boyce's education. She had discovered the work of established women artists whose productions were in direct opposition to the orthodoxies and strictures she was encountering in art school, while also coming into contact with black artists of her own generation who were making works that addressed her experience as a young black person in Britain. Together, these encounters instilled in her a new confidence to ignore the constraints imposed by her tutors, and, as the artist put it, to "go for it in terms of all the things that I wanted to talk about."<sup>11</sup> The remainder of this article, which seeks to present an alternative object-based interpretation, focuses on the way Boyce engaged with and challenged Greenbergian prescriptions for modernism in her early, mixed-media drawings.

*Auntie Enid—The Pose* is a life-size portrait drawn with pastel, oil stick, and gouache and is based on a 1960s black-and-white studio portrait of the artist's aunt. The surrounding features—the carpet, skirting board, wallpaper, and side table—did not feature in the original photograph but were separately sourced by Boyce, because she was keen to break with modernist tradition and lock the image in a particular moment in history, which is suggested by the dress, bouffant hairstyle, and pose. The highly patterned designs of the carpet and wallpaper bring an antimodernist element of kitsch to the work and are highly evocative of the 1960s.

Patterned carpet and wallpaper, as part of an interior domestic setting, also feature in Boyce's double self-portrait *Missionary Position II*. In this work, two representations of the artist are seated side-by-side: the figure on the left has her eyes shut in prayer, wearing a Sunday-best hat, yellow blouse, and blue skirt; the figure on the right wears a red dress and matching headscarf and leans back, right arm stretched out toward her counterpart in a gesture that suggests disagreement. The drawing is a direct reference to Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* (1939), with obvious parallels in terms of the formal, pious attire of the left figures in both Boyce's and Kahlo's works and both figures on the right in more informal folk wear. The colors in Boyce's work echo those in Kahlo's (though, interestingly, the colors in the clothes of the right-hand, more formally dressed figure in Boyce's work echo those in the left-hand, folkly figure in Kahlo's work). Boyce's early encounter with Kahlo's highly personal but political works inspired her to reflect in her work issues that were pertinent in her own personal and familial life—in this case, the entanglement of religion and politics within a domestic setting.

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<sup>10</sup> Boyce, interview by author, London, June 26, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Boyce, interview by author.

Inspired by Hiller and other artists who utilized text to bring the lives of ordinary people into their work, Boyce included hand-written text in *Missionary Position II*, with the title at the top almost hidden among the pattern of the wallpaper and, flanking the bottom of the image, additional narrative text that reveals the intended content of the work. In her second year in art school, Boyce was in the habit of keeping a diary in which she noted and formulated ideas she felt unable to explore in her artworks due to the formalist preferences of her tutors. In my interview with her, she recalled that after attending a conference organized by Claudette Johnson, Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Marlene Smith, and others in 1982, she spent several weeks writing in her diary about her childhood memories and sayings, expressions, and attitudes that were common among her immediate and extended family and friends. Once she took the decision to reject the orthodoxies of her art school, these memories and expressions entered her artworks. In *Missionary Position II* Boyce inserted what she describes as creolized language into the frame, enabling “vernacular culture to enter the space of art.”<sup>12</sup>

According to the Greenbergian prescriptions for modernism that were favored by Boyce’s art school tutors, art was to be autonomous and non-referential, removed from the social world and justified in its own terms. By making works that were highly referential— particular moments in history, personal and social concerns, familial and domestic environments—she contested these modernist conventions. Another strategy she employed in *Missionary Position II* to challenge the modernist strictures of her educational environment was to include text. Combining image and text had, by this point, become standardized by avant-garde artists in the 1960s. However, as Boyce clarified in our interview, her reference to the interconnectedness of politics and religion in the text at the bottom of the drawing enabled her to allude to the parallel and antimodernist perspective that politics and art are inextricable. For Boyce, it was impossible for art to be autonomous and non-referential, and she, therefore, sought to imbue her drawings with references to a variety of social, political, and low-art concerns. In my interview with her she commented, “This still goes on in art schools, where people are trying to separate the relationship between art and aesthetics and politics . . . as if they live discrete lives. . . . They look down on those who want to explore these things together, as if art is somehow tainted when the question of the political is invoked.”<sup>13</sup>

*Big Women’s Talk* is probably the best-known of Boyce’s early works. In it there are two female figures. One is a curvaceous, maternal figure in a boldly patterned dress, which, as Boyce revealed to me at interview, references the sculptures of Niki de Saint Phalle, the French artist best known for her voluptuous and boldly patterned Nana sculptures. The woman’s face is cropped just below the nose, but her open mouth suggests she is in conversation with another individual not pictured. In the center of the image is a young girl leaning in the lap of the older woman, staring dreamily into the distance but half listening to the conversation around her. It is just possible to discern that the older woman is sitting in an arm chair, and the negative space is highly patterned. As with *Auntie Enid—The Pose* and *Missionary Position II*, the scene references domestic life, and the flowery pattern of the older woman’s dress is evocative of the late 1960s or early 1970s, thus firmly positioning the scene in a particular moment in history.

Boyce had begun using pattern to fill negative spaces during her art and design foundation course at Stourbridge College of Art, after a tutor criticized her for not putting her figures in context. She found that this strategy enabled her to give a sense of depth to the scenes she was setting. At first glance, the pattern in the negative space of *Big Women’s Talk* appears flat, while the pattern on the woman’s dress seems to undulate over the contours of her body. Closer examination, however, reveals that the pattern on the dress is also flat. The ochre foliage by the woman’s right shoulder does not tuck into her underarm, and the large purple flower over her chest does not dip under the curve of her breast

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<sup>12</sup> Boyce, interview by author.

<sup>13</sup> Boyce, interview by author.

but continues straight down to her stomach. It is intriguing that Boyce sought to depict depth and context through the use of flat pattern, when she could just as easily have used shading and other techniques to give a sense of depth and context in these works.

In Gilane Tawadros's 1997 monograph *Sonia Boyce: Speaking in Tongues*, she describes the artist as being concerned with appearance and reality and the contradictions between idealized perceptions of family, history, domestic life, and lived reality.<sup>14</sup> Boyce's depiction of flatness in works such as *Big Women's Talk* may, therefore, have been a way of counterbalancing the realism of the images she was presenting—of undermining a simplistic perception of the themes and issues addressed by those artworks. Boyce's use of flatness may also be interpreted in relation to a comment she made during a 1987 interview with John Roberts about flattened spaces in her works serving to contradict the invitational gaze of her figures; that is, while the figures in her drawings gaze outward toward the viewer, suggesting that the viewer is being invited into the pictorial space, the flatness presented in the patterns serves to deny the viewer entry into that space.<sup>15</sup>

Not fully convinced by either of these possible explanations, I asked Boyce why she had chosen to include such severe flatness in *Missionary Position II*, when it appears to be at such odds with the highly representational, referential, and arguably anti-formalist and anti-Greenbergian approach she seemed to have adopted at that time. For Greenberg, flatness was an essential quality in modernist painting, the valorization of which led to post-painterly abstraction and minimalism. Flatness was a means through which art could remove itself from the past and the social or political, and it has been employed by artists such as Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly to encourage an appreciation of the act of painting itself, rather than the depiction of anything *in* the painting. In response to my question, Boyce exclaimed, "I would never have said that I was not a modernist; I would never have called myself an anti-modernist."<sup>16</sup> She further explained that she had never been entirely for or against the high-modernist principles espoused by individuals such as Greenberg and that, in fact, she had used flat pattern to complicate her engagement with, and contestation of, these principles. Much like the 1960s pop artists before her, Boyce was able to critique the principles of high modernism by bringing the flatness found in abstract and minimal works into her highly representational and referential drawings. In doing so, she asserted a position for herself within the frame of modernism, joining a vast lineage of predominantly white, male artists—from Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Frank Stella, and Ellsworth Kelly, who self-consciously sought to draw the viewer's attention to the flatness of the surfaces upon which their works were painted, to Eduardo Paolozzi and Andy Warhol, whose avant-garde works utilized images from pop culture and the mass media but maintained the simple flat color schemes found in minimalism and abstraction.

Although Boyce was keen to claim her own place within the frame of high modernism, her critical approach extended beyond the simple melding of modernist formal techniques with representational and referential imagery. Her use of pattern is rooted in a tradition of privileging so-called low-art strategies within the space of fine art that goes as far back as the English Arts and Crafts Movement (ca. 1880) and Vienna Secession (ca. 1897) of the late nineteenth century. Both developments sought a revival of craft traditions, partly as a critical response to the mechanization and depersonalization of society that had resulted from the Industrial Revolution, but also as a reaction to the low status that craft and decorative arts had acquired after the Renaissance and the gradual disconnection of art from the normal and everyday functions of life. Pattern became a significant feature in both movements, with William Morris producing richly patterned interior furnishings as part of his utopian vision for beauty to enter the homes of both the rich and poor, and Gustav Klimt combining abstract patterns (derived from textiles and Byzantine, Egyptian, and Greek art) with realistic figure painting as a way of

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<sup>14</sup> Gilane Tawadros, *Sonia Boyce: Speaking in Tongues* (London: Third Text Publications, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> John Roberts, "Sonia Boyce: In Conversation with John Roberts," *Third Text* 1, no. 1 (2008): 55–64.

<sup>16</sup> Sonia Boyce, interview by author, London, June 26, 2015.

realizing the Vienna Secession's objective of unifying the fine and decorative arts. The influence of both the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Vienna Secession is clearly evident in several of Boyce's early drawings, particularly in *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986), with its patterns sourced directly from a William Morris wallpaper design, and in *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986), with its compositional structure and patterning so evocative of many of Klimt's works. Her tendency to cut figures off at the edge of her drawings—heads stopping below the nose, bodies cutting off at the shoulder or bust—is a strategy that was also used by Vienna Secession artists to heighten the emotional messages of their artworks.

While both the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Vienna Secession occurred before the advent of modernism, Boyce's use of pattern enabled her to critique modernism's distinction between high and low art in the same way that pattern was used by Morris, Klimt, and other artists of their time to challenge the low status that decorative art had acquired by the end of the nineteenth century. Boyce's use of pattern also served another purpose. The twentieth-century assignation of craft and ornamentation to the feminine sphere and the marginalization of women's creative concerns and practices throughout modernism were radically opposed by the feminist art movement of the 1970s. Crafts traditionally practiced by women in the domestic sphere, such as needlepoint, quilting, and beading, began to be included in works by feminist artists to dismantle the long-standing hierarchy of fine art over craft, and this often involved patterning and decorative techniques. By employing the (now gendered) technique of patterning in her paintings, Boyce underscored the feminist agenda in her work that was already evidenced through her acknowledgment of other important women artists, including de Saint Phalle and Kahlo.

Boyce's early drawings, with their varied and divergent formal techniques and art-historical reference points, at once anchored her practice within the multitudinous artistic traditions that developed between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century and, also, what were then contemporary critical responses to modernism. The art-historical lineages in which she is positioned, and indeed positioned herself, are diverse, ranging from the Arts and Crafts Movement to the feminist art movement, and everything in between. Her interests, concerns, and approach were not simply characteristic of a burgeoning black British aesthetic or movement, as many other appraisals of her work would have us believe, but were part of the broader artistic zeitgeist. Nevertheless, it is only through conducting an object-centered analysis of her early works that her artistic strategies can be fully considered, providing, by extension, a different or additional perspective on her position within art's histories, reaching beyond questions of blackness to offer a more nuanced understanding of her practice and the broader cultural and aesthetic formations to which Boyce has contributed.