

SONIA BOYCE

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SONIA BOYCE

FEELING HER WAY

Emma Ridgway

Shane Akeroyd Associate Curator for the British Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia, 2022

Courtney J. Martin

Director of the Yale Center for British Art



**BRITISH
COUNCIL**

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FOREWORD

It is with great pride and pleasure that I introduce audiences and readers to the exhibition and catalogue for Sonia Boyce's British Council Commission for the 59th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. Ever since 1937 when the British Council first took responsibility for the British Pavilion exhibitions, the Council has ensured that it is one of the most highly anticipated, visited and celebrated national pavilions in Venice – 2022 is no exception.

Boyce came to prominence in the 1980s as a member of the British black arts movement with graphic works focused on race, social issues and gender. Of late her installation-based practice has created immersive spaces exploring the nature of collaboration, improvisation, play and experiment. Boyce's ambitious exhibition places the visitor in a labyrinth of sound and vision, melding a cappella song from female voices, crystalline structures and dynamic imagery to create a visually and aurally eccentric space for exploration that celebrates the histories and achievements of Black British female singers and posits, in turn, new possible futures. Boyce's commission comes at a pivotal point in her distinguished career, and this timely and inspirational exhibition promises to leave a lasting imprint on audiences from all over the world.

Our 2022 Selection Committee chose Boyce for this prestigious opportunity because her work brings people together to explore and create within a context of shared humanity and hope – something our Selection Committee placed great value upon. Boyce's exhibition perfectly complements the work of the British Council – an organisation dedicated to bringing people together across the globe through cultural exchange since 1934.

As part of our work in arts and culture, the British Council builds creative global communities that

inspire collaboration, and stimulate knowledge and prosperity in response to global challenges, which in turn effects positive change and increases trust and understanding around the world. Through major cultural events such as La Biennale di Venezia, we share the diversity and distinctive creativity of all four countries of the UK with international audiences in both face-to-face and virtual encounters, and we make connections between cultural professionals across the world.

With this in mind, we are particularly excited that, with the support of Art Fund, *Feeling Her Way* will be presented at Turner Contemporary, Margate, in 2023, enabling UK audiences to experience this significant new commission. It will then travel to the Yale Center for British Art (YCBA), Connecticut, US, in 2024 – the first time that the British Council Commission has been presented outside the UK or Venice. We would like to thank both Turner Contemporary and the YCBA for their enthusiasm, commitment and collaborative spirit in ensuring this important exhibition travels beyond the Biennale.

We are also delighted that, thanks to the generosity of philanthropist Shane Akeroyd, we continue to offer a UK-based curator the chance to work alongside the artist during this exceptional international opportunity. Following an open call in 2020, Emma Ridgway, Chief Curator at Modern Art Oxford, was announced as the inaugural Shane Akeroyd Associate Curator. We would like to thank Emma for her energetic engagement with all aspects of *Feeling Her Way*, and for her lucid, insightful and compelling essay in this catalogue. We would also like to thank Dr Courtney J. Martin, Director of the Yale Center for British Art, for her interview with Sonia Boyce in this publication, which provides the reader with precious insights into her early development as an artist through a wealth of detail and anecdote.

We have many people to thank for the evolution of this exhibition, but none more deserving of gratitude than Sonia Boyce, who has created such a spectacular and moving installation for the British Pavilion, and who has been a generous, open and cheerful collaborator despite the many tribulations that the pandemic has thrown in our path. We are also very grateful to Niamh Sullivan, who has been so supportive a producer to Sonia's vision.

This exhibition and all its related events would not have been possible without the support and involvement of numerous collaborators and partners. We are particularly indebted to Simon Lee and Georgia Lurie at Simon Lee Gallery for their enthusiasm, dedication and unstinting support throughout the project.

We are proud to welcome our new Headline Partner and iconic British brand, Burberry, and are profoundly grateful to the team there for their vision and generosity in helping to realise the British Council Commission in Venice. We are delighted to be continuing our partnership with Robert Hanea and Mikolaj Sekutowicz of Therme Group and are grateful for their ongoing support and for their insightful and thought-provoking accompanying programme. We are also indebted to Christie's for joining and supporting us on this journey.

We remain deeply grateful to Shane Akeroyd for his leadership philanthropy which supports the Associate Curator position. A project of this scale is the result of many collaborative partnerships and we would like to thank the organisations and individuals who have come together to support the realisation of Sonia's vision. We are especially thankful to: Bianca and Stuart Roden, Jenny Waldman and Sarah Philp at Art Fund, Godfrey Worsdale at the Henry Moore Foundation, Newlands House Gallery, The Lord

Browne of Madingley, Ebele Okobi, Annette A. Anthony, Francesca Migliorati at APalazzo Gallery, Luca Bombassei, Marcelle Joseph and Kimberly Morris at Girlpower Collection, Vanessa Johnson-Burgess, Simon Price and Andy Simpkin for their visionary philanthropy, and to Sigrid and Stephen Kirk, Oba Nsugbe and others who wish to remain anonymous, for their kindness and generosity.

We would also like to thank the team at Yale University Press, and in particular Mark Eastment and Julie Hrischeva, for working alongside us to produce this beautiful catalogue. We must additionally thank the many UK universities whose vital support for our Fellowships programme enables young people to have an important international and creative opportunity in Venice.

Finally, this exhibition represents a huge amount of teamwork both inside and outside the British Council, and I wish to thank all our colleagues, collaborators, partners, friends and the British Pavilion Fellows for their passion and dedication in bringing this exhibition, tour and catalogue to fruition.

Emma Dexter

Commissioner for the British Pavilion
at La Biennale di Venezia
Director Visual Arts, British Council

HEADLINE PARTNER FOREWORD

At Burberry, we believe in the power of creativity and creative thinking to open up new possibilities. This belief is grounded in the words of our founder Thomas Burberry, whose book *Open Spaces* continues to inspire us.

As a brand rooted in the outdoors and founded by a bold thinker, we have always given our customers the freedom to venture into new environments and the courage to step into the unknown.

Thomas Burberry's progressive values and determination to support kindred spirits as they broke new ground remains at the heart of our brand today.

As we proudly take his creative legacy onwards, Burberry is pleased to partner with the British Council to support the British Pavilion at La Biennale di Venezia, 2022.

At Burberry, we believe that diversity, equity and inclusion are essential to fulfilling our purpose and are core to our values. In a year when La Biennale di Venezia will be spotlighting many Black female artists from around the world, Burberry is thrilled to be able to support the British Pavilion in celebrating Sonia Boyce OBE RA, a British artist with a bold creative voice.

We are honoured to be supporting her work alongside that of the British Council, continuing our ongoing belief in the power of creative thinking and its ability to open up new possibilities.

Burberry
April 2022

BURBERRY

PLATINUM PARTNER FOREWORD

Therme Group is proud to partner with the British Council to support Sonia Boyce's major new commission and representation of Great Britain at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, 2022. Marking the fourth consecutive year of collaboration between the British Council and Therme Group's cultural arm Therme Art, this year's British Pavilion presents a historic and conceptually rigorous new work by the artist.

Therme Group's partnership with the British Council supports the shared vision of centring culture at the heart of social progress and collective wellbeing through art, architecture and design across urban environments. The support of Sonia Boyce's new commission at the Venice Biennale directly relates to Therme Art's cultural initiatives to engage in the production of culture and art beyond traditional boundaries.

Boyce's new commission positions the voice as a transformative force. Her experimental and participatory approach to art-making is a direct source of inspiration for Therme Art's mission to support the realisation of art and cultural productions that promote community, belonging and wellbeing. Additionally, the Biennale's groundbreaking cohort of artists reminds us that inclusivity is an essential starting point from which true innovation and progress can sprout. Through a collective spirit and the willingness to push the boundaries of artistic exploration, collaboration gives us the power to unlock our fullest potential as we heal our environments.

As a leading global wellbeing provider designing, constructing and operating the world's largest wellbeing facilities, Therme Group's contemporary urban development proposition combines innovative sustainable technologies with human-oriented design

to build environments that nurture visitors' minds and bodies. As Therme Group's cultural incubator, Therme Art works with internationally renowned artists and architects, as well as emerging talents, to commission and support the development of ambitious, site-specific artistic projects that challenge the limitations of conventional exhibition spaces and propose solutions to our most pressing issues concerning our bodies, our communities and the health of the planet.

Therme Art's support of Boyce's exhibition at the British Pavilion in 2022 follows their support of the British Council's commission last year, *The Garden of Privatised Delights* by Unscene Architecture, an exhibition that invited leading architects and designers to consider and reimagine public space. Therme Art also supported the 2018 British Pavilion, Caruso St John's *Island*, at the 16th International Architecture Exhibition, and the 2019 British Pavilion by Cathy Wilkes at the 58th International Art Exhibition. This year, Therme Art will host its third year of their ongoing programming series, the Wellbeing Culture Forum, inviting experts from the fields of art, design, architecture, science and urban planning to participate in discussions concerning the development of future wellbeing cities.

Mikolaj Sekutowicz
CEO and Curator, Therme Art
Vice President, Therme Group

THERMEGROUP

INTERVIEW:
**SONIA
BOYCE**

Courtney J. Martin

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I

COURTNEY J. MARTIN: Where were you born?

SONIA BOYCE: I was born in the Angel in Islington, London.

CJM: And who were your parents?

SB: Edna Boyce and Donald Hardy. Everyone used to call him Hardy. My mum was from Barbados, my father from British Guyana. They met here in London. My mum talked about arriving in England on Christmas Eve. She went to a party that evening and met my father. Then she went off to Leicester to study nursing, then afterwards came back to London.

CJM: Did she work as a nurse throughout her life?

SB: She came to the UK to study to be a nurse, but she was a seamstress in Barbados. My father was a tailor, but his first job when he arrived in London was to work in Camden as a cinema projectionist. As a young man in Guyana, he was part of a sound system. I didn't get the impression that he came to the UK to do a specific job. He was just on an adventure.

CJM: Did you grow up in Islington?

SB: When I was two or three, we moved to Wapping in East London, and then to Whitechapel. We lived close to Brick Lane until I was 10 and then we moved to Plaistow in the Royal Docks. At that point, my mum was a single parent with five children, and she was adamant about buying a house. At some point in the 70s, she returned to her studies and moved from nursing to social work.

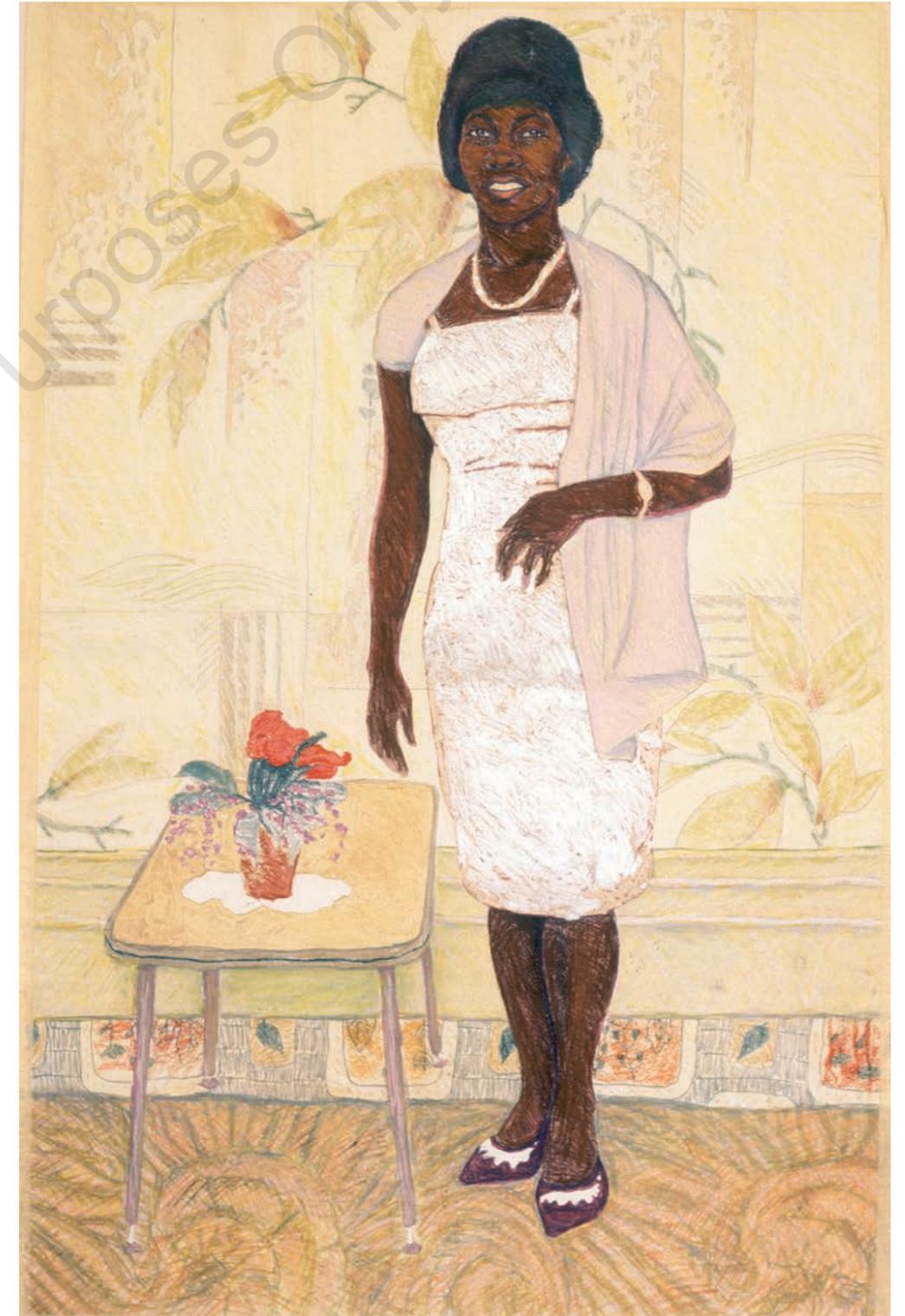
CJM: Do you have siblings?

SB: My mum came to the UK but left two of my siblings in Barbados, who were raised by our grandmother. They came to the UK when I was about three or four. My two other sisters were born here. One just a bit older than me, and one, younger.

CJM: Are you the only artist in your family?

SB: Oh, they're all artistic, not only visually, but also in terms of music and making things. My eldest sister, Marrietta, we tried for years to get her to open a restaurant or pursue a singing career. My brother

Auntie Enid – The Pose
1985. Gouache, pastel and crayon on paper.
183 × 123 cm. Private collection.



was always drawing. I was always drawing. My sister who is slightly older than me, Pamela, she went on to do architecture. Denise, the youngest, works in finance.

CJM: If you and your older brother are drawing all the time and your mother is sewing, does she see herself as an artist?

SB: For my mum, it was a job. I don't know if she thought of it as a creative career.

CJM: What was it like to grow up in London?

SB: In terms of a West Indian community, there were always excursions, usually to the coast. Southend, Essex and Kent coastal areas. I used to love excursions because everybody would pack the same picnic: macaroni pie, peas and rice, fried chicken. Always on the coach coming back, the adults would let us kids have a thimble of rum, which, of course [laughs], knocked us all out.

There were always house parties; surrounded by unguarded moments of reverie without having to look over our shoulders. I was trying to explain to my girls that whenever we went to a house party, there was always food and always drink. Usually about one, two o'clock in the morning, out would come all the food and everybody would eat, like, Sunday dinner.

CJM [laughs]: Had you been to museums?

SB: I love museums. We lived very close to Whitechapel Art Gallery so I used to go in there all the time, even as a seven-year-old. The place I loved the most was the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood. I would go there because I got to play with the mechanical nineteenth-century toys.

CJM: Did you want to be an artist as a child?

SB: I was always drawing, but I wanted to become a dancer. I went very briefly to the Laban Dance Centre, and later, I wanted to join Michael Clark's dance troupe.' From about the age of ten, I started taking dance classes. Between Thursday and Sunday, I was out every evening dancing. When I attended Laban, it felt so strenuous and I thought, 'I can't take this pain.'

When I was 15, Mrs Franklin, who was my art teacher at school, took me under her wing. She said, 'You should be going to art school.' And I thought, well I don't know what that is. She showed me books about El Greco and Picasso. Then she wrote my mum a letter and said, 'I really think your daughter needs to go to the local art school up the road at East Ham. We need your permission for her to be able to go.' And so, from the age of 15, I was going one day a week.

CJM: Was your mother surprised by this?

SB: Uh, she was concerned [laughs]. My very first day of attending was very funny because at school, if you're going to a teacher's classroom that you're not in, you knock on the door and you wait to be ushered in. I stood outside the life drawing class. I didn't know what a life drawing class was and I knocked, but no one answered. People would go in and they'd leave. And then one person who'd done this a few times looked at me and said, 'What are you after? You know, you can just go in.' I must've been standing outside for about 40 minutes. I was waiting for someone to say, 'Come in.'

I went into the room very gingerly. There's this man standing there with no clothes on, and a group of

people who are drawing him at their easels. And I'm like, 'What's going on?' Arthur, the life drawing tutor, said, 'Oh, have you come to the class? Go set yourself up and I'll come and speak to you.' I did not know where to look [laughs]. It was why I needed the letter from my mum to agree for me to go. But then, very quickly, I got very used to going there one day a week, staring at a male or a female model. It was actually useful to be doing both the dance classes alongside drawing because I could start to understand bone structure and musculature. And then, a few years after that, I became a life model myself. It's incredibly boring [laughs].

CJM: From taking the single class did you decide to apply for the Foundation course?²

SB: Yes. I was told by Mrs Franklin that I was going to art school. And then when I was doing life drawing, Arthur said, 'Well now you need to apply for Foundation.' And I didn't know what Foundation was. I then applied for Foundation, because I was told to. I was very compliant.

Foundation was a great revelation. On the course you did modules in design and in fine art. For the first term, you're exploring everything to see what you like. It only occurred to me in later years that it was a very good Foundation course. Many of the tutors that taught me were conceptual artists.

The defining moment on Foundation was Maggie, the art history teacher. I remember her talking about [Kazimir] Malevich and different periods of art. And then she did one lecture on feminist art practice. It was like a fractal explosion in my head. She was talking about the Fenix feminist art collective, of which Margaret Harrison, Kate Walker and Monica Ross were a part. The thing that struck me was that

they were challenging masculinity and they were challenging femininity. It was like a lightning bolt. And I thought, this is what I'm going to do.

CJM: When you thought you were going to be an artist, you thought you were going to be a feminist or you thought you'd be a feminist artist?

SB: I was going to be a feminist artist. It was literally that lecture that made me decide.

CJM: Had you heard of feminism before?

SB: Yes. But not feminist art. This is 1979, about two years after Rock Against Racism.

CJM: Were you a punk?

SB: I was called a punk by a number of people but it's not something that I called myself. I was very interested in punk. I remember once in East Ham this elderly West Indian woman saw me in the street. At that time, I used to wear lots of boys' tailored suits. I was really experimenting with clothes. And this woman came up to me and she spat at me and said, 'How dare you?' And she called me a punk. Because there was so much outrage about punks that people had almost lost their mind . . . that somehow, punks were going to eat their children. So, to be Black and female and perceived as a punk, I'd gone too far. Whereas my friends at school, who knew that half the time I was making my own clothes, used to say, 'Oh yeah. She's the weird one.' And that was fine . . .

CJM: How did you make it from the Foundation year at East Ham to Stourbridge?³

SB: Oh, it's so funny. Now, this is something I didn't know at the time, but our tutors on Foundation were suggesting art schools that might be of interest and Stourbridge was one of them. One of the tutors was David Bainbridge, who's one of the founders of Art & Language.⁴

I didn't know at the time, but there were quite a few conceptual artists teaching at East Ham and I only know this now because of the exhibition that was at Tate a few years back on British conceptual art.⁵ I saw several of my former tutors' work in that exhibition. There's lots of other things to say about that show . . .

CJM: Like the fact that they left Rasheed Araeen out?

SB: Rasheed and David Medalla. According to Rosetta Brooks, the roots of conceptual art in the UK revolved around the works of John Latham, David Medalla and Gustav Metzger and what has happened through their removal from that history has severed the roots of how conceptualism really developed in the UK.⁶

CJM: What were you making?

SB: I was making images. They were always really drawings. I sometimes used paint. The reason I call them drawings is because I was very involved in early feminist art discussions about medium and about representation. I was still on Foundation and there were some debates happening at Saint Martin's School of Art among feminist artists. I can't even remember if there were any other women artists of colour there, but I was there. There seemed to be two camps. Either the Mary Kelly camp, saying that images of women were so problematic that one shouldn't use them. And then there was this other camp that wanted to reinvent images around female representation. It was so tense and fraught that a fight broke out during the discussions. Some went up onto the roof of Saint Martin's, when it used to be in Charing Cross Road, to actually fight it out. There were arguments not only about the bankruptcy of painting, but also about what should be represented and what shouldn't be represented. It was really interesting when the *Women's Images of Men* exhibition opened at the ICA [in 1980].⁷

It was so antagonistic, this question of the medium. Concurrently, I suppose, what was being discussed was the status of women, predominantly white women artists who had been sidelined into flower painting and non-figurative work because they weren't allowed in the life drawing classes up until the twentieth century. There was a debate about craft, about the status of different aspects of making art. There was a sense that somehow painting – because it seemed to represent the pinnacle of art – that only men could occupy that space, which was seen as bankrupt. Even though I was making images, I was making drawings and looking at other women artists who made drawings . . .

CJM: Is that why you're unwilling to call your work painting, even though there is a point at which you are clearly putting paint onto paper or other supports?

SB: Yeah.

CJM: I've always wondered that. I remember once, in an early conversation, you corrected me. I called something a painting. I remember trying to say, 'But there's paint on it [laughs]. What else can it be?' It is interesting to learn the reason that you resist being called a painter.

SB: I suspect Claudette Johnson makes drawings for the same reason. I wrote an essay for Frank Bowling's exhibition at Tate, where I talk about the field of painting as gladiatorial.⁸ You're entering into this arena that is preloaded against artists of colour, women artists, where you have to be like Teflon to enter that field and get to grips with the hierarchies of what 'proper art' is. Only certain people are allowed into that little gateway called proper art.

CJM: Had you ever left London before you studied for your degree at Stourbridge?

SB: For any extended time? No. My mum wanted me to go to either Manchester or Leicester because we have family there [laughs]. She was keen on me going to study somewhere where someone could look out for me. And I was resistant to that and wanted to go somewhere where nobody knew me.

CJM: Were the students mostly local?

SB: No, people came from all over the place, actually. There were quite a few from London. But it has to be said, and this is definitely no longer the case in

If you were doing anything that was considered political . . . then you automatically would be shuttled off to the print room.

terms of higher education, there were 30 of us in our year group, and less than a hundred in the fine art department.

CJM: And who were your tutors there?

SB: I mentioned David Bainbridge – he's the one that I remember most of all. There was a painter called David Ross. I'm going to wind back a little bit. When I went to visit Stourbridge there was a student, Mo White, making feminist work, photo/text-based work. Mo gave me a bit of a heads-up that if you didn't want to have to deal with all the male tutors, you could go to the print room, which was off-site, 5 minutes' walk from the main art college. You were never seen again, so you could get on with what you wanted to do. If you wanted conversations, you could talk with the technicians.

If you were doing anything that was considered political – documentary photographs and text in that conceptual art mode – then you automatically would be shuttled off to the print room. The art school was for painters. Because Mo was clearly making feminist work, I thought, 'Oh, I can come here.'

CJM: Even though she was making it under duress?

SB: She's making it under duress and she's making it away from the central space. As a small student feminist group, it took us two years to get a female tutor, Anne Lydiat, who was part-time as a job-share.

Anne was basically running the course but didn't get tenure.

CJM: Were you the only Black student in your year?

SB: No. The other Black student in my year group, Paul, was a painter from Birmingham. Talitha, South Asian, she was in the year after me. We used to hang out whenever we could but try not to look like we were a crowd [laughs]. There were three Black students that were on the Foundation course, in another building.

CJM: Coming from London, where the visibility of being Black is different, was it difficult to move to such a small town?

SB: Absolutely.

CJM: Why did you stay?

SB: I never thought about going to another art school. They were going to expel me in my first year.

CJM: Why?

SB: Because of the work that I was making. They were unhappy with my progress. And the only reason why I wasn't thrown off the course is because they were too lazy to do the admin to throw me out. I had to send in work during the summer break and then was continuously assessed in my second year.



Towards the end of my Foundation, I started making lots of collages. Paper collages from magazines. I was trying to figure out Black female representation in the media.

CJM: What kind of work were you making in those years there?

SB: Towards the end of my Foundation, I started making lots of collages. Paper collages from magazines. I was trying to figure out Black female representation in the media and magazines. Buying *Ebony* or buying whatever magazine I could get hold of that had images of Black women and I was making collages with them. I was trying to make sense of Black female representation.

The college and the tutors weren't having any of it. This was the bit that I never really quite understood, because they knew what I was making before I arrived and there had been a feminist student group that I met when I went to visit. It was my first choice, the place where I wanted to study. They clearly decided that they wanted me to be there, but maybe they thought they could mould me into something else. The politics of women at art school is such a challenging narrative. The female students weren't taken seriously because the reason why we were let on the course was this idea that somehow, we would become mistresses of the real artists, whether that's the tutors or the male students. It's so shocking.

CJM: In the States, we call that the MRS degree! In all seriousness, it is disappointing to see structural sexism in art. What else were you making at this time?

SB: When I got to Stourbridge I resumed life drawing. There were three life models and I worked with two of them. One called Susan, and another was Marlene. Marlene was the caretaker's wife. They were both great. At times, I would draw myself. I destroyed all of my first-year work because of this moment when they said that I was on the naughty list. When I returned in the second year, I was doing very formal systems-based drawings of playing cards and envelopes. These envelopes were secret ghost letters that I was sending to my mum.

I became interested in different types of papers and different effects. I was using what's called bitumen paper – tar sandwiched between brown paper that I would scratch and spray to achieve various effects, sometimes adding charcoal. I was very narrative-driven at that stage. At some point in my second year, I started making a series of drawings about mermaids. I was intrigued by this idea of the mermaid who would sing so beautifully that sailors would drown.

I remember group crits were so brutal. You'd have a line of staff, all male, and they'd stand there. For lots of art schools at the time, the teaching ethos was to tear that person's intentions apart so they build themselves back up again. I found it virtually impossible to keep track of my intentions to justify what I was doing. My tutors often – rather disparagingly – called me 'post-intentional'. The teaching mode was that you had to know what you were going to do before you've done it, you've mapped out a plan. You don't start intuitively, you don't mess around until you find something. You set out your intention and then you follow that intention.

CJM: Because the object is secondary to the thought?

SB: Each student would get crucified by these once-a-term staff grillings in the studio. Tutors would spend an hour tearing apart something and explaining why it wasn't working. With the large charcoal mermaid drawings, I wanted to talk about the narrative and the ideas and the tutors would talk about, 'Oh, the square up in the corner', and it took me ages to realise they couldn't deal with the content. A way to divert away from the question of subject-matter is to only talk about form.

All the students were railing against this kind of formalist way of teaching. I think it was the *New Spirit in Painting* exhibition where it was clear that figuration and narrative were coming back [1981]. When that exhibition came out, lots of us in that year group were encouraged in the knowledge that artwork doesn't have to be buttoned down to something arid, where content has to be evacuated.⁹

By the time of our degree show, the vast majority of students were doing very figurative work [laughs], which the tutors really couldn't understand.

III

CJM: What were your inspirations or influences as a younger artist?

SB: Discovering Frida Kahlo. Frida Kahlo was in an exhibition with Tina Modotti [1982].¹⁰ Then of course the other show that was also fundamental was *Black Art an' Done* [1981].¹¹ Seeing both shows was another metamorphosis moment. With Frida Kahlo, it was the way in which she was bringing together transcultural references, indigenous Mexican motifs alongside her interest in not only the contemporary, but her connection to what was going on in Europe – her father being German. She brought together these big cultural references in her work. Kahlo was using her personal experience to speak about much wider things. As well as an engagement with surrealism. Seeing her work was like encountering a perfect storm.

Then, of course, seeing *Black Art an' Done*. It was like the same moment I talked about while on Foundation in that art history class, and seeing feminist art practice for the first time that felt immediately current. I hadn't seen anything under the terms of 'black art' before. It was like a thunderbolt. I felt I'd suddenly arrived at something by seeing that work.

Then I really started making, I think I must have spent about a month or so just writing lots of notes about growing up, about my parents' home, about my parents' stories. It just lit this fuse basically around trying to articulate something about the experience of growing up in the UK, from a Caribbean background.

CJM: What happened to all the writing?

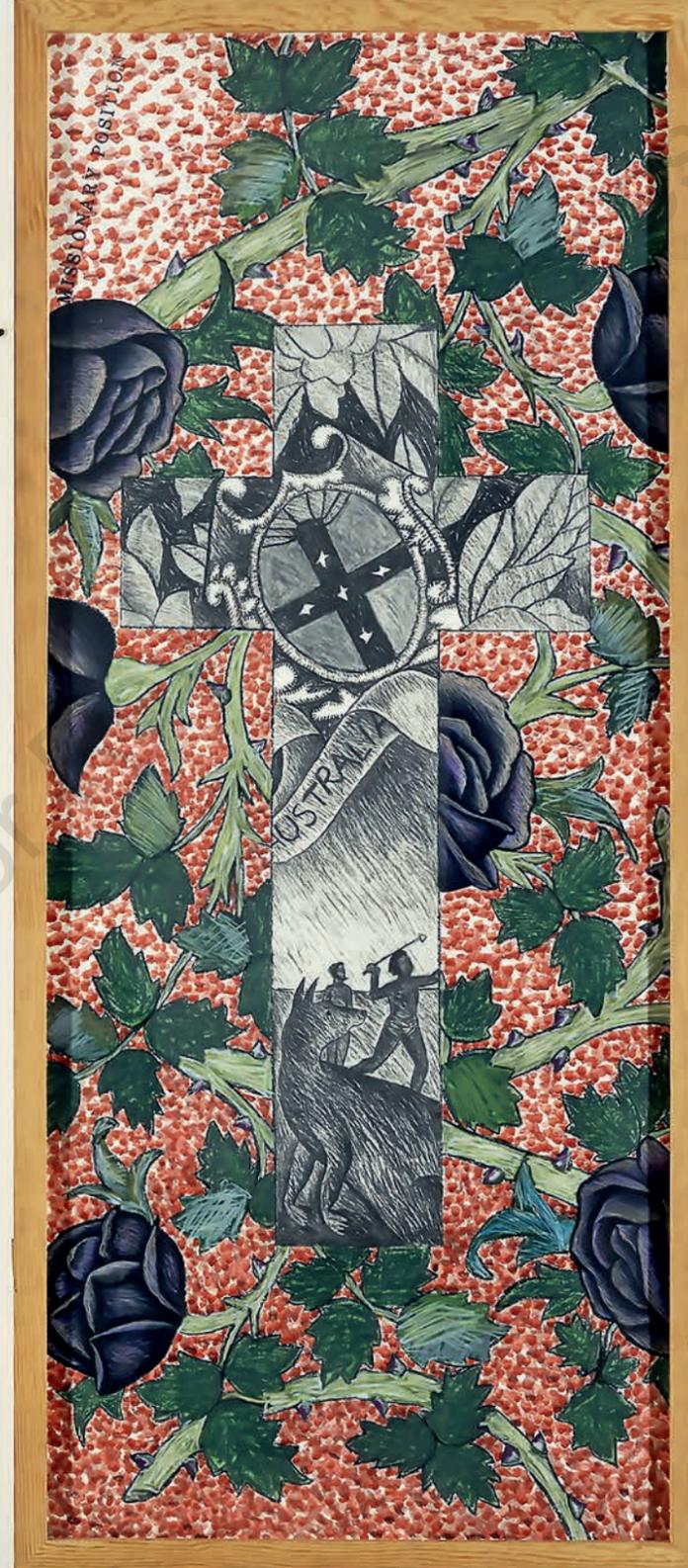
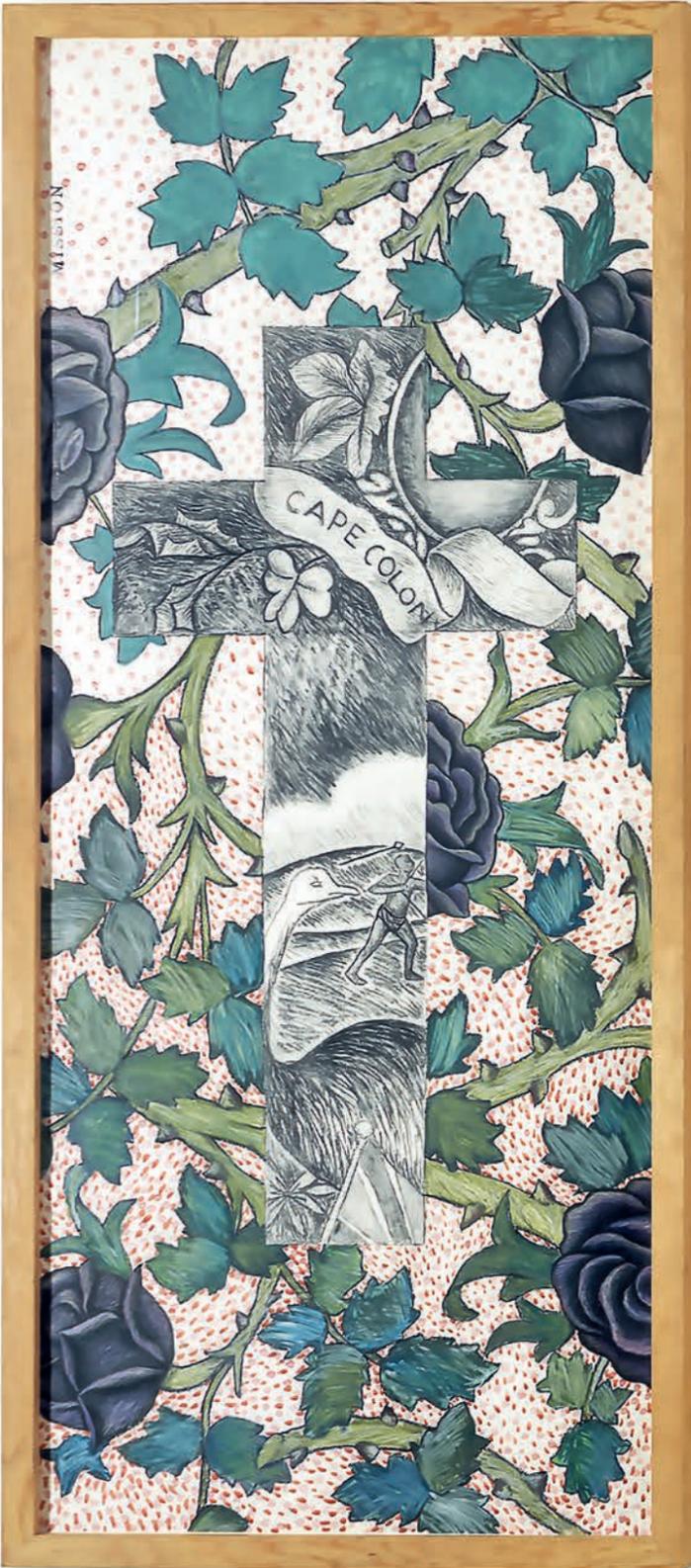
SB: The writing entered some of the drawings. I still do it now. I make constant notes in my sketchbook. In some of the drawings the text became the titles. It became a way to use words as a framing device.

CJM: Did you know that the artists in *Black Art an' Done* are your age?

SB: I could tell that they were young by the nature of what was being discussed. It was the subject matter in the artworks about things like the Sus laws.¹² Narrative-driven work that was very much about being in the UK. I just assumed they were young. They weren't talking about the Caribbean, for instance, or they weren't talking about somewhere else. A lot of it was very raw and emotive. There was something very direct that was being expressed about our times.

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I hadn't seen anything under the terms of 'black art' before. It was like a thunderbolt. I felt I'd suddenly arrived at something by seeing that work.



(previous pages) *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great*
1986. Charcoal, pastel and watercolour on paper. 4 parts, each 152.5 × 65 cm. Arts Council Collection, London.

CJM: After seeing the show, you learned about the First National Black Art Convention.¹³

SB: I then very, very, very sheepishly turned up at Wolverhampton Polytechnic to find out about the conference and met Marlene Smith and Donald Rodney. Then I attended the conference.

CJM: Did you have a sense of who was going to be at the conference, in terms of presenters or speakers?

SB: I was so clueless and when I arrived, going into the auditorium, there were 200 people there. I was like, 'Whoa, how did I not know there were so many Black artists in the country? How did I not know that?' It was an enormous shock. I remember entering the auditorium and walking up the first stairwell to a bank of seats. I saw Lubaina Himid, she nodded at me, I nodded back, and then I went and sat down. The whole experience gave me an enormous amount of confidence.

CJM: About making work?

SB: About making work because I was coming out of this process of hiding, you might say, within the art school. I think I talked about making these symbolic letters to my mother, and it just gave me this huge amount of confidence to speak about what I wanted to say in the work. In some ways, I metaphorically left Stourbridge by joining this much bigger force where I felt that I could speak about these things in art, that it wasn't dependent on what the tutors thought of what I was doing. It gave me the confidence to think, 'Okay, well I'll probably fail for doing all this, but I've just got to do it.'

CJM: Did you go back to school, ease into making different work, or did you immediately start making different work?

SB: Literally, I spent a good couple of weeks just writing. All of the life drawing that I'd done and all the arguments that I'd been involved with, in terms of feminist debates about representing the female body or not, had a purpose once I saw Frida Kahlo's work. I carried around a monograph on her like my life depended on it. I was really studying what she was doing. I reverted to drawing myself because that just made sense.

Arthur, who I mentioned was my life drawing tutor, would chastise me because I always focused on the figure and never put anything in the background. Later, on my degree course, I'd hear his voice in my head saying, 'You've got to put in a background.' So then, out of making lots of notes about growing up and the decorative domestic space of my mother's home, I went to the library to find a book on the history of British wallpapers as a way to find sources that might be used to fill in the background. That's how the drawings started to emerge.

Entering the book, I became very aware of Britain's colonial past. One of the key images is a wallpaper commemorating Queen Victoria's 50th reign over the empire, which I used for *Lay back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986).

CJM: Compositional flatness is key to your work in the 1980s. It is interesting to hear how the choices that you made emerge from having once omitted other elements in life drawing. How did you balance keeping the figure in such a state of prominence compositionally while also having patterning?

SB: That was a fluke in many ways, how pattern fills a space. This is also to do with the time in which this work was made. I talked briefly about my formalist training. Modernism and the flatness of the surface of painting was a very dominant conversation at art school; we were reading Michael Fried's discussions on flatness.¹⁴ When I started to work with both figure and pattern, it was about needing to just fill a space, and then realising actually it does an optical thing that Ernst Gombrich talks about, in terms of how perception makes its own order. He talks about how the eye configures different spatial relations, even if it's all on the same plane. Collapsing the illusion of space that pattern can give was just something that I stumbled across. Pattern can play tricks with the eye. I'm thinking particularly of *Big Women's Talk* (1984). The mother's dress is a flat pattern. Actually, in that artwork I'm making a reference to Niki de Saint Phalle's fool images.

But even though you've got all these folds and of course, if one looks at Japanese nineteenth-century prints, there's something similar that happens with a line that delineates a pattern, you can have a flat pattern and put something over it that suggests a different plane. You read both at the same time. They don't seem out of place together.

CJM: Do you think that there was a black arts movement?

SB: Yeah. We were a presence. There were so many people making work about the condition of being Black. Speaking about our social experiences. I also recognise that some artists felt that they were being corralled into a particular framing of their work, or a particular way of making that wasn't something that they themselves would have automatically chosen.

Big Women's Talk
1984. Pastel and gouache on paper.
122 × 122 cm. Private collection.



But, for many of us, it was like a hive mentality. Each of us affecting each other's work and a mode of working.

I've talked about the black arts movement as a form of institutional critique. Not through the medium, but as a form of collective cultural activism. Making institutions open up. As a movement, for me, it's not about going into one art museum and saying, look at what this one museum is doing. But, actually, it was a conversation across the national art spectrum. I align that very much with what emerged in terms of institutional critique as an art practice.

CJM: When did it end? Or did it end?

SB: It did end. I do think that there are remnants of black art practices that can be seen in subsequent generations. But, overall, I think it ended with the *Other Story* [1989].¹⁵

CJM: Why?

SB: The force of the backlash was about trying to quell the momentum. The critical backlash was institutionally structured. The deafening criticisms of that exhibition were a real setback.

IV

CJM: How did you transition from making two-dimensional work to using sound, making installations and engaging participation in your practice?

SB: When I made *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986), I knew it was the last work that I was going to make like that.

CJM: Are all of the works up to that point part of a series?

SB: Yeah, they can be read as a series. I knew while I was making it I'd arrived at an endpoint. I knew that I needed to find a way out. The end of the 80s and into the 90s were the wilderness years of trying to find my way out of the cul-de-sac.

My work has always been performative. I suppose that's what I recognised in Frida Kahlo. She was performing. It was her as a performance. And so, for me, those works always were quite didactically a performance. The use of pattern and almost like these different, but very shallow, layers still, for me, remain present in the work. I don't feel it's enormously different. I recognise that the lexicon is slightly different. But not the way in which I've constructed things.

And I know when the decisive break came.

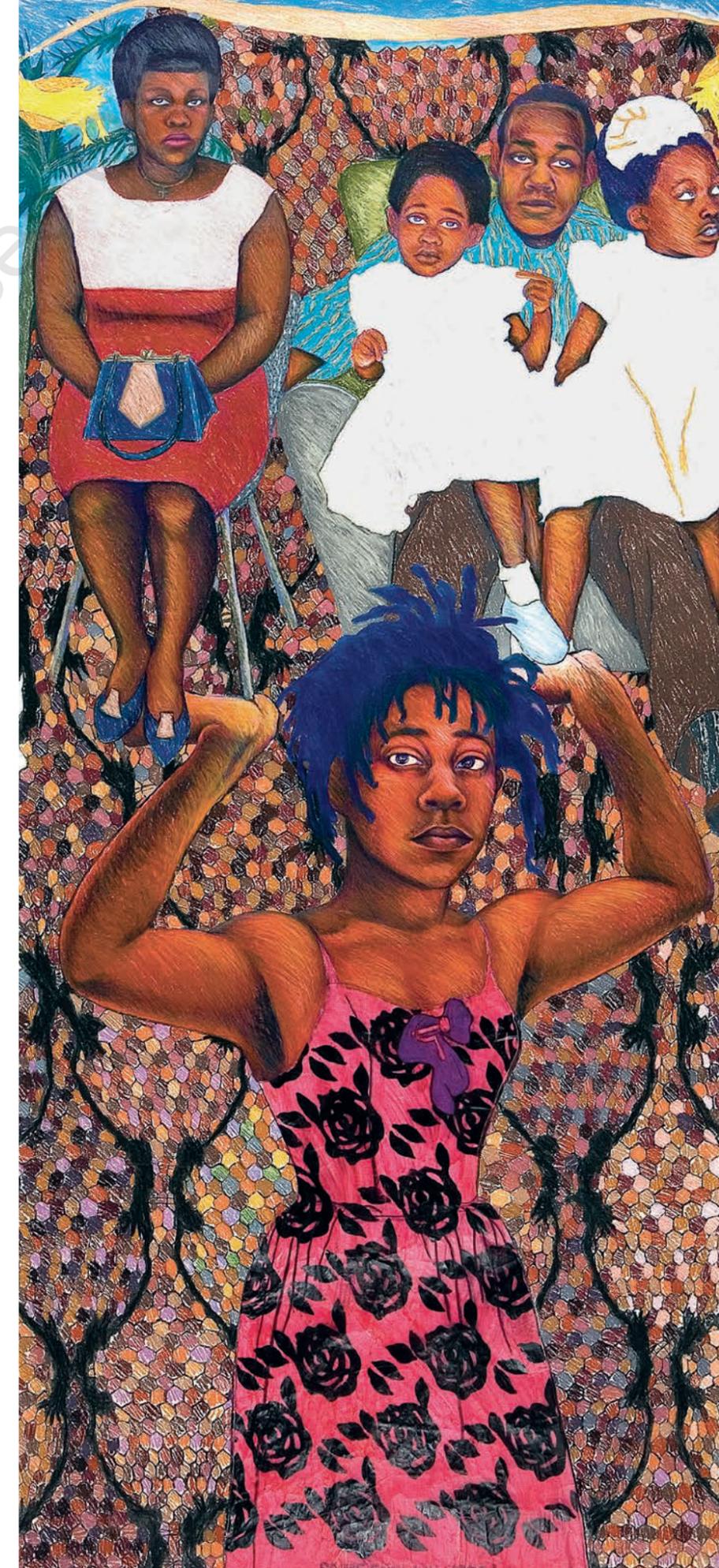
CJM: When was that?

SB: Somewhere between 1992 and 1993. I realised that I had to move out of a way of picture making, but use the elements that I used to make the pictures. It took a while to figure out how to do that.

Two things were going on. One, I was teaching at Goldsmiths. Jean Fisher persuaded the fine art course at Goldsmiths, the MA course, to get me in to teach. Jean then left, and she suggested that I should run the first-year programme of the fine art course.

Goldsmiths was just on the cusp of the YBA [Young British Artists].¹⁶ That was mainly coming from the undergraduate more so than the postgraduate course. There was a crest that was building around Goldsmiths and a cohort of Goldsmiths' students, of which Yinka Shonibare was one. He was studying the year before I took over the first-year programme. He was in the second year of his MA programme, as was Bob and Roberta Smith. Steve McQueen, I think, had just finished on the undergraduate programme.

Basically, there was a lot happening at Goldsmiths. And in the first-year programme that I was running, we were all talking about Sophie Calle. And about the ways in which she was using people in her work. She wasn't working *with* people, but people were making her practice possible. Her work was very much about being responsive to others. This seemed to dominate our conversations in that year.



She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)
1986. Pastel and mixed media on paper.
227 × 113.5 cm. Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art.

//

I was living in Brixton at the time. And I'd walk past the hair shops and think, 'Oh, actually that bit of braiding would work really well.' I was more invested in these things that I was making at home than what I was doing in the studio.

Gillian Wearing was part of that group, along with Janette Parris and Lucy Gunning. It was a very vibrant group of students. A lot came out of that year group, in terms of them going on to do really great things.

At the same time, I was teaching at Glasgow School of Art. Sam Ainsley set up the MFA programme in Glasgow and Dave Harding was running the environmental art programme. Glasgow was on a crest reacting to the Scottish macho painters who dominated the Scottish art scene with almost brutalist male figures populating rugged landscapes. Big, heavy paintings. At Glasgow School of Art, students were encouraged to get out of the studio, use the building, make things in the street, just go outside of their comfort zone. It was very experimental, very collaborative. Students were getting involved with what other students were doing.

I was teaching at both art schools, on a parallel crest that they were riding.

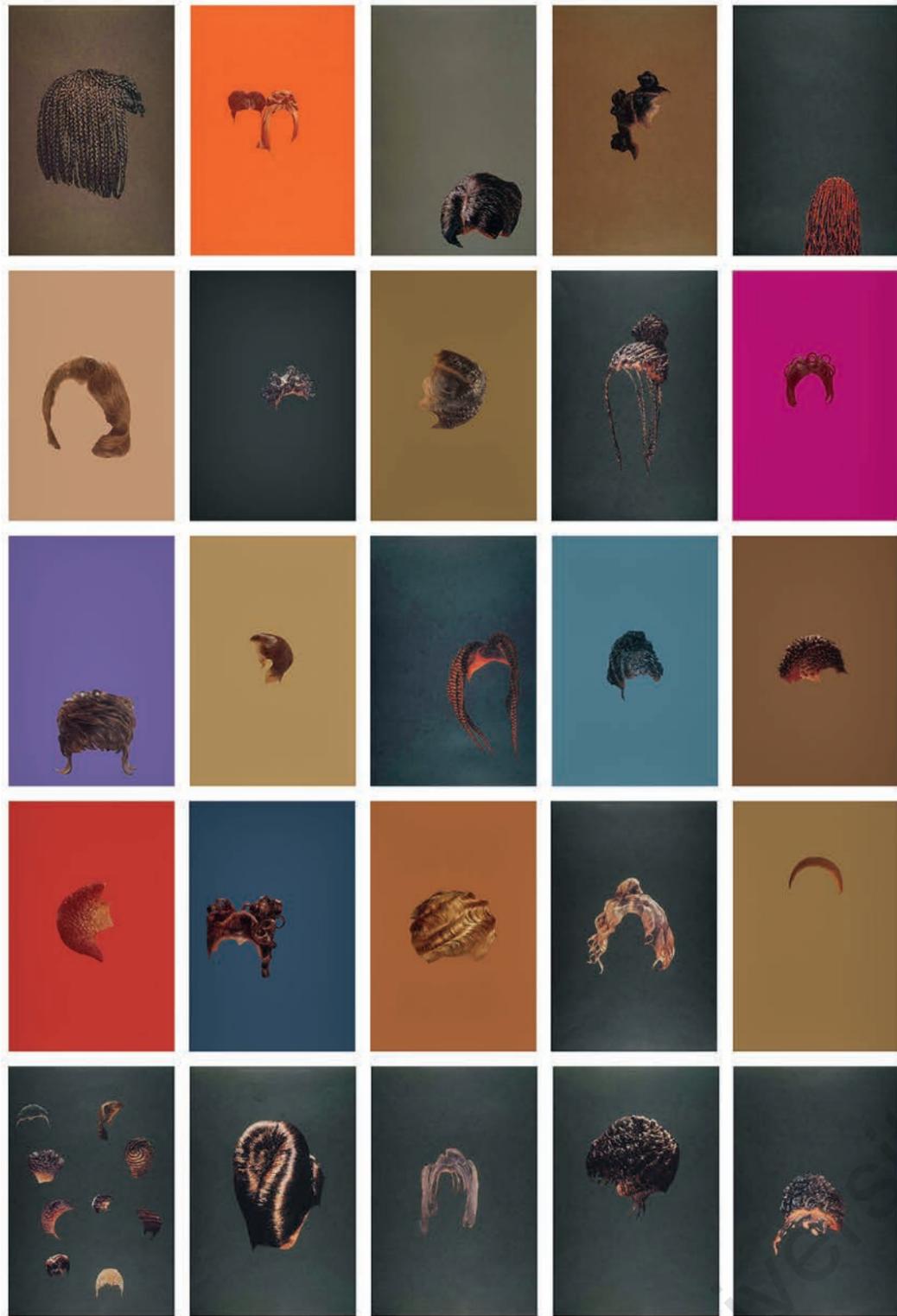
CJM: Those were the two schools that produced many of the artists that were being publicly discussed at the time and later.

SB: And it's just by chance that I was teaching at both. Personally, what was going on with me, I had a studio in Camberwell. I was trying to continue photo-montage images. But at home, I'd taken my hair out of braids and used the hair to make rather odd, plaited objects. Quite quickly, these objects were accumulating in the kitchen. I was living in Brixton at the time. And I'd walk past the hair shops and think, 'Oh, actually that bit of braiding would work really well.' I was more invested in these things that I was making at home than what I was doing in the studio.

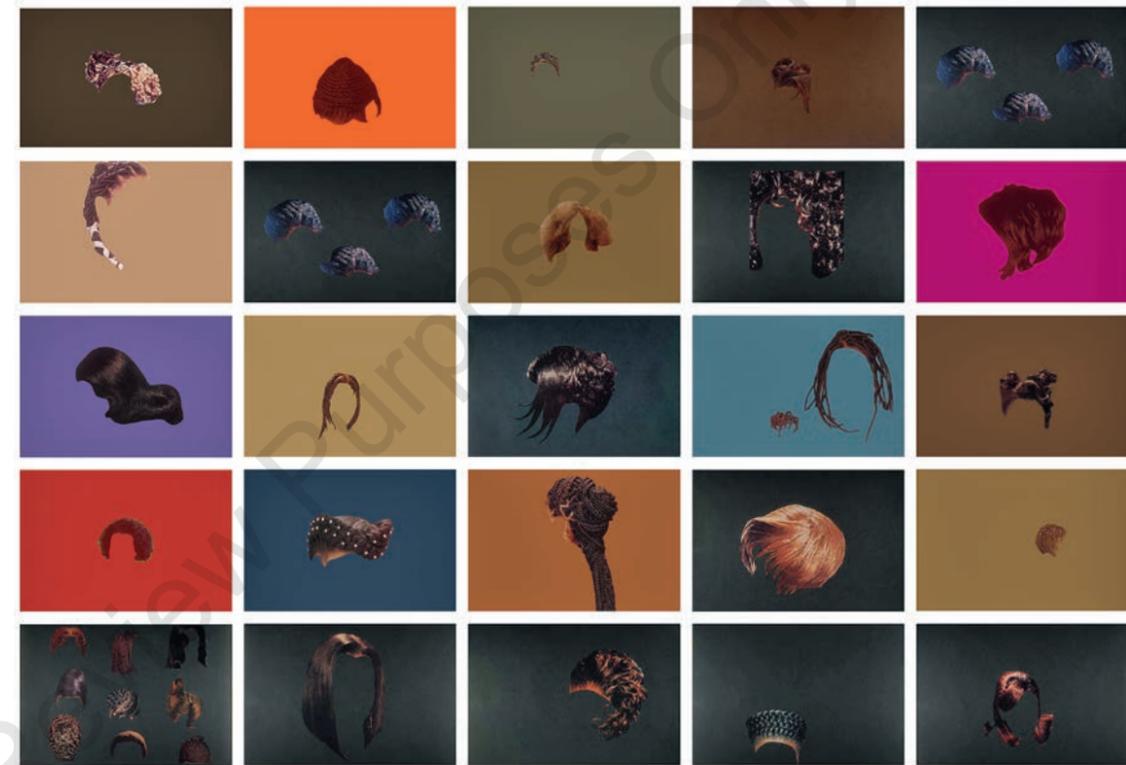
I still call these the wilderness years. At a certain point, I'd made about 50 of these hair objects. And they really troubled me. I didn't know what they were. I didn't know why I was doing them. I didn't know why they were fascinating.

I asked one of my students, Lucy Gunning, a really great artist, whether she would come into the studio and talk to me about what I was making.

CJM: At this point are you having regular studio visits with other people?



Black Female Hairstyles
1995. 25 collages on paper. 156.5 × 113 cm.
Wolverhampton Art Gallery.



Black Female Hairstyles
1995. 25 collages on paper. 113 × 156.5 cm.
Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

SB: No. I'm showing every now and again, but not really. This is, of course, in the aftermath of the *Other Story*. The morning after, you could say.

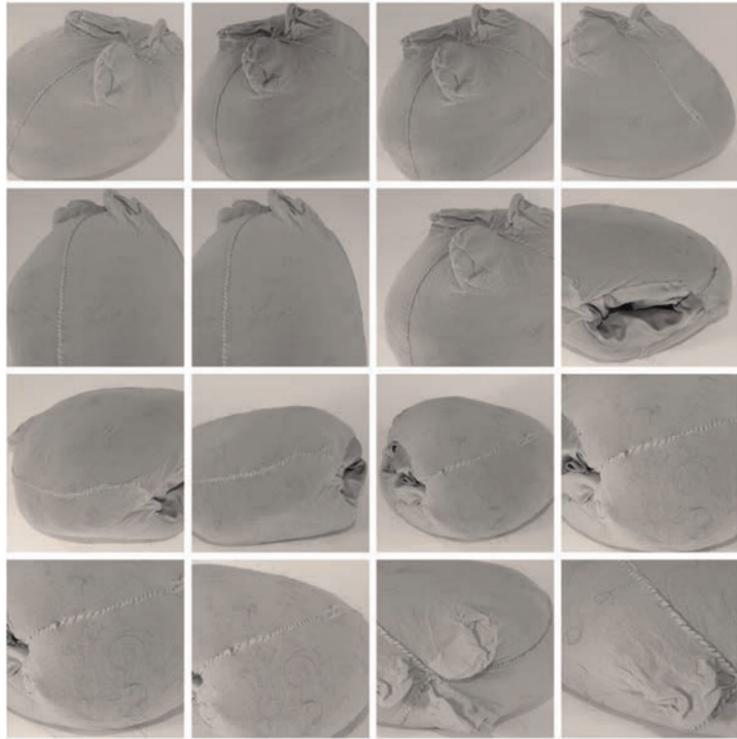
The conversation with Lucy was great, with her commenting that 'They're like these little creatures. It feels like there's been some kind of scalping spree', that there was a real violence in the work, which I, at first, recoiled from. But then, I just thought, 'Well, no, I need to think about that.'

I grouped these hair pieces into an installation called *Do You Want to Touch?* in a very small, independent, council-run gallery in Hammersmith. I started to think about these objects as fragments of the African diasporic body. I was reminded of how as Black people, many people I know and definitely I'd experienced strangers just coming up and touching my hair. Without knowing them, without them realising that the gesture is an assault.

The objects weren't displayed behind glass; they weren't protected. Visitors could get as close as they

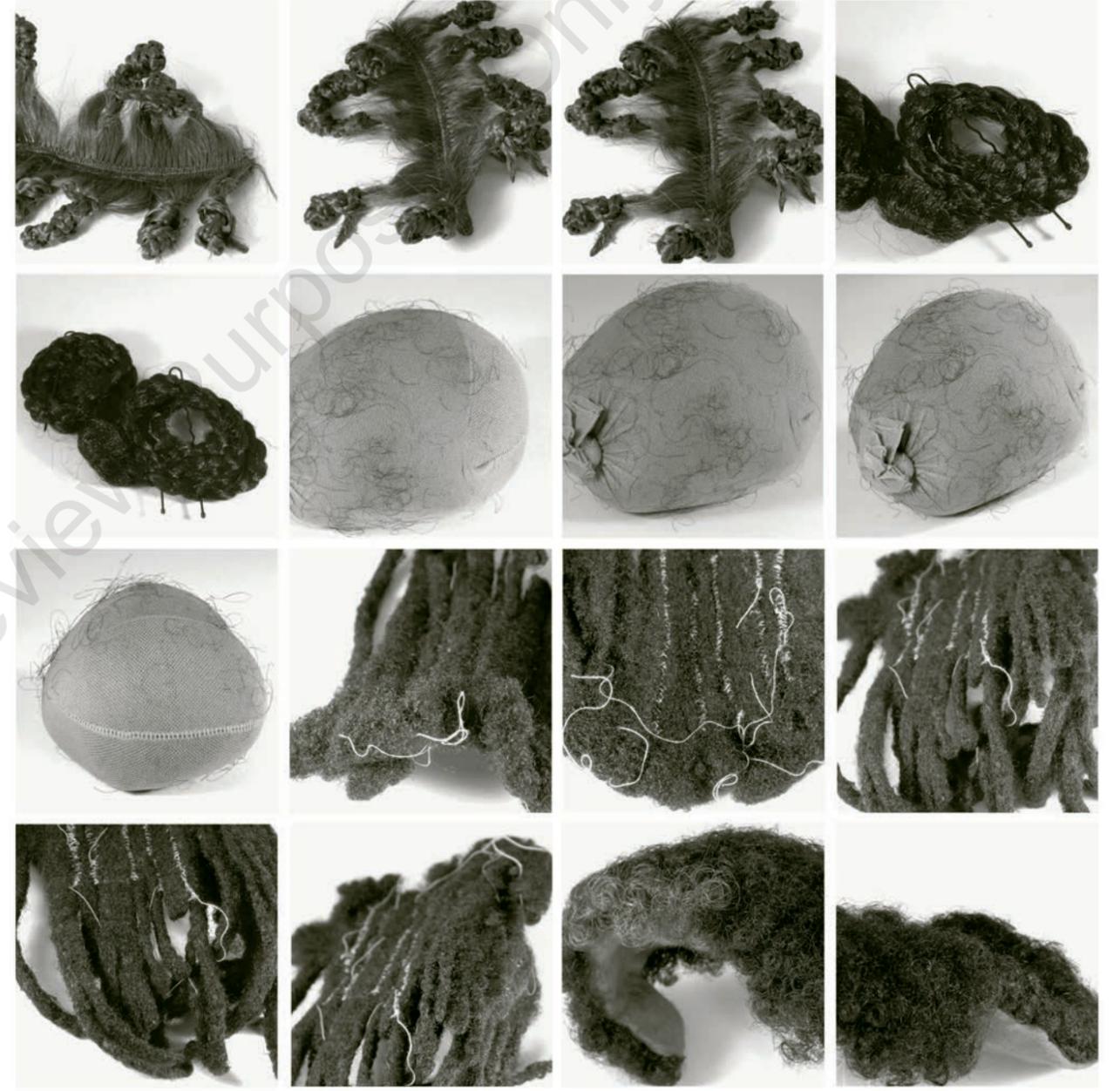
wanted to these things that I was unsure about. Some of the hairpieces were unrecognisably mangled because they'd obviously been handled so much by a viewing audience. By this point, I literally abandoned the 2D work that I'd been trying to press on with, but that just wasn't really going anywhere. And decided that I was going to embrace this, whatever this new thing was.

I then started to ask people whether they would let me photograph them wearing an Afro wig. That took me down another path. In Brixton at that time, but also in most of the hair shops that I visited, there weren't any, what I consider to be good quality, Afro wigs. And for some reason I was in Camden, and I'd walked past a fancy-dress shop. On the top shelf in this party shop was a row of multicoloured Afro wigs. And it's only at that point that the penny dropped about the question of the Black body, the African body fragmented, the relationship between Afro hair and minstrelsy, the attempt to reclaim the Black body by insisting on the Afro as a sign of being proud, but its underside of being parodied.



(top) Three Legs of Tights Stuffed with Afro Hair, from the Do You Want to Touch? series
1994 (printed 2015). Photographic print.
80 × 80 cm. British Photography –
The Hyman Collection, HC 12401.

(bottom) Hair Objects, from the Do You Want to Touch? series
1993. Braided hair sewn, beads, velvet.
26 × 17 × 12 cm. Private collection.



Hair Objects, from the Do You Want to Touch? series
1994 (printed 2016). Photographic print.
100 × 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



So, the question of the clown. The way in which the Afro, if someone who's not of African descent puts on an Afro, people instantly, automatically, unconsciously laugh. What is there to laugh about? And of course, the laughter is about a long historical memory of the African body as a figure of derision.

CJM: Once, I tried to explain this body of work that you're talking about to someone else and somehow, I veered into trying to explain *The Black and White Minstrel Show*.¹⁷ Which, I can't explain. The uncanny has to be unleashed through laughter.

What did you call the new work?

SB: Mixed media.

During that early period, I was interested in magazines, films, music, the question of mass media. I suppose the way in which mass media has such an influence and overhangs our sense of identity. The artwork in Tate's collection, *From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers Her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and Her Roots in Reconstruction* (1987) uses comic book imagery. It probes the question of Tarzan. It uses the photo-booth as an automated device, where you can somehow self-fashion your own image. Though I have to say that the use of the photo-booth was a quiet conversation, not an actual conversation, but was in dialogue with the work of Susan Hiller, who had been working with this format.¹⁸ But earlier than that, some of the work that the surrealists had done.

From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers Her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and Her Roots in Reconstruction 1987. Black and white photographs and photocopies on paper, acrylic paint, ballpoint pen, crayon and felt-tip pen. 125 × 360 cm (with support). Tate, T05021.

This is a very transitional piece, because it brings in the various elements of what had constituted the earlier work, but also led me towards the moving image, sound, performative, new media, multimedia, mixed-media realm.

CJM: Is this when you move into relational aesthetics?

SB: Just as I was about to start a residency at University of Manchester in the Art History Department, Gilane Tawadros was writing the *Speaking in Tongues* monograph.¹⁹ I was already making works where I was asking people whether they would engage with me in the production of the work and of course, it's also because of Gilane, who had been working with David Medalla and Guy Brett and uncovering the history of what had emerged out of Signals Gallery, that I came to know about Lygia Clark.²⁰

It was a continuation of considering Sophie Calle and, of course, Calle's practice emerges from artists like Lygia Clark. I was actively thinking about the question of bringing the audience into the work by the mid-90s.

Reading Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, through the suggestion of Marcus Verhagen, made me realise, 'There is a name for it.'²¹ But also, I started to feel uneasy about Bourriaud's argument because I think it's very romantic. The more I got interested in

what he was trying to articulate, the more I thought, 'Actually, this is hiding a lot.' I feel much more aligned to Lygia Clark because she talks about the messiness and the traumas that lie within relational and object encounters. Whether it's transference or . . . No, she talks about the imagination and the mess and the fearful desire to come together; to be an ensemble.

CJM: What about a project like *GATHER: JUSTICIA* (2010), which is performance that results in a film?

SB: *GATHER: JUSTICIA* was made in Córdoba, Argentina. It was a 'take over' of the former police detention centre in the heart of the city, where it is believed hundreds of people were taken to, tortured and disappeared between 1976 and 1983. It's now a Memory Museum dedicated to unearthing the atrocities of that time. I worked with a choral group for a filmed work and asked them to sing to the many photographs of the 'disappeared'. We were also joined by members of the general public who wanted to bear witness. I think I'm drawn to those moments of resistance. I've never cried so much.

The curatorial team were really interested in a work I'd made a few years earlier: *For you, only you* (2007). It was another watermark moment for me. Mikhail Karikis, the central protagonist in *For you, only you*, draws on – in part – jazz scat, a singer like Ella Fitzgerald, and a complex range of non-linguistic extended vocalisations.



Still from *GATHER: JUSTICIA* 2010. Single-channel video. 5 minutes, 52 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of *For you, only you* 2007. Three-channel video installation. 15 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Manchester Art Gallery.

NOTES

I was in Wisconsin giving a talk about my work, and a student asked me how it was Black. The question sort of pulled the rug from underneath me. I think people are a bit stuck in that they think that representation only means images and recognisable images, especially of the Black figure.

I can hear a modernist transatlantic journey in the background of *For you, only you* – albeit framed within the context of Renaissance choral music, but as a disruptive force. Not that I'm looking to represent Blackness in a didactic or disruptive way; a Black presence is in the granular aspect of the work, but audibly. What that has led me to think about, particularly working with Mikhail, is the relationship between Dada and jazz scat and that early modernist moment. And that's what *Exquisite Cacophony* (2015) (pp. 72–3) draws on, it's about the relationship between extended annunciations, making words fail, and the crisis of that early twentieth-century moment that retains its legacies today: post-slavery, infused by the practices of the Pentecostal Church, as well as emerging out of the First World War.

One of the last conversations I had with Okwui Enwezor, when he was putting together *All the World's Futures*, was about the question of field hollers.²² I've been listening to a few, not many, I need to do much more research. What I've heard is incredibly emotional, and the vocalists move between the linguistic and the non-linguistic. From lyrics to a howl. I keep thinking, how does one transcribe that, can you . . . it must be possible to transcribe it? What would that look like? It would probably look like some of the sonic scores that Dadaists made, the nonsensical, where nothing makes sense.

CJM: Within an argument like this, within a conversation like this, this is where I would put forward that something like [John] Cage's 4'33", 4 minutes, 33 seconds, is ultimately about white silence. And not only would I say it is passive, because I think that's one level of it, but it is also

the active disallowance of the noise that is there at all times to be recognised. It is an enforcement of that silence.

SB: Oh, I can see you writing that essay.

CJM: If only I had time for it.

SB: Oh, you've got to.

CJM: One day, one day.

1. The Michael Clark Company was founded in 1984. Clark is a dancer and choreographer known for breaking with his classical training to experiment with a range of styles, using popular music and working with visual artists.
2. Boyce attended East Ham College of Art and Technology from 1979 to 1980. In 1985 it merged with West Ham Further Education College to form Newham College.
3. Stourbridge College of Technology and Art was formed from previous entities in 1979. In 2003 it merged with Birmingham Metropolitan College and in 2019 it closed.
4. Art & Language was a conceptual art group that challenged the assumptions of mainstream art practice and criticism. It was founded in 1968 by Bainbridge, Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin and Harold Hurrell.
5. *Conceptual Art in Britain, 1964–1979*, Tate Britain, London, 2016.
6. Rosetta Brooks, 'An Art of Refusal', in *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965–75*, ed. Clive Phillpot and Andrea Tarsia (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2000), p. 32.
7. There were a trio of feminist exhibitions held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, in the autumn of 1980, of which *Women's Images of Men*, on view from 4 to 26 October, was the first. Curated by artists Joyce Agee, Jacqueline Morreau, Catherine Elwes and Pat Whiteread, the show travelled to regional institutions throughout Britain for a year after it closed in London.
8. Sonia Boyce, 'From Substrate to the Riverbed', in *Frank Bowling*, ed. Elena Crippa (London: Tate Publishing, 2019), pp. 70–77.
9. *A New Spirit in Painting* was on view at the Royal Academy of Art, London, from 15 January to 18 March 1981. The all-male group show explored the concept of neo-expressionism with a wide range of American, British and German artists, including Frank Auerbach, Picasso, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Robert Ryman and Andy Warhol.
10. The exhibition of Kahlo and Modotti was on view at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, from 20 March to 2 May 1982. Notably, this was the first time that Kahlo was the subject of a solo exhibition outside of Mexico.
11. *Black Art an' Done*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 1981. With Eddie Chambers, Dominic Hawes, Andrew Hazel, Ian Palmer and Keith Piper.
12. An outgrowth of the Vagrancy Act of 1824, the 'Sus' or 'suspected person' law allowed police to stop, search and arrest people on the basis of suspicion of criminal activity. The Sus law was repealed in 1981.
13. The First National Black Art Convention to Discuss the Form, Functioning and Future of Black Art was organised by the BLK Art Group on 28 October 1982, and was held at Wolverhampton Polytechnic (now Wolverhampton University).
14. Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 1967.
15. *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* was curated by Rasheed Araeen for the Hayward Gallery, London. On view at the Hayward from 29 November 1989 to 4 February 1990, the exhibition toured to the Wolverhampton Art Gallery and then City Art Gallery and Cornerhouse in Manchester through to the summer of 1990. Seven of Boyce's works were included in the exhibition.
16. This term was used to describe a group of London-based artists that came to notoriety in the early 1990s.
17. *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was a BBC primetime television show (from 1958 to 1979) that featured performers in blackface.
18. Susan Hiller's *Midnight – Baker Street* (1983) is one such example.
19. Gilane Tawadros, *Sonia Boyce: Speaking in Tongues* (London: Kala Press, 1997).
20. Signals London (first known as the Centre for Advanced Creative Study) was a gallery founded by artists David Medalla, Gustav Metzger and Marcello Salvadori, critic Guy Brett and Paul Keeler. From 1964 to 1966, the gallery showed a host of experimental art (installation, performance, technology, and so on) by international artists and produced an influential newsletter.
21. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).
22. A field holler is a type of work song consisting of a long, loud, musical cry or shout, originally sung by Black slaves in the US, which later contributed to the development of the blues.



The Audition
 1997 (printed 2018). 390 C-prints on paper.
 29.9 × 19.9 cm (each photograph).
 Tate, P82514.



The Audition in Colour
 1997 (printed 2020). 75 photographic prints.
 30 × 20 cm (each photograph). Courtesy of the
 artist. An edition of this work is held by the
 UK Government Art Collection.

SHE FEELS HER WAY

Emma Ridgway

*I am in love with the wonders of life
Aye, in love with the struggle, the joy and the strife:
For the beauties of rivers, of love and of flowers,
of poetry, music and moonlight are ours.*

Una Marson, *In Love*, 1930¹

In the botanical gardens of Venice, within the terrain of the official Biennale, stands the tree-flanked British Pavilion.² It resembles a country house in the Italianate style. Inside, the six gallery rooms of the exhibition space are occupied by a solo show of artist Sonia Boyce titled Feeling Her Way. The site-specific installation is an expanded collage, a layering of tessellating wallpapers of clashing colours, golden geometric structures replicating pyrite, and monochrome moving-image works, which immerse the space in the emotive sound of women singing.

Sonia Boyce called the exhibition Feeling Her Way to foreground her artistic process: finding her way intuitively, letting go of expectations as situations change, working with others, in iterative stages, to create new work. Feeling her way forward is Boyce's creative principle, art practice as a form of enquiry. Boyce's work is centred on interpersonal dynamics and improvisation. In her own words, this is explored through 'how one represents identity, but in a very performative way Of performing towards an audience.'³ This installation continues Boyce's Devotional Collection, a celebration of the contribution of Black British women to the music industry and of their listeners. In Feeling Her Way, Boyce seeks to bring people and their voices, conversations and playful interactions together, to discover new forms of expression.

1

BOYCE'S ART

A swift review of Boyce's practice informs what has led her to Feeling Her Way. The artist came to prominence in the mid-1980s, claiming a new place in art history for Black British female subjectivity. In the vibrant works on paper she produced during this period in oil pastels, paint and cut-outs, she herself is the central subject. At times her figures gaze out directly at the viewer, concise texts annotating the ambiguous situations she presents. Early in the 1990s, she abruptly stops depicting herself, pivoting in a conceptual direction. No longer confined to one picture plane, her works leap into the space with the viewer, introducing humour and unpredictable social dynamics to the mix. She employs photography and ready-made objects, combined with invitations to engagement, along with instructions, for participant viewers. The figure remains central, although sometimes in the form of fragments: signifiers of Black bodies such as Afro hair, women's voices singing or hands clapping. In her participatory works a broad range of subjectivities appear; race and gender are at times contrasted, at times united, with identity represented, as she herself explains, as 'being very self-aware of being looked at'.⁴

As an ongoing form of experimental enquiry, Boyce's aesthetic is necessarily dynamic; her representation of identity is expanded by the wide range of collaborators she engages with as she shifts between mediums. The 1990s see her move into innovative social art practice, video and installation. Contributors are from identifiable communities, whether defined by locale, life experience or profession, such as performers or visual artists. Her approach becomes iterative: Boyce creates specific situations framed within cultural reference points that intrigue her, in which she recruits participants to speak, sing or move freely in relation to their own experiences. When she documents these one-off improvisations, the footage becomes material that Boyce shapes into unconventional art installations. Within her ever-expanding practice, she often relocates the activities of one community into another setting, intuitively juxtaposing people who appear intrinsically different yet are shaped in relation to one another. In Boyce's compositions, she sets out to confront viewers with unexpected encounters from real life, such that our attention is drawn to the continuous power dynamics at play. To understand Boyce's serendipitous route to *Feeling Her Way*, it is important to attune to some of the recurring tropes in her work, which often appear as voices, patterns of imagery or transnational histories.

POWER IN SPEECH

Feminist academics have long been exploring women's conversations as expressions of power, concepts that are mirrored in Boyce's own practice. Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero articulates the importance of women narrating their own unique identity, developing Hannah Arendt's

characterisation of power as the potential that springs up between people when they act 'in concert'. For Arendt, this first requires paying attention to how speech and action reveal 'who' a person is, rather than hasty assumptions about 'what' they are.⁵ Cavarero's work expands on how people show who they are through vocalisation, suggesting that an individual's corporal identity – of body and voice – is dependent on the presence of others for its location. We are a self in relation to others, not a singular 'I'. Cavarero elucidates that this is not an abstract idea: we all instinctively learn it from our mothers, their bodies and rhythmic melodic voices initially orientating us in the world.⁶ We later come to intuitively know that we perceive *who* an individual person is when they show themselves to be 'a narratable self with a unique story . . . immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory'.⁷ Self-narration, vocalising personal stories to make sense of the world, is characterised as being 'a feminine art', and one that values the fragility and uniqueness of each individual life. This shows humanity is pluralistic, our lives and selfhood shaped mutually in relation to one another.

However, the centrality of self-narration – expressing the multiplicity of lived experience – has been repressed in Western patriarchal hierarchies of knowledge. Françoise Vergès calls for a 'decolonial feminism' accompanied by a continuous sung narration: 'songs of struggle – Black spirituals, revolutionary songs . . . songs of colonised people'. She calls for the creative energies of feminist communities to turn towards emancipatory dreams that include resistance, freedom, kindness and wonder. This is an implementation of utopian thinking as 'an uplifting energy and force . . . as a gesture of rupture', that will 'expose the imperialist

forces that crush dissent'.⁸ Classicist Mary Beard also believes we must now think of power in a new way. Public voices and the right to be heard have been 'exclusive practices and skills that define masculinity as a gender' since the ancient world – and we now need to conceive of power anew: 'It means thinking collaboratively about the power of followers not just leaders . . . the ability to be effective, to make a difference in the world, and the right to be taken seriously, together as much as individually.'⁹ We can recognise these fresh definitions of power at play – collaborative and narratable selves – in Boyce's *Feeling Her Way*, an installation that represents identities as multi-vocal, underlining her pluralist understanding of humanity.

SELF-NARRATION

The heart of Boyce's practice asserts the ways in which individuals are seen, finding a voice for expressing and situating oneself and others in the current moment in time. What becomes apparent in Boyce's narration of her own trajectory is that certain conversations and encounters have acted as seminal pivot points in her artistic approach.

Her early career, an intense period of self-narration through art, gained direction from a trio of events that fundamentally changed her understanding of contemporary art. While on her Foundation course in 1979, Boyce's art history tutor told the class about the Fenix feminist art collective, explaining there was a whole range of new art being created which focused on, in Boyce's words, 'the experience of now and was really connected to life, life that was being lived. And you know, that was my first real epiphany – when I decided that I was going to become an artist.'

Boyce was studying at Stourbridge College in the West Midlands when she visited the exhibition *Black Art An' Done* at Wolverhampton Art Gallery in 1981. She explains that seeing that exhibition 'was immediately about now; now and the experience of being black. It was really dynamic and it . . . gave me license . . . the trigger for me to start. I just wrote loads and loads about growing up. About my mum.' A year later, she attended an event advertised on a flyer with the words 'Calling All Black Artists & Art Students. We, a group of Black art students based in the West Midlands, are planning the First National Black Art Convention. To be held at the faculty of Art and Design, the polytechnic, Wolverhampton . . . To discuss the form, functioning, and future of black art'.¹⁰ The three experiences galvanised the foundational principles of Boyce's practice: to pay close attention to what is happening in life now; to make her own subjectivity and her lived experience a legitimate focus of her artwork; and to be in dialogue with other artists, both historical and present, through active conversations.



From Someone Else's Fear Fantasy
1987. Acrylic paint, ink and felt-tip pen on photograph. 120 × 80 cm. Private collection.



Talking Presence
1987. Pastel on paper on photograph with acrylic paint. 183 × 123cm. Private collection.

Clapping Wallpaper
1994 (remade in 2010). Printed wallpaper.
Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Boyce describes the Black Art Convention as a '240-volt experience'. For those of us not present that day, art historian Ella S. Mills's meticulously pieced-together account is illuminating. The event included a talk by artist Claudette Johnson, the only female speaker. Through a slideshow of art historical paintings, she argued that in the history of painting, Black women have not been depicted fairly or as equal to others, contrasting them with her own work, in which Black female subjects are central to the composition and occupy the picture assertively. However, the subject of Black women's depiction in art was rejected by a number of vocal men at the conference, and Johnson was aggressively shut down, leading to most of the women attendees leaving the room to find a new space. Through their action, according to Mills's account, 'We witness the moment when, symbolically, the women of the Black British Art Movement refuse a non-discussion and instead choose their own space to talk to one another and, crucially, to talk about their work.'¹¹ For Boyce, the outcome was transformative: the artists she met that day – particularly Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson and Marlene Smith – championed each other's work in these early years, organising group exhibitions such as *Five Black Women* (Africa Centre Gallery, 1983) and *The Thin Black Line* (ICA, 1985). Boyce's existing interest in the figure as central to her work was consolidated in these years, and the depiction of Black British women occupying space in their own way is an anchor that still sustains her, as is evident in *Feeling Her Way*.

SELF-CONCEPT IN DIALOGUE

The title of Boyce's first solo show was *Conversations* (Black Art Gallery, London, 1986). The exhibition included the work *Big Women's Talk* (1984) (see p. 26), a large oil pastel and collage drawing of a child leaning on her mother's knee listening intently, the two of them surrounded by the patterns of

domestic wallpaper and fabric. Such works blend the influence of wallpaper designs by British artist William Morris (1834–1896) with the interior styling of Afro-Caribbean British homes, characterised by layers of designs, patterns and colour. As Jean Fisher has written, these innovative stylistic combinations seek 'a new expressive language that, in taking on the continuities and discontinuities of generational memory, move(s) emphatically towards the reparative space of "working through" [...] negotiating a passage out of the lassitude of trauma to found new narratives to express a belonging commensurate with contemporary realities.'¹² Further early works also draw on recollections of family relationships. One is *She Ain't Holding Them Up, She's Holding On (Some English Rose)* (1986) (see p. 29), a dramatic dream-like composition in which Boyce is positioned centrally holding up her family members, all of whom return the gaze of the viewer. It is directly inspired by Frida Kahlo's painting *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* (1936).

Boyce's self-depiction directly in relation to colonial history begins with *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain So Great* (1986) (see pp. 22–3). The artist uses a Victorian wallpaper design featuring Queen Victoria as a backdrop to place herself within the narrative of empire. She consciously addresses the imposition and internalising of racial stereotypes in her collages of sequential portrait photographs – with her eyes closed indicating an internal visualisation, she transforms from King Kong to a butterfly in *From Someone Else's Fear Fantasy* (1987). Racist and primitivist tropes of African-diasporic cultures feature in *From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction* (1987) (see pp. 36–7). All these works, Boyce tells me when we talk, relate to desire for, as well as fear of, the Other. Direct interpersonal desire is most clearly expressed in *Talking Presence* (1987), a seductively elegant and intimate image





(left) *Untitled (Kiss)*
1995. Photographic print. 300 × 300 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

(opposite) *Tongues*
1997 (printed 2021). 4 photographic prints.
100 × 100 cm. Private collection.

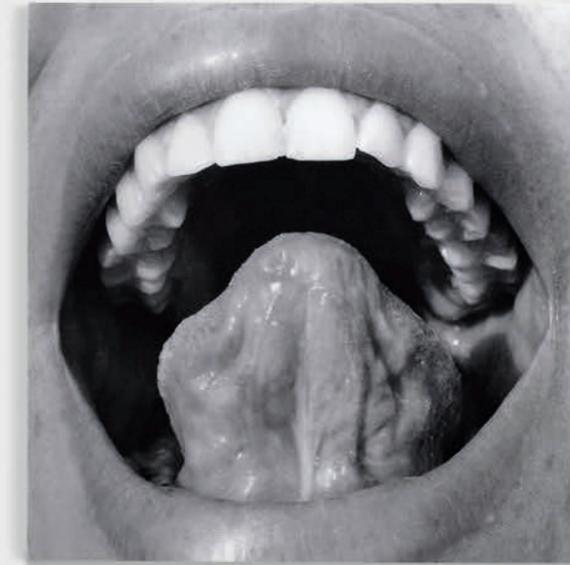
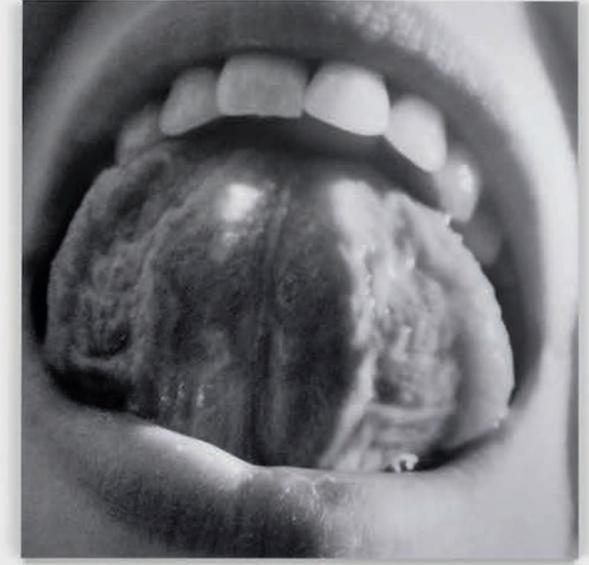
of two naked Black bodies at rest high above a vibrant collage of a brightly lit London (see p. 49). In 1988, Boyce would create her first video work, a collaboration with Eddie George and Trevor Mathison of Black Audio Film Collective, for the concert for Nelson Mandela's seventieth birthday tribute at Wembley Stadium, London. It would be another ten years before she revisited the medium of video.

IMPLICATING THE AUDIENCE

Boyce's fundamental creative process, established in her earliest works, would drive her practice in the decades to come. Each body of artwork establishes a new visual language to explore identity and 'belonging' within contemporary realities, arriving at a fresh sense of an individual's own agency by 'taking on' and 'working through' the narration of generational and personal memories that affect lived experience. Within five years of the ground-breaking moment she experienced at the Black Art Convention, Boyce became the first Black woman to have her work acquired by Tate, followed soon afterwards by the Arts Council Collection. In 1990, the British Council Collection acquired *Pillowcase* (1990), a large text-based work comprised of personal ads that pre-date the era of social media. This marks the point at which Boyce removes herself as the subject and makes the identity and private desires of others into artworks exhibited for public consideration.

She cites as a further 'pivotal moment' the intensive discussions she had with her students about a particular work by French artist Sophie Calle: *The Hotel, Room 47* (1981), in which Calle gained employment as a cleaner in order to access the private belongings of hotel guests, which she surreptitiously photographed as signifiers of their identity. In 1992, when she was teaching on the first year MA Fine Art Programme at Goldsmiths, ongoing conversations generated by the students (who included conceptual artist Gillian Wearing) focused on Calle's interaction with the audience. '[Calle] was outside of the studio', Boyce explains. 'She was going out and doing things; engaging with people in ways that they were aware of, or not. . . . It had a direct influence on everyone in the group.' These ideas would impact Boyce's work going forward – including her use of photography, props and requests or instructions to strangers – bringing in a playful provocation around identity that puts people into uneasy relation to one another.

The awareness of being seen by an audience during a private moment of encounter is a recurring feature of this era of works, along with Boyce's ongoing fascination with the work of William Morris – particularly his use of repeated patterns to evoke outdoor environments within interiors. *Clapping Wallpaper* (1994) is Boyce's first wallpaper. Originally printed in orange and white, it features a close-up photograph of two pairs of hands clapping, repeated as a pattern that suggests an



applauding audience. It was made for a group art installation with the artist collective Bank, whose ingenious Dada-esque exhibitions included pointed narrative conceits as games for invited artists and adventurous viewers. In the exhibition *Wish You Were Here* (1994), staged as the flat of a Shoreditch yuppie,¹³ Boyce's *Clapping Hands* covers all the walls of the fictional living space, satirising with silent applause the pretensions of the wealthy young incomers then gentrifying the area. Her *Afro Hair Blanket* (1994), created from 37 Afro hairpieces, also features in the installation, casually draped over a double bed, underlining the racial tensions inherent in gentrification and their intersection with the fetishisation and objectification of the Black body.

In 1995, a critical group exhibition at the ICA focused on the works of Frantz Fanon, entitled *Mirage: Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*. Boyce critiqued Fanon's contempt for interracial relationships in her contribution to the show. As art historian and curator Gilane Tawadros recalls, Boyce hung 'a massive colour print of a mixed-race couple (a black woman and a white man) which she installed in a narrow space . . . [and] on the opposite wall, facing the image of the couple at the point of kissing (see p. 52), Boyce hung two small images – one of an all-white audience clapping and the other of a black audience'.¹⁴ Curator David A. Bailey describes her contribution as an 'arena for miscegenation', compelling viewers to look at a union rendered taboo by the binary and essentialised notions of race prevalent at the time. As Tawadros acutely observes on Boyce's practice from 1984 to 1997, 'the dividing line between private and public [is] once again ruptured and the audience's simultaneous absence and presence in many ways become the subject of the work'.¹⁵

The delight and discomfort arising from people's assumptions being disrupted runs throughout Boyce's practice, particularly in relation to voices. Boyce attributes the shift she makes towards the use of speech and words in her work during the 1990s as the result of a negative verbal encounter she had in Havana, Cuba, along with 'a pivotal moment' of intensive conversation about relational aesthetics with her students at Goldsmiths College, London. In 1997 she joined a group of international artists on a trip to Havana, organised by the Triangle Arts Trust. In the hotel where the group were staying, she entered an elevator, only to be assailed by a security guard who, she recalls, 'jumped in the lift, held the door and was speaking at me really, really fast in Spanish'. She repeatedly responded, saying, "I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish." First of all, he could not hear it. Then, when he heard, he was completely thrown, just furious'. Boyce believes it's likely she was the subject of mistaken identity; during that era in Havana, the only Black women who would be seen entering hotels were either cleaners or sex workers. Boyce 'worked through' the incident by asking her fellow artists to write 'I don't speak Spanish' in their language; then, revisiting her childhood preoccupation with drawing words, she spent many weeks rewriting the lines 'in a variety of languages and trying to almost inhabit these other languages [through] writing acts. . . . It returned me to drawing [words], and has a direct link with the *Devotional* wallpaper. . . . It really connected the relationship between text and sound.' A direct result of the encounter in Cuba is a compelling photographic work, *Tongues* (1997), comprised of four large black and white images showing the underside of four tongues. With this, Boyce brings to our attention the peculiar intimacy of this most hidden area of the mouth, which is vital for actively brokering private inner thoughts into the public arena of speech.

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She entered an elevator, only to be assailed by a security guard who, she recalls, 'jumped in the lift, held the door and was speaking at me really, really fast in Spanish'. She repeatedly responded, saying, "I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish." First of all, he could not hear it. Then, when he heard, he was completely thrown, just furious'.

CONVERSATION AS RESEARCH

Boyce's projects become increasingly social in the 1990s, employing conversation as a method for encouraging self-narration in other people. She co-founded the Black Women's Artist Study Group (1995–7) with Zineb Sedira (b. 1963), the Franco-Algerian artist representing France for La Biennale di Venezia in 2022. The group was established in the spirit of the gift economy, as an informal network of up to 20 women in London, who met each month to show and discuss their new work. Focused on professional development, the women chose not to meet in their private homes or studios, taking on the obligation of hosting; instead they hired a space and projector, then circulated discussion notes to attendees. As Boyce explains it, the group met in a women's centre in Covent Garden, which closed in 1996, and then 'a couple of meetings then took place at AAVAA – the African & Asian Visual Artists Archive, when it was based at the University of East London. In many ways, the Study Group was a rehashing of my experiences going to A Woman's Place on Westminster Bridge Road during the 1980s.'

In 1999, Boyce was invited by FACT (the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) to collaborate with a group called Liverpool Black Sisters on a project, *Motherlode*, exploring community and belonging in Liverpool. With conversation as her starting point, she asked the group to name some Black British female singers. As Boyce tells it, the whole group took ten minutes of slightly awkward pondering before they came up with the name of Shirley Bassey, prompting an impromptu rendition of the power ballad 'Big Spender'. Yet the initial hesitation alerted Boyce to a cultural narrative that was in danger of being lost. Even after *Motherlode* ended in Liverpool, people remained so interested in the idea through word-of-mouth that over the coming months and years, they continued to donate records and items of memorabilia, encouraging her to continue the project. What began as a one-off art project was germinated through a series of conversations, as much of Boyce's practice has been, and eventually became the *Devotional Collection*, which would go on to seed other projects, including *Feeling Her Way*.

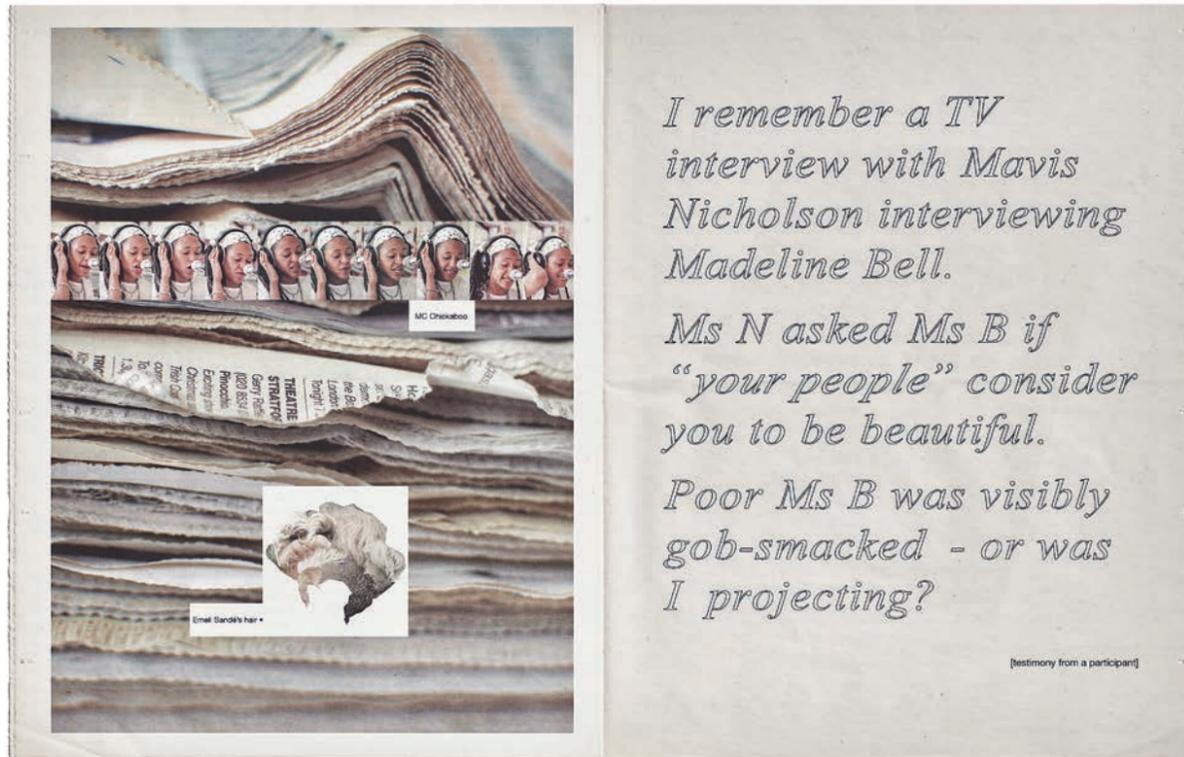
Boyce's *Devotional Collection* is an ever-growing archive, documenting the cultural contribution Black British female musicians have made to international culture. In Boyce's words,

over 300 performers have been nominated by members of the public, and the Devotional Collection has grown to include over 1,000 music items and many paper items relating to these performers. As a form of collective knowledge-building, the rollcall of names dates back to the mid-nineteenth century. One of the earliest performers featured in the collection is Amanda Aldridge, the daughter of renowned nineteenth-century Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge.

Giving voice to the experience of difference has been central in Boyce's work over the last 20 years. While gender and race are not the sole subjects of her art practice, her own identity means they remain among her abiding concerns. Her nuanced position on descriptors such as 'Black British' differs from definitions that refer solely to people who are part of the African diaspora. In short, she recognises 'Black' as being an imperfect yet inclusive term, referring to an identity drawn together through a shared experience of the racialisation born of British notions of Empire and the subjugation of the colonial 'Other'. As Stuart Hall explains, Black 'is used here not as the sign of an ineradicable genetic imprint but as a signifier of difference: a difference which, being historical, is therefore always changing, always located, always articulated with other signifying elements: but which, nevertheless, continues – persistently – to register its disturbing effects.'¹⁶ What Boyce wishes to achieve with projects such as the *Devotional Collection* is to assert the contribution of Black British women as part of the cultural interaction between individual subjectivities and the collective imagination. Her practice demonstrates the mutually dependent systems of cultural influences, and within that, the substantial contributions by people marginalised in the public imagination.



Devotional Wallpaper and Placards
2008–2021. 100 placards and wallpaper.
Dimensions variable. Centre Pompidou, Paris
and Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art.



Boyce's aspiration for the *Devotional Collection* is for it eventually to become a permanent museum display. In museological terms, it is what is known as 'an unruly collection' (perhaps the most delightfully named among curatorial categories), with informal cataloguing and a highly subjective acquisition policy. Boyce has returned to the *Devotional Collection* a number of times in the last two decades, generating new manifestations of her ongoing enquiry. In 2007, her installation *Devotional* at the National Portrait Gallery was comprised of 18 framed photographs of singers hung on white walls, around which she had hand-drawn 'wallpaper' of their names using carbon paper, ink and pencil. The laboriousness of hand drawing in situ for three weeks prompted the design of a new wallpaper for later exhibitions, created from rectangular paper tiles bearing names highlighted in radiating outlines. It featured in her iconic work *Devotional Wallpaper and Placards* (2018) as part of the exhibition *Sounds Like Her* at New Art Exchange, Nottingham, when collection memorabilia was displayed in the form of protest placards, alluding to political demonstrations. *Scat: Sound and Collaboration* (2013) at the Institute of International

Visual Arts (iniva), London, included a number of *Devotional* series works, such as the wallpaper and a homage to the pioneering jazz singer Adelaide Hall, *Oh Adelaide* (2010), a work made with sound artist Ain Bailey.

In cultural history, the *Devotional Collection* sits within the UK feminist tradition of creating educational collections to record, recover and empower the voices of women in public. This strategy increased in the 1970s and 80s around the fields of class, race and gender equality. As D-M Withers explains, this impetus had its roots in the early suffrage campaigns that established the Women's Service Library in 1926: 'Its mission at that time was to provide resources and information to women able to enter public life following legal reforms to the voting system (1918) and the legal professions (1919).'¹⁷ The efforts to archive Black British women artists' achievements and formalise informal collections have taken the commitment of many. One such example, Lubaina Himid's *Making Histories Visible*, has enhanced the diversity of knowledge within British art institutions.

Double page spread from the *Devotional* newspaper
2013. Newspaper print. Courtesy of the artist.

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Boyce's aspiration for the *Devotional Collection* is for it eventually to become a permanent museum display . . . she has returned to the collection a number of times in the last two decades, generating new manifestations of her ongoing enquiry.

MOVING-IMAGE WORK

As Boyce feels her way into moving-image work and working with creative collaborators, her role as artist once again undergoes a shift. In 1998, on a residency at Manchester University, she embarks on her second video project, although she finds participants less compliant to her artist instructions than in her previous photographic and gallery installations. One example she shares with me is of working with a pair of twins, explaining that they just start inventively playing and coming up with ideas that she finds more compelling than her original one. Despite the initial bruising of her ego, accustomed to her position as 'the artist', she recognises that granting people freedom will result in different representations of identity. Her own improvised play with male performance artist Richard Hancock, in which they braid their hair together, later prompts her to make a video recreating the same act, with Boyce's place taken by curator Adelaide Bannerman, 'so I could see how it looked from the outside'. The physical stillness yet evident emotional discomfort of the two entangled figures is caught in the video work *Exquisite Tension* (2005). Through these years, Boyce increasingly questions the hierarchical conceptions of roles and identities, including essentialised articulations of race and gender. She comes to recognise the limitations in the idea of the artist as sole creative author.

In 2007, Boyce is commissioned to create a new work at the University of Oxford. She invites vocalists that come from different ends of the historical spectrum of singing as collaborators. David Skinner is director of the early music vocal consort Alamire, while sound artist Mikhail Karikis specialises in 'non-linguistic vocalisations: utterances produced by engaging the body's resonant cavities . . . whose referent is the body itself, its drives and emotional responses to the world'.¹⁸ The process is challenging as it brings together professionals from different traditions with differing expectations. As a conceptual artist, Boyce devised the proposition for the encounter, rather than taking on the role of orchestrator or director, as would be expected in the performing arts. 'It made me think about how a lot of the collaborative and participatory work I had done before was very much based on a nineteenth-century idea of philanthropy,' Boyce later explains to an interviewer, 'where you are there as an authorial figure to do good for those who are lesser in some way . . . enabling others. Working on *For you, only you* we all had to up our game; it was apparent that we all knew what we were doing in our own field, so we had to come

together and re-negotiate.'¹⁹ The sixteenth-century a cappella composition 'Tu solus qui facis mirabilia' ('You alone can do wonders'), by the Franco-Flemish composer Josquin des Prez, was selected by Skinner for its long pauses that offer space for Karikis's vocal interjections. Throughout the piece Karikis creates a unique vocal performance featuring mammalian sounds in dialogue with the highly disciplined vocals of the Alamire consort. In Fisher's account, Karikis's guttural sounds represent the fear of our pre-socialised selves, yet show that this emotional aspect of who we are is ever-present. In doing so the performance 'signifies the entire thrust of Boyce's project giving voice to the experience of difference.'²⁰

Karikis's non-linguistic works draw on Dada sound pieces as well as jazz sources. 'On reflection,' Boyce says, 'I understand the complexities within the piece, the Balkan beat, but also there is the jazz scat. I felt heartened and humbled when we were talking and Mikhail mentioned there was the influence of female jazz singers and scat in this piece.'²¹ The potent emotions unleashed by a cappella singing continue to provide rich material for Boyce. As we converse, she remembers her residency in Córdoba, Argentina. On seeing the walls in public spaces papered with photographs of individuals 'disappeared' by the military dictatorship, she was so moved that all she wanted to do was sing to them, to honour their lives. The experience prompted her to make a short moving film with local participants: *GATHER: JUSTICIA* (2010) (see p. 38) depicts a room slowly filling with people singing María Elena Walsh's *Oración a la Justicia* a cappella in honour of the lives lost. Translated, the title means 'A Prayer to Justice'. Solo and group a cappella have been central within religious worship for centuries. As a physical action, individual or collective, singing forges communities because it demands we focus on experiencing heightened feelings together, even if only for a few minutes. Drawing on Karikis's pluralistic influences, Boyce explores the joyful disobedience of early scat singing. *Oh Adelaide* shows archive footage of Adelaide Hall's 1935 scat performance, but Boyce ruptures our viewing of the footage with flares of white light and her collaborator Ain Bailey's sound interventions.

Feeling Her Way is preceded by four installation projects that combine multi-screen videos of one-off experimental events, presented together with bespoke wallpaper designs. *Crop Over* (2007; reimaged in 2021), explores the street celebration that once signified the culmination of the sugar harvest in Barbados.



(top) Installation view of *Oh Adelaide* (with Ain Bailey)
2010. Single-channel video. 7 minutes.
Courtesy of the Ulrich Museum of Art,
Wichita.

(bottom) Still from *Exquisite Tension*
2005. Photographic print. 70.75 × 100 cm.
Wolverhampton Art Gallery.



Installation view of *Crop Over and Shaggy Bear wallpaper*
2007/2021. Two-channel video and printed wallpaper. 15 minutes. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Tate.



Drawing on the title of, and insights from, George Lamming's memoir, Boyce explores the concept of moving beyond interpersonal boundaries of skin colour, while amplifying the subject of surface coverings through her wallpaper designs, on show throughout the exhibition space.

In Boyce's words, '*Crop Over* [the film] sets two spaces, the grounds of Harewood House in Yorkshire, UK, and plantation houses [called Great Houses] in Barbados, in relation to each other, connected by the transatlantic slave trade.' She invited key folk characters from the public festival including Donkey-Man (half man, half donkey), Mother Sally (a pantomime-style dame), and Shaggy Bear with a stilt walker (two figures reminiscent of sub-Saharan and West African spiritual masquerades) to enter the private grounds of the estates – a taboo action. Curator Allison Thompson explains Boyce's interest in folk carnivals as structured events for 'transgression and acting out. . . . This is the diasporic experience – to find oneself in a space that must be shared and negotiated.'²²

Boyce's invitations often result in boundaries being playfully transgressed. In *We move in her way* (2017) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, professional performers, including vocalist Elaine Mitchener, collaborated on a participatory event in which visitors themselves became artist-performers while wearing masks depicting a photomontage of Boyce's hair and Sophie Taeuber-Arp's *Head* (1920). Within the wallpapered gallery of the exhibition, videos of the event were displayed at different scales and angles, requiring viewers to move unconventionally through the space. Performative transgressions were also key in *Six Acts* (2018), set in the Victorian collection of Manchester Art Gallery. Following conversations with the staff about the representation of race, gender, class and sexuality in the works on display, Boyce oversaw an evening event of performances by Lasana Shabazz, Liquorice Black, Cheddar Gorgeous, Anna Phylactic and Venus Vienna, with the sixth act being the museum staff temporarily removing the John William Waterhouse painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) in order for visitors to share their opinions on the controversial work.

In the recent *In The Castle of My Skin* (2020–21), Boyce utilises the medium of exhibition-making to examine how we share and negotiate space. Drawing on the title of, and insights from, George Lamming's

memoir, Boyce explores the concept of moving beyond interpersonal boundaries of skin colour, while amplifying the subject of surface coverings through her wallpaper designs, on show throughout the exhibition space. The work of 11 visual artists, including Bridget Riley and Alberta Whittle, were also displayed in unexpected configurations across large geometric frames referencing the crystalline structure of pyrite. In this precursor to the pyrite motifs in *Feeling Her Way*, Boyce emphasises the idea of discovery, encouraging visitors to seek out new perspectives on the artworks.

SUBVERSIVE PLAY

What might we discover in the wider artistic influences that inform Boyce's distinctive practice? She seems particularly drawn to those who provoke change through interventions, be it Brazilian artist Lygia Clark's playful interactions with objects, American conceptual artist Adrian Piper's interventions in daily life, or the African heritage masquerades in Caribbean folk festivals. All these varied practices, like her own, utilise what they find in the real environments around them as their creative source material and then defamiliarise it into a new critical form: Dada through its photomontage and disruption of performance; folk masquerades in their surreptitious satirisation of colonial figures; and jazz scat vocalisations by impersonating other instruments, deconstructing language, or integrating the call and response of field hollers (see p. 40). She shows an affinity for the subversive capability of creative play and its ability to disrupt social norms and intervene in dominant hierarchies. Boyce not only uses music to 'reduce emotional distance', but also employs the most disarming form of humour – the absurd. As philosopher Simon Critchley explains, popular jokes reinforce social consensus, but a 'true joke' points to the absurdity of a situation and, 'invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives'. Absurd or surreal humour generates feelings of shared commonality 'through its miniature strategies of defamiliarization.'²³



(right) *Six Acts* wallpaper detail
2018. Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist and Manchester
Art Gallery.

(below) Installation view of *Six Acts*
2018. 6 videos and wallpaper installation.
15 minutes. Dimensions variable.
Manchester Art Gallery.

(opposite top) Still from *We move in her way*
2017. Courtesy of the artist and ICA, London.

(opposite bottom) Installation view of *We move in her way*
2017. Seven-channel video and wallpaper
installation. 15 minutes. Dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist and ICA, London.





(opposite and above) In the Castle of My Skin
2020–21. Plywood structure, wallpapers,
objects, videos, drawings and prints.
Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the
artist; Eastside Projects, Birmingham and
Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art.

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For Boyce, improvised play has become a creative methodology: she employs play as a relational activity that invites others in, an activity through which participants can learn creatively from the experience of what is happening in life now.

(following pages) Still from *Exquisite Cacophony*
2015. Photographic print. 70 × 124.7 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

To interrogate one example more closely, Boyce's interest in Dada collage reveals further insights into her practice. Collage as an art form is premised on de-centring how we look at things by presenting multiple perspectives within a single composition. But what speaks to Boyce is the way Dada artists politicised the medium, exploring its trickster capability to disrupt real-world images, words and performance. In our conversations during the making of *Feeling Her Way*, Boyce at times refers to her artistic role as 'an editor' of material created by others. Her re-positioning of her role as an artist is a sentiment that finds parallels in Dada declarations to deliberately move away from the romantic notion of 'the artist'. Instead, in the words of Austrian artist Raoul Hausmann, 'we meant to construct, to assemble our works'.²⁴ Dada artists collaged photographs from media sources to attack commercial interests and subvert social conventions. German artist Hannah Höch, a pioneer of photomontage, created works such as *Cut with the kitchen knife of Dada through the last beer-swilling cultural epoch of the Weimar Republic* (1919–20). Dynamic, with dense layers of imagery incorporating multiple photographs of women, the work also features female artists such as Kathë Kollwitz. Höch's playful critical works remain an art-historical high-water mark in the critique of how female identity is represented and shaped by media. Boyce's presentation of women in the *Devotional Collection*, compiled from images of women in the media industry, grants new insight into the contribution of women to public life and how gender is performed through images for audiences.

One route through which to see the world afresh and bring forth the new is play. For Boyce, improvised play has become a creative methodology: she employs play as a relational activity that invites others in, an activity through which participants can learn creatively from the experience of what is happening in life now. Her genuine openness to others results in a highly eclectic art practice, which nevertheless maintains a consistent and distinctive aesthetic of expanded collage. In 2015, Boyce contributed the piece *Exquisite Cacophony* to Okwui Enwezor's exhibition *All the World's Futures* at the La Biennale di Venezia. She matched experimental vocalist Elaine Mitchener with the grunge hip-hop artist Astronautalis to create a film of the two riffing off, and sparking energy from, each other, reacting to word prompts from a live audience in a performance originally filmed in an eatery designed by William Morris. Their vocal play embodies the argument



that creative play, voluntarily entered into, is the generative font of all human culture.²⁵ Within the 'game' of their performance, their playful interaction has the quality of an exceedingly good joke.

Such unpredictable game playing is also a feature of the central film in *Feeling Her Way*. As anthropologist Mary Douglas argues, 'aesthetic pleasure [has] something in common with the joy of a joke; something which might have been repressed has been allowed to appear, a new improbable form of life has been glimpsed. . . . A joke is a play upon form that affords an opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity.'²⁶ When I ask Boyce about her use of humour and provocation to put people into uneasy yet playful situations together, she tells me, 'I'm more interested in human responses than anything else.' As an artist, she seeks to discover

how to learn, how to listen, how to watch things and be in it; not be separate from it, not to have a kind of arm's length relation to what might be unfolding with other people. And so that is what I've been trying to get better at, you could say. . . . What happens in that invitation [to collaborators] and how people respond . . . how to pay attention to all the things that are happening to be able to then figure out what I want to do within that context.

In feeling her way through decades of practice, experimenting with representations of identity, she is striving to understand more deeply the social dynamics of 'now'.

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Aesthetic pleasure [has] something in common with the joy of a joke; something which might have been repressed has been allowed to appear, a new improbable form of life has been glimpsed.

2

FEELING HER WAY

In our current age – marked by the global pandemic and reinvigorated racial justice movements – social separation, video-conferenced conversations and even the acts of breathing and vocalising have all taken on heightened significance. Inevitably Feeling Her Way speaks to this context, which has also shaped the process of making the collaborative project. During its creation, the strict social distancing rules of the pandemic were in force, including restrictions on singers performing to live audiences. However, singing is a form of communication that is viscerally emotional whether live or recorded, and an excellent vocalist has the power to pull listeners into an immediate present, which takes on new importance in this anxious and uncertain era. Strong singing is premised on maximising every breath – and in recent times, both the power of breathing and the dexterity required to improvise have become acutely vital.

A swift walkthrough of the installation grants an overview of the concepts at play. Through the grand double door of the pavilion, we enter the main gallery to encounter the staging of an experiment in singing. At the invitation of Sonia Boyce, four outstanding vocalists are meeting for the first time to try something new. What we are witnessing is a private a cappella improvisation by a group of acclaimed soloists, recorded in a venue made for voices: Abbey Road Studios in London. Walking from the main improvisation to the other performances, we learn more about each voice. In the back gallery of the pavilion is a display of album covers and posters relating to the work of Black female musicians; artists that, as Boyce has said, have provided ‘a meaningful soundtrack in so many people’s lives’. In *Feeling Her Way*, Boyce invites us to notice how multiple histories are transmitted by our voices, and to celebrate the disruptively liberating process of play. The exhibition also honours the cultural contributions made by Black British women in music who have long been a part of public life. Boyce has invited five vocalists, selected because of their distinctive styles, and indirectly connected by the influence of jazz and soul on their sound, to explore musical improvisation together. Individually, they each attract their own community of fans, as Boyce explains: ‘I wanted to bring (I suppose metaphorically) those different communities into

one space. The audience and their own recollections, that somehow they are part of this because it’s through the audiences that musicians become known.’

Boyce has a notably eclectic aesthetic, driven by her engagement with what is happening now. As collage is her principal mode of creation, and she focuses on the delights, vulnerability and unease embedded within social encounters, we can consider her work as a kind of ‘social collage’. Boyce intuitively juxtaposes materials from life – some devised, some appropriated – to discover what emerges. Encounters between people are the subject and method of four decades of practice that implicitly asks the following question: how are we experiencing and shaping this living moment of time in relation to others?

Wallpaper has acted as scenography for decades of Boyce’s practice, the backdrop before which life’s dramas unfold. With the individual body always taking a central role, private dialogues are presented as public performances to be witnessed and interpreted. Her artistic practice is an investigation into what has shaped our unthinking assumptions about what other people should be like, look like or sound like and what may disrupt those assumptions. As she has said, ‘it’s not that we won’t let go of the past, it’s that the ghosts of the past won’t let go of us’.²⁷

COLLAGE

What are the collage components of *Feeling Her Way*? Simply stated, they are images and videos of Black female musicians, eccentric wallpapers of tessellating shapes, and angular geometries replicating the shimmering mineral pyrite.

As we move between the video works in the connected gallery rooms, a single wash of colour differentiates each singer. They appear separately on large horizontal monitors, so that we can see the owner of each powerful, distinctive and critically acclaimed voice. Through the filter of the colour washes we encounter in blue Poppy Ajudha (b. 1995, UK); in purple Jacqui Dankworth MBE (b. 1963, UK); Sofia Jernberg (b. 1983, Ethiopia) in orange; Tanita Tikaram (b. 1969, Germany) in red; and composer Errollyn Wallen OBE (b. 1958, Belize) in yellow-green. Lively wallpaper patterns through the installations foreground the visual drama of brightly coloured moving-image works, disrupting the dominant minimalist aesthetic of modernist art and design. In his book *Chromophobia*, artist and writer David Batchelor posits that a Western prejudice against colour acts ‘to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity . . . colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body – usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological . . . colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic.’²⁸ Boyce emphasises the complexity and drama of colour in each component of the exhibition, along with her deliberate refusal of Western biases that ‘other’ the profound importance of non-linguistic vocalising, surreal humour, imperfection and following one’s feeling.

The use of colour wash brings Boyce’s videos into dialogue with two more artists whose work she admires: the ‘Screen Tests’ that require us to pay attention by Andy Warhol and the social interventions of Adrian Piper. When we speak about the colour filters she uses in *Feeling Her Way*, I ask Boyce how the washes connect to a previous work

of hers, *The Audition in Colour* (1997–2020) (see p. 43). She explains that she has been influenced by *Coloured People*, an artist’s book by Piper, each page of which is a black and white photograph of a willing collaborator that Piper has drawn over with a single bright colour (blues, reds, greens and so on).²⁹ Humour and ambiguity run deep in both artists’ practices. Boyce speaks highly of Piper: ‘She makes us feel uncomfortable, and there are things in the world that are uncomfortable, she makes us think. Adrian Piper has always complicated ideas of race. . . . She is extraordinary for making us think about mundane things . . . about art practice as a strategy for engaging people. She gives us a strategy to think about [mundane things], and if art’s about anything it is about making us think.’³⁰

Throughout *Feeling Her Way*, the gallery walls are partially covered in collage wallpapers designed by Boyce. These wallpaper designs intersect room after room, leading the viewer from one sensory, sonic experience to the next and creating bursts of movement and colour. Throughout the galleries, . Angular shapes jostle and interrupt each other, with photographic details vying for attention with triangles of colour: bright shades of orange, yellow, green and magenta along with powdery pink, blue, purple and gold. The tessellating printed visuals offer glimpses of documentary photographs taken on the day of the singers’ recording, detailing lights, clothing and cabling. The geometric abstraction throughout Boyce’s new installation reflects her affinity with Brazilian artist Lygia Clark. Clark is an artist who excites Boyce. Clark continually moved her approach forward too; both artists abandoned the early figurative work for which they were known in favour of socially orientated practice, experimenting with ideas of individual freedom through exploratory play. Clark was a co-founder of Grupo Frente, a radical Brazilian movement for whom geometric abstraction expressed optimism about a future of social equality; in the pioneering hands of Clark, this included sensory interaction for exhibition visitors.³¹

Within Boyce’s wallpaper, colour photographs show visual fragments from the venue of the event we are watching on screen. Boyce shows the tools of production – mic stands, looped cables and lights – to emphasise what facilitates the relocation of the singers’ voices from one geography to another. The recording studios at Abbey Road in London are among the best-known in the world, in part because of the 1969 Beatles named after them. Many extraordinary voices have recorded in Studio Two, from Ella Fitzgerald and David Bowie to Adele and Little Simz. For singers, the studio’s much-admired 1950s Neumann valve microphones add a favourable warmth to the sound of their vocals, which is further increased by the resonance of the bare wood of the studio’s parquet floor – both feature in Boyce’s wallpaper. When discussing where to film the singers, with future listeners at the Pavilion in mind, Sonia and I decided to find a venue made for voices. Of course, the sole purpose of a recording studio is to function as a private space dedicated to capturing music in all its emotive power. Public galleries, however, are not designed for listening to music. The custom here, derived from a wholly different tradition of audience behaviour, is to politely wander among the galleries, individually giving artworks our thoughtful attention, both visually and spatially. With Boyce’s photomontage wallpaper showing the moment of audio capture, she reminds us to listen as we are in the act of looking. We are immersed in the present moment, tuning in to the different sensory experiences of now.

Pyrite, better known as ‘fool’s gold’, is the playful inspiration for the angled walls, geometric structures and gold metallic finishes of the surfaces that characterise each gallery. In the gallery at the back, golden pyrite-like objects act as wall display supports for the memorabilia of celebrated singers, while in other rooms, exhibition visitors can sit on golden seats, their shiny metallic surfaces providing reflections of both the singers captured on video and the audience walking through the space.

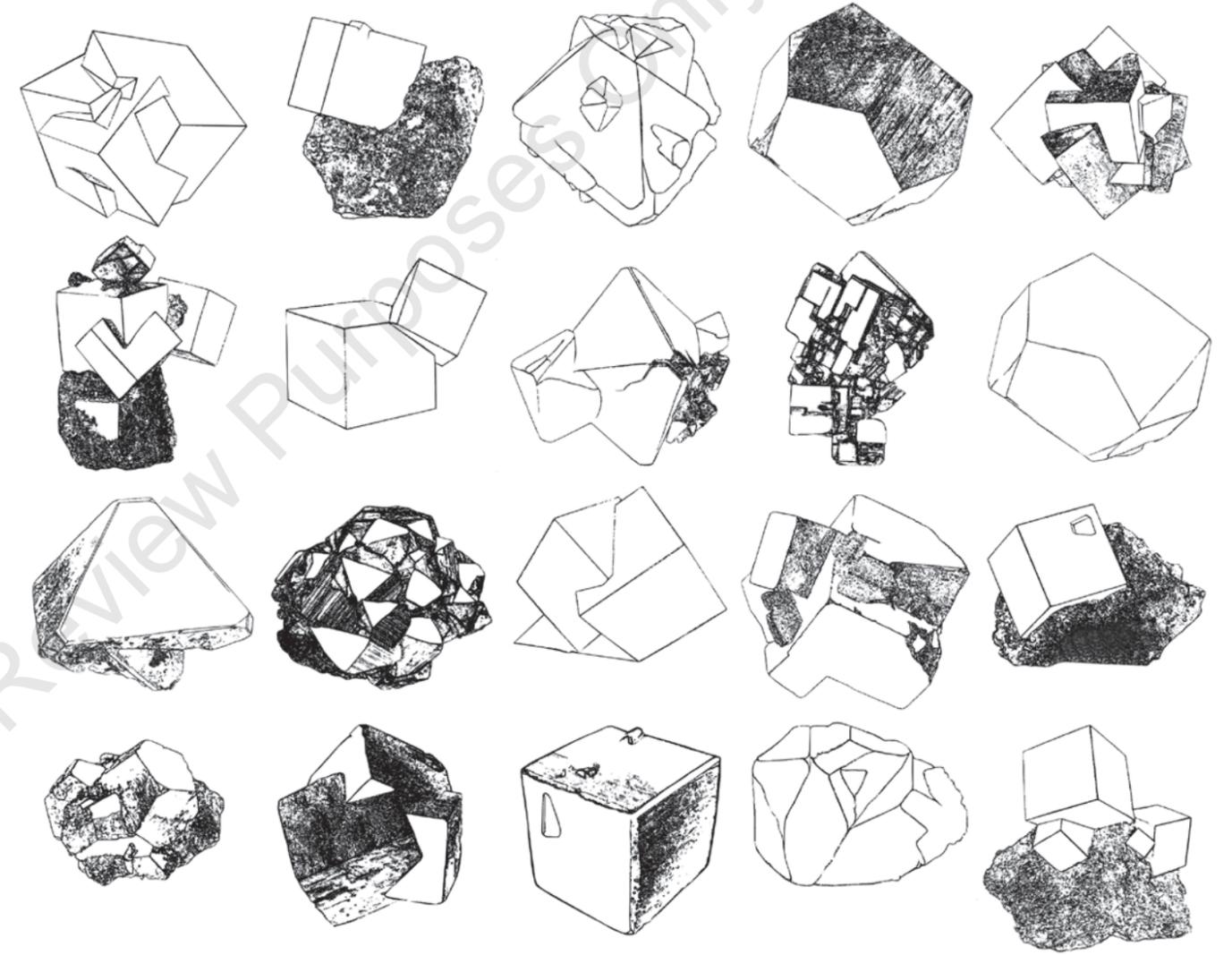


Boyce emphasises the complexity and drama of colour in each component of the exhibition, along with her deliberate refusal of Western biases that ‘other’ the profound importance of non-linguistic vocalising, surreal humour, imperfection and following one’s feeling.

'Fool's gold' is a metaphorical designation with an intriguing place in the collective imagination: pyrite is a misnamed object, described as what it is not, a negatively defined status that shackles its perceived value to historical circumstances originating in the nineteenth-century North American gold rush.³² That the phrase became used in multiple nations implies a consensus around hierarchies of status and worth, with gold designated a precious metal and pyrite a common and relatively worthless mineral, although pyrite's ubiquity in nature is what has granted it a powerful influence on human life. As pyrite expert David Rickard explains, 'The formation and burial of pyrite is a key component of the oxygen and carbon cycles of the Earth. As such, it is directly related to biological productivity and to the Earth's climate.'³³ Its human uses range from its function in ancient societies as a portable source of fire-making to its role in the modern pharmaceutical industry in the manufacture of medicines. Recent metallurgical methods can now extract the 'real' gold dust that pyrite contains for use in jewellery; a far more equitable product than traditionally

sourced gold, the extraction of which was made profitable through slave labour. Notably, pyrite has played a role in the arms industry over the past millennium.

The expression 'fool's gold' evokes a specific sequence of feelings: a moment of elation after a supposed discovery, followed by a more rational evaluation, leading to deflation and crushed expectations. At its simplest, your discovery is not what you assumed it was: instead of being priceless, it is inauthentic and relatively worthless. 'Fool's gold' is a misnaming, a declaration of what something is not. It is an invalidating definition. There is, perhaps, an implication of imposterism. As such, Boyce's references to pyrite throughout the exhibition raise ambiguous questions about social judgement and consensus on value. Pyrite's material forms – unique crystalline shapes – provide a way for Boyce to bring our bodies as visitors into unconventional relationships with video works and music memorabilia, suggesting the importance of individual discovery.



(left) 3D-printed object
2022. Chrome plated plastic. 14 × 13 × 10.5 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

(opposite) Research drawings of pyrite
2021. Digital drawing. 50 × 50 cm. Courtesy
of the artist.

3

THE CENTRAL IMPROVISATION

Ascending the stone steps of the British Pavilion, visitors hear women's voices travelling through the air. Once inside the main gallery, beyond the gold wallpapered entrance, our attention is demanded by an intensity of geometric wallpaper covering an angle-topped wall, and reflective gold seating. It is the staging for four individual vocalists, who appear larger than life on video monitors set into the angled walls, which together show one event: an absorbing group game. This is a rare moment of soloists at play together, an improvisation session intended by Boyce as a moment when the singers joyfully discover each other's voices. Boyce proposed the idea, but the instructions are spontaneously invented by Errollyn Wallen, the award-winning vocal composer, and the singers commit to actively listen to one another and let their voices respond in a way that is free and without inhibition. This is a private warm-up exercise: the women know they are being filmed but it is not a performance for the public. As exhibition viewers, our role is to observe the game unfold, noticing how our feelings respond. The singers are strangers to one another, coming together for the first time to try something unprecedented. As lead singers, Poppy Ajudha, Jacqui Dankworth and Tanita Tikaram are rarely, if ever, asked to improvise or expected to sing with other soloists. At the time of recording, a national lockdown had just been lifted, but the vocalists had not been allowed to sing in public for over 18 months. In this pandemic era of rapid adaptations, one vocalist, Sofia Jernberg, was unexpectedly prevented from travelling to the UK from Europe due to the rapidly changing quarantine rules. Jernberg was later recorded in Atlantis Grammofon Studios in Stockholm.



Poppy wallpaper
2022. Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist.



Jacqui still from *FEELING HER WAY*
2022. Four-channel video. 12 minutes,
28 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.



Errollyn still from *FEELING HER WAY*
2022. Four-channel video. 12 minutes,
28 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.



Poppy still from *FEELING HER WAY*
2022. Four-channel video. 12 minutes,
28 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.



Tanita still from *FEELING HER WAY*
2022. Four-channel video. 12 minutes,
28 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

VOCALISING WITHOUT LANGUAGE

In her own words, Sonia Boyce uses music to reduce the emotional distance between people. She knows that music moves us, inscribing or evoking memories and building a sense of community between individuals. Music has that effect when it is familiar; anticipating words, sounds and emotions stimulates the pleasure we have learnt to expect. In *Feeling Her Way*, as a unique experiment in vocal music, Boyce subverts the reassurance of predictability for the contributors and audience.

The majority of the singing we hear in *Feeling Her Way* is without lyrics. Non-linguistic singing is the oldest form of human song, yet it springs into force within different cultures across different eras, and still now has the capability to disrupt conventions. Words that *are* sung – such as ‘run’ or ‘queen’ – become conduits for vocal interplay, leaping over the intangible boundary between sense and non-sense. In the group improvisation, the singers respond to one another with growls, gasps, squawks, panting and imploring whines, with nods to jazz scat, pop lilt and operatic flourishes; fleetingly they sound in the throes of mutual ecstasy, before jousting vocally to the point of argument.

It is disruptive for women, especially singers, to vocalise in public without compliance to the verbal conventions they are trained to exemplify: first-person narratives about a relational role (lover, mother, sister); a prettiness of voice to subtly indicate submissiveness; the need to be appealing to the feelings of the audience. The singers overcome their natural caution by engaging in such an activity with strangers. But it is precisely through their playful improvisation that the singers highlight rules and conventional expectations rendered invisible by their ubiquity. Singing in this way – playfully and without making sense – is to subvert what one’s body usually expresses within interpersonal dynamics, without having to justify oneself as an individual. Here, being fully present, listening and responding are enough.

Improvisation has shaped how we listen to non-linguistic singing over the past century. Within Boyce’s projects that have focused on song, it is scat singing and Dada that come to the fore. Scat was first recorded in 1926 during a session for Louis Armstrong’s album *Heebie Jeebies*. Armstrong accidentally dropped his music, so he improvised vocally, creating trumpet-like sounds,

The first voice we hear belongs to Wallen. On the yellow-green screen, she encourages the soloists to attune to one another’s voices with softly spoken directions. Through acutely listening to the acclaimed vocalists, she is also acting as our guide. As viewers we are witnesses to the singers’ initial hesitancy. The first half of the film shows Wallen propose an idea, listen to the singers’ responses, then respond with a new idea. In just minutes she takes them step by step beyond the safety of their perfected and polished vocal styles into a space of unguarded experimentation, humour, discomfort and delight. It is images in the mind – how the imagination manifests in the body and is expressed via the breath – that set the parameters of the acoustic piece: a game of call and response in which the vocalisations become increasingly freeform and playful. Each iterative stage is framed by instructions from Wallen. ‘I want you to imagine you are a huge bell’, she begins, ‘that’s the image I want you to have when you sing . . . so that everything is resonating.’ She gestures to suggest tone and speed. The primary function of a huge bell lies in its sound, its main purpose to bring people to attention in public spaces, whether calling a community to prayer, announcing a celebratory event or rhythmically marking the passage of time. Each singer closed their eyes to better sink into their imaginations, that distinctive aspect of human cognition, drawing from pools of shared cultural references and personal memories.

Boyce’s film highlights the potency of Wallen’s leadership. Within minutes, she has elicited playfulness between these three strangers and vocalisations that move beyond the emotional safety of conventional expectation. As we observe the women on the screens, they know they are being watched but their commitment to the improvisatory moment swiftly makes them lose their inhibitions. Through their headphones, they can only hear each

other’s voices. Their bodies remain still behind their mic stands, yet in their minds they shift, subjectively inhabiting the sensation of becoming something else. Wallen’s leadership emboldens the singers to share a sequence of simulations, imaging themselves in a surreal form. She is commanding because her mode of communication demonstrates – without ego – her acute awareness of each individual’s multiple sensitivities. As the singers listen to Wallen, they swiftly trust their intuitive responses to the other soloists.

We watch as Wallen listens to their vocalisations. She affirms, yet also notices when something is holding the singers back from expressing their voices freely and fully. She spontaneously invents verbal prompts to elicit emotional states and vocal ranges she feels may be possible. Yet these are soloists with established sounds and ranges, from whom a vocal femininity is expected as part of the ways gender is performed in public life. She nudges them to shed conventional expectations. ‘Really strong’, she says, ‘and don’t try and think about making a nice sound.’ To manoeuvre the women’s voices from familiar territory, she emboldens them with a two-fold encouragement: first she evokes ‘a massive lion’ – a mammal renowned for its terrifying roar – and second a situation demanding both urgency and volume: ‘Imagine you’re trapped!’ She then sets them running, in a rhythm of seven steps, using the word run, run, run, run, run, run, run, resulting in minutes of panting, breath notes, clicking sounds, sighs and delighted, ecstatic squeals. About midway through the film, Wallen escalates the social dynamics with the lightest of touches, and a warm smile: ‘Just three words . . . The words are “I am queen”’. Those are the three words: “I am queen”.’ Three soloists, singing three words, improvising status games both imaginary and real.

and thus the joyful sound of scat became distributed internationally via that album.³⁴ For Boyce, it was Mikhail Karikis who drew her into an ‘obsession’ with Ella Fitzgerald’s scat singing when making *For you, only you* (2007) (see p. 39). Boyce repeatedly returns to the online video of Fitzgerald’s live performance of ‘One Note Samba’ at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1969. Watching the performance back today, it is Fitzgerald’s swift inventiveness and escalation of creative playfulness that delight audiences then and now, the same humour deployed in 1920s Dada performances and a century later in *Feeling Her Way*.

Language holds a privileged position in the hierarchy of communication, yet non-linguistic vocalisations express our feelings, the most common being laughter. Laughter is a particularly dynamic audience response; it is also the most common of all our non-linguistic vocalisations. Like singing, it is intentionally focused on social dynamics and emotional connection. Yet unlike singing, laughter is frequently spontaneous, a reaction to what we personally find unexpected in that moment. Laughter spotlights our hidden assumptions and beliefs more than any other wordless vocalisation, whether arising from new insight or judgemental ridicule. We infer meaning from laughter’s pitch and duration, just as we do with other wordless vocal expression, whether yawns, yelps or screams. In *Feeling Her Way*, a number of elements spark audience laughter, from

the playful vocal jousting of ‘No! I am queen’, to the peculiar, glitter-covered pyrite that holds music memorabilia. These humorous moments act as an invitation to drop our guard and allow our feelings to reveal a part of who we are.

Listening to the voices of others, actively considering what one hears and then responding, is central to appreciating *Feeling Her Way*. How might we fully listen, without bias, to patiently discover who others are as distinct individuals? When we listen, we subjectively interpret the vibrating air that enters our ears. Infants are taught to selectively listen, to prioritise sounds that form language, but humans emit other audible sounds when forming words, as neuroscientist Israel Rosenfeld explained to me.³⁵ Since the 1960s, musician Pauline Oliveros has advocated for listening to all the sounds in a given moment: an inclusive engagement with life she later termed ‘Deep Listening’. As Boyce said, her practice is about ‘how to learn, how to listen, how to watch things . . . unfolding with other people’, thereby learning to respond afresh to situations that are happening in the now.

VOCAL SUBJECTIVITIES

Languages are specific cultural codes of nations and communities. Out of consideration for the international audience attracted to Venice, Boyce’s original intention was to have no English words included in the singers’ vocalisations. However, as the day-long improvisation unfolded at Abbey Road Studios it became clear that words are integral to the vocalists’ freedom of expression. Boyce’s iterative process of making includes the acceptance of her collaborators’ needs and responding to the situation in the moment.

With English, as with all languages, the ways in which people speak or sing can transmit substantial amounts of information about their embodied experience of life to date. Beyond the language they use and what they say, there is their accent, intonation and the intentions behind their words – each aspect informed by their upbringing, the communities they are part of and, notably, the historical events that have decided whether they inhabit one geography rather than another. Unexpected voices may take us by surprise, revealing our assumptions about the voice we anticipate from different bodies. In an early conversation during our work together, Sonia shared an anecdote about being at a party in New York in the 1990s. A man started a conversation with her but when she replied he was shocked that she had a British accent; she in turn

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Unexpected voices may take us by surprise, revealing our assumptions about the voice we anticipate from different bodies.

was surprised that he wasn’t aware that people with Caribbean parents could be British. That prompted her to reflect on her own reaction on meeting photographer Maud Sulter (1960–2008), who was of Ghanaian heritage, and her own delighted surprise at the unexpectedness of Sulter’s Glaswegian accent. Boyce’s accounts all arose out of private friendly encounters, yet are indicative of how internalised our assumptions are. Even if we know intellectually about the level of internationalism that exists between nations, our own experience lays bare our preconceptions; cognitive shortcuts based on what we have experienced in life so far. How a person speaks, and the way we respond to them, can reveal to us our perception and knowledge of the world beyond ourselves – as we learn about geopolitics through the way people speak.

When discussing the centuries of ethnic diversity in the British Isles, Boyce and I both recall being immensely moved by the insights in David Crystal’s seminal exhibition *Evolving English* at the British Library in 2010–11. From a starting point of 450–480 CE, it mapped out the diverse character of English as a living language, its standardisation between 1400 and 1800, and the fact that it is now spoken by a third of the world’s population. English, of course, is widespread because the British Empire was the largest empire in human history, covering a quarter of the world’s population. Yet as Crystal has long argued, English is a living language that cannot

reasonably be claimed by any one country. Crystal asks the question, 'Who owns English? . . . now that English is a global tongue, used in all countries, talk of ownership becomes meaningless. The reality is anyone who has taken the trouble to learn English can be said to have a stake in it – and today that means around a third of the world's population. . . . When English is established within a culture, an early outcome is new literature.'³⁶ Crystal's study concludes by praising the most distinctive new writing as coming from the Caribbean during the mid-twentieth century and citing a poem by Guyanese writer John Agard, 'Listen Mr Oxford Don' (1985), which concludes: 'I slashing suffix in self-defence / I bashing future wit present tense / and if necessary / I making de Queen's English accessory / to my offense.'³⁷

Our voice narrates who we are; unique individuals shaped in relation to others. It is the sound of our voice that reveals our subjectivity, the language, accents, phrasings, rhythms, tones and feelings. To speak is to breathe in air, then return it to the world, transformed by the particular physical and emotional needs of our individual body. We inhale to survive. When we exhale to speak, our breath is forcibly choreographed through the apparatus of our throat, resonating chambers, and mouth, then interrupted by our tongue, teeth and lips to make meaning through words – all in the hope that we connect our interior life with that of another individual. Our voices also evidence the interplay of cultural influences in the system of empire, and our being part of multiple communities.

Wallen's understanding of the voices of others is exceptional. She gives an interesting account of her own voice as 'a story of colonialism', and how she, like Boyce, disrupts assumptions when in America:

So going back to my childhood, I speak in this way – received pronunciation: I think some of that is also a story of colonialism. My uncle made us recite poetry from a very young age – five or six years old – poetry we could not understand, like Tennyson, Wordsworth and a bit of Dylan Thomas, which I really loved. So that gave me a love of words. But he would make us enunciate in this way, and then he would make us listen to the radio, waiting for me to copy the BBC Radio 4 way of speaking. He'd grown up in Belize studying elocution. Elocution was a big thing. . . . I have an ear

out when I meet somebody. I try and listen. Listen to the accent, and a lot of information is encoded, isn't it? Yes.

I definitely know that if I'm ever in the States . . . there's something more complicated about being Black and speaking very, you know, RP. I can see that it confuses people sometimes as well, and they have an idea of how you should be. . . . It's been met with some animosity. But as a Black person, I'm also very interested in how often people have an idea of what you are – and they'll tell you what you are, where you come from – but your voice can confuse them, and I think that's a good thing.'³⁸

In the summer, thinking about how spoken voices seem to be granted hierarchical levels of authority in the UK, I read Musa Okwonga's *One of Them: An Eton College Memoir*. Among his impressive account of the form and effect of an Eton education is this passage about how his voice changed, in what I term a class-jump: 'My accent changed, too. The adaptation had been gradual and unenforced; one day I suddenly noticed I no longer pronounce milk as melk.' His narration of how his identity was transformed appears indicative of how social hierarchies continue to be stratified through schooling in the UK, which then becomes codified through one's voice. He continues, 'Years later, I'll talk to a friend of mine, a black woman who also attended private school and who is now working in a hostile corporate environment. Despite her excellence at her job, she is in no doubt as to which asset serves and protects her the most. It's the accent, she tells me almost despairingly. It's the accent.'³⁹

In these anecdotes of Black British experience, assumptions are revealed when their voices are encountered with surprised delight, professional recognition or animosity. As Wallen highlights, as a Black person, as a woman, people hold strong assumptions about 'what you are', born from the limits of their own experiences. The histories of empire and mutual cultural interactions that are communicated through all English voices are most pronounced when Black bodies are deemed as separate from their British voice, which has long been a concern for Boyce. For that reason, in *Feeling Her Way*, the filming focuses on the body of each singer, Boyce's edits ensure we readily identify who is singing, and the directional audio in the installation enables us to intuitively sense the owner of each outstanding voice.



The histories of empire and mutual cultural interactions that are communicated through all English voices are most pronounced when Black bodies are deemed as separate from their British voice, which has long been a concern for Boyce.

FREEDOM AND PLAY

Freedom, like trust, is shaped in relation to other people. Free play requires us to willingly take creative risks with others. Improvised play relies on all participants being in a state of trust with one another. Boyce's project is premised on such trust; each invited participant is expected to contribute in their own way, while Boyce sets the parameters, reassuring contributors of her confidence in them and the hope they 'find the joy in each other's voices'. As she explains to the singers in our group video meeting the week before the improvisation, 'lots of things are not pre-planned with the project. In fact, with all of the projects I've done, they come into being, then something magical happens. I can't predict when or how, but by bringing together the constellation, something interesting will emerge'. The singers are enthused, and request more guidance: a theme for example, some instrumental accompaniment, an indication of what she expects from them, some direction. She responds by telling them,

My desire to bring you together is to [explore] how you might feel free. What kind of conditions might you need to feel free to express yourself if not given a particular role? What does it mean to feel free in the space and how might you play? The question of play and of freedom is crucial to the work I do . . . I'm bringing you together because I want you to not be constricted by what others might feel you should be, or could be. But really, what is 'free', what is free for you?

To feel 'free' may be to feel unconstrained, but removing familiar constraints – including direction, specific expectations of roles, of a clear endpoint in sight – is uncomfortable for most people. Boyce is interested in the role of anxiety in social dynamics because, like humour, it reveals our identity, including the parts of ourselves we may wish to conceal in anticipation of negative judgement. Specifically, Boyce is fascinated by the interpersonal power dynamics that are always at play in every social interaction. Among the recent

interdisciplinary researchers of the subject is Loretta Graziano Breuning, who exposes the way each of us are constantly involved in status games because of our individual need for social importance and recognition.⁴⁰ Such behaviour is intrinsically part of our biology as mammals, and there is a myriad of ways it can manifest in how we each perform our identities and conduct our lives. If it's in an individual's best interest, they will either compete or collaborate. Breuning proposes that, through making a conscious effort, we can sate our desire to feel 'up' without putting others down. Play is expected of children as the route to learning, yet it is actively discouraged in adults – such social and imaginative freedom becomes entangled in unease and social anxiety. Boyce's critical interest in freedom and anxieties might indirectly suggest that for adults, improvised play can engender new possibilities, including that we may recognise our own discomfort with freedom and face the taboo around our status dynamics. It is a political point, related to Boyce's engagement with the now.

The vocalists have each separately commented on how they appreciated Boyce's high level of trust in them; trust they reciprocated by granting her full control of filmed material for *Feeling Her Way*. I ask Wallen about her ability to build trust so quickly with the singers on the day of improvisation. 'Each voice is so unique', she replies.

I've always had an affinity for the voice, but maybe it's an affinity for people. I'm very interested in how voice can express different things. And that was an extraordinary day because we hadn't all met before (although I'd met Jacqui). So the thing to do was to kind of get things going quickly. [What] I appreciated on that day is that [singing] is the most vulnerable thing you can do. It's the scariest thing you can do and on any given day, a singer doesn't know what their [voice will exactly sound like]. And it was quite early in the morning, so the voice isn't usually at its best. I could sense the nervousness, that people were quite vulnerable. So my job . . . was to encourage.

RECALLING 'I AM QUEEN'

In the central film of *Feeling Her Way*, the phrase 'I am queen' is the last of the spontaneous prompts Wallen calls out to Ajudha, Dankworth and Tikaram. It is also the only human role she suggests they adopt. As with the other images which she invites the singers, and now us, to bring to mind, it taps into the collective imagination, as well as each individual's own emotional landscape of experiences, references and opinions. As a statement said aloud by a woman, even in jest, 'I am queen' swiftly elicits a bodily sensation of authority. As part of a game, this claim to authority bestows permission to perform outside of oneself, or to draw on the deeper truth of one's inherent self-worth. As Wallen later says, it's a phrase that 'makes you stand up a bit straighter'. Provocatively introduced, it sparks a fascinating interplay between the collaborating soloists that forms the climactic second half of Boyce's central video work in the exhibition.

As Boyce's work invites us to observe the dynamics we perceive between the vocalists, I was interested to hear their own accounts too. Six months after we all met at Abbey Road Studios, I asked them to recall the moment of vocalising, 'I am queen' and what they may have noticed within themselves and within their interpersonal dynamics when they did so. Their recollections offer insights into the interior sensations of being involved in a vocal improvisation,

and how that is expressed and externally perceived. At this point, they had not yet seen the final edit, so their comments are their personal memories of the experience. After editing the film and re-watching it a number of times, Boyce recalled her own reaction. 'It's precisely about, you know, the hierarchies of status', she tells me.

It's not a term I would embrace, although yeah, I understand its attraction. . . . The idea of being able to control one's domain. But it also taps into princess fantasies. Here in the UK we have a royal family, the whole thing has enormous status across the globe. Within that idea of being a queen is a supremacist kind of narrative. . . . That actually we are all in competition with each other. When the singers really start to get into it – I am queen, no I am . . . the push and pull and the highs and lows [. . .] who retreats and who moves forward. . . . It's almost like watching some kind of military manoeuvre happening. I love that part, but I also find it quite uncomfortable.

Within that are there are also cultural references that are very Afrocentric. Across African diasporic people, women might be called queens. [In my view this is] almost a subliminal line that she [Errollyn Wallen] is introducing here about an African supremacy.



Behind the scenes at Abbey Road Studios
2021. Photograph courtesy of Emma Ridgway.

Errollyn Wallen was clear about her intentions in using the phrase. ‘All those women in the room, they were very regal to me, very strong and empowered’, she says.

But at the same time we were all of us, even Sonia, quite vulnerable. And it was very different having all the cameras around us, coming into a new space and meeting; that was a lot of information to take on. But I think ‘queen’ is such a wonderful word because not only does it imply strength, but it also implies a sort of – not exactly a mask, but the sense you can embody something else. And when you put on that costume then you can just inhabit it. It’s almost like an outward thing.

When you’re actually making work, there’s nothing glamorous about it. A lot of the time you feel uneasy. You’re not dressed like a queen! But I have a friend called Tom, who would call me. He would say, ‘Remember, Errollyn, you are Queen of the Universe.’ And [to encourage myself] sometimes I’d say that to myself: ‘I’ve got to remember I’m queen.’ It’s fundamental across all cultures: it’s almost like a godhead thing – the archetype of a woman who has power. I was thinking of innate power generally, not just traditional power. Somebody that is proud, self-disciplined, powerful, but who has increased that power either through their deeds or through their thinking. And I think we all understood it, didn’t we?

For Jacqui Dankworth, the process was clearly a visceral one. ‘It felt powerful and playful, you know, because it’s hilarious and sort of surprising’, she remembers.

But also it brought out a little bit of competition between us in a nice, fun way. I remember ‘I’m Queen of New York’ [from King Kong on Broadway]. And yet I felt powerful because I guess, you know, the Queen is a very powerful character. So you felt released, perhaps. I remember feeling the humour of it as well. I was doing my sort-of fake opera singing that I like to do sometimes, just for fun. I don’t actually sing opera, but it’s fun to play with those sounds.

Poppy Ajudha’s reaction to the phrase was rather different. ‘What was interesting is that I think like a solo artist, so the natural tendency that happened when people were saying “I am queen”, when people were singing it really loudly, was to feel quite competitive,’ she explains.

What I found interesting is that I had a natural tendency to subvert that; it wasn’t really that thought-out, but I started singing ‘he is queen, she is queen, we are queen’ and I was changing the words. It was natural to not make it feel like a competition – to make it feel like more like we were doing it together. I was quite surprised by myself. In improvising, that’s what I chose to do. It was an interesting exercise – the way that we perceive that saying, especially when it’s coming out of a woman’s mouth – especially in a group.

For Tanita Tikaram, the phrase was grounding. ‘I think the reason it was magical is that up to that point we didn’t really have any words [about people],’ she says.

So it felt like something we could really hold on to. ‘I am queen’ is a very powerful statement when you have [a piece] which is all about women. And it has so many connotations, if you think about it. I think about the Queen, Queen Elizabeth, and about somebody who wants to be the leader in a group. And I thought about Miranda Richardson who plays Queenie in Blackadder, who is the most ‘queenie’ person. I also thought about it being a very positive thing. It’s not necessarily just about royalty, it’s also about being a woman. Being empowered and holding herself up and whatever is happening, she has a sense of her worth. I associate that with Sonia. I really think she has something very comforting and noble about her and very warm. All of those things come into your mind.

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All those women in the room, they were very regal to me, very strong and empowered . . . I think ‘queen’ is such a wonderful word . . . I was thinking of innate power generally, not just traditional power.

4

DEVOTIONAL

One gallery at the back of the British Pavilion is visually vibrant yet emits no sound. Glittering golden wallpaper across the whole length of the main wall creates a backdrop for a montage of memorabilia featuring Black British female musicians. We see, without hearing, women of different generations and musical genres, from Dame Shirley Bassey (The Best of Bassey, 1995) to the ska-pop group Amazulu ('Too Good to be Forgotten', 1986); from a wistful anthem by Tamsin Archer ('Sleeping Satellite', 1992) to an image of the singer Shingai of indie-rock group The Noisettes (Wild Young Hearts, 2009), among over 30 other artefacts. Artfully shot photographs of singers adorn the cover sleeves of 12" albums, 7" singles, cassette tapes and CDs, all of which remain in their original packaging. Each is held aloft on gold sculptures that replicate the organic geometric forms of pyrite. As we study their glittering surfaces (some smooth, some textured), we are invited to contemplate the treasured memorabilia they present. As we do so, we notice that our own bodies appear as hazy reflections in the gilded wall behind, part of an essential yet unidentifiable audience of listeners. For Boyce, what is critical is acknowledging that the vocals of Black British women form the emotional soundtrack to millions of people's lives, but the memory of who these women are, or have been, often fades from view.

Boyce's idiosyncratic and uplifting display is made up of items either collected by or donated to the artist in the summer of 2021. At the centre of the wall display, we recognise the five vocalists who took part in *Feeling Her Way*, appearing here as photomontage portraits by Boyce. To visually emphasise their different personal styles, she layers decorative details onto each portrait that echo the visual aspects she picked out for their wallpaper designs: the lace dress for Ajudha, studio lights for Jernberg and the leather flowers on Wallen's boots. Each woman appears in full colour rather than through a single-colour filter as they do in the videos, photographed while unselfconsciously absorbed in the a cappella singing we hear emanating from the galleries nearby. Each of Boyce's photo-portraits is made from her personal perspective as a fan of their music.

By contrast, the memorabilia on the wall presents perfected, stylised images of these same musicians on records, posters and magazine covers aimed at mass appeal. We notice the consistency in the brand images of each: in head and shoulder shots Tikaram faces the viewer directly, unsmiling in these starkly lit images, yet with a soft non-confrontational gaze; Dankworth appears casually seated, wearing glamorous clothes as if resting backstage, her head facing away from the camera as she seems to smile in conversation; Wallen's CD cover photographs are tender intimate close-ups showing her face absorbed in contemplation, subtly positioning her lips as the focal point. From the cover of a magazine, Ajudha glances at us over her part-bared shoulder, her look assertive and infused with bright colours, as is the graphic comic-style design of her album cover displayed nearby, which features voyeuristically exoticised young women (Boyce has not included these items in the final display, opting instead for a

text-based poster). Jernberg's album cover is striking yet abstract; silhouetted branches shoot up in vertical twists against a grey background; classical music presented through Scandinavian imagery of trees. Other images of Jernberg not presented here show her energetically mid-movement, with more of the pared-back low-key look she presents in *Feeling Her Way*.

Through this display of music industry material, Boyce shows us the identities of the five vocalists from three perspectives: within the moving-image works they are trusting collaborators, engaged in playful improvisation in a private setting; within the photomontages each is idolised, their portraits homages from one individual to another; within their commercial images, each is presented to appeal to a breadth of music fans to attract attention in a crowded market. All reveal the women as aware of being looked at, yet the intended viewers for these three forms of depiction are also different: a contemporary art audience interested in the experimentation of the musicians within the frame of Boyce's authorship; and music fans who form the communities that sustain the singers and for whom they sing. These juxtapositions bring us into a multi-dimensional relationship with both the singers and Sonia Boyce as women who dare to take creative risks in the public space.

What comes to light as we look at the objects selected from the *Devotional Collection*? On the gold wall, with its geometric patterns and pyrite sculptures, images of Black British women appear on music cover sleeves in a range of postures. They are shown as sexually desirable, socially enviable and slightly out of reach – the embodiment of glamour, that status game of seduction through unattainability.



Gold wallpaper
2022. Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist.

The covers of the earlier albums of Shirley Bassey and Winifred Atwell literally put the soloists in the spotlight, as they perform in shimmering evening gowns, smiling as they connect with live audiences; while Cleo Laine is shown offstage in a mellow mood that belies her powerful voice. Downcast eyes in a number of images suggest vulnerability, or that the singers are immersed in private thoughts, yet each remains the central protagonist. Meanwhile groups, including the Sugababes, Brown Sugar and 5 Star, are shown offstage, their bodies synchronised in choreographed movements, combining portrayals of friendship with invitations to play.

On occasion the normative visual representation of women is conspicuously subverted, as in the case of lead singer Skin from rock group Skunk Anansie. Skin stands in a posture of defiance, looking at us directly, wearing a t-shirt and army trousers, her arms crossed defensively across her chest as though guarding her body. Compositionally, she commands the centre of the image, confronting the dominant hierarchies in gender and race, her male collaborators appearing in diminutive scale to the rear. The image addresses the voyeurism very often implicit in portrayals of women, yet it slightly slips into another stereotype – that of Black women being loud and non-compliant – again drawing attention to racist tropes (Boyce later replaces the CD *Paranoid and Sunburnt* with Skin's book *It Takes Blood and Guts*). The singer Mel B is characterised this way too on a magazine cover promoting the Spice Girls. Boyce includes a particular album cover of the girl group All Saints in order to demonstrate how the visual identity of racial difference is manipulated through exaggeration or negation. Shaznay Lewis,



In relation to the Devotional project, it is a question of geography; being in one place [the British Isles] that is related to many places. And the circulation [of cultural influences] between geographies.

the only Afro-Caribbean British member of All Saints, has dark skin on one album cover (not included here), with hair straightened to match the rest of the group, but in another image selected by Boyce she is depicted as if she has white skin, along with her three bandmates. For Boyce, this is indicative of ‘not knowing what to do with Black bodies’, a condition arising from the British confusion about how to represent racial identity. It was this ‘not knowing’ that sparked the *Devotional* project in 1999.

These images strive to elicit our trust. They reach out to our individual identities, understanding our desire to connect. The task of each image is to convey the identity of a vocalist’s sound: that intimate moment in which they shape their breath through their body into song, pulsations in air that are captured, made tangible, available to our ears. Daniel Levitin writes about us as listeners in his popular book *This is Your Brain on Music*:

To a certain extent, we surrender to music when we listen to it – we allow ourselves to trust the composers and musicians with a part of our hearts and our spirits; we let the music take us somewhere outside of ourselves. . . . We might be understandably reluctant, then, to let down our guard, to drop our emotional defences for just anyone. We will do so if the musician and composer make us feel safe. We want to know that our vulnerability is not going to be exploited.⁴¹

Distributed music generates communities of casual listeners, fans of specific songs and devotees. In the display, each tangible object signifies many thousands of individual listeners. Those collected by Boyce from second-hand shops, which still bear their price labels, are evidence of the social circulation of

these singers’ voices and the way in which, as market products, they are devalued over time.

Boyce’s *Devotional Collection* has been growing informally for almost a quarter of a century, during a period when the dominant understanding of the terms ‘Black’, ‘British’ and ‘female’ has also been on the move. In reality, the nominative descriptors that categorise people will continually change, because they are components in dynamic cultural narratives. Such stories are how humans make sense of their lived experience, guiding how individuals are expected to relate to one another in communities or societies. Just think, for example, of the term ‘British’: if it is defined by citizenship (that is, the legal relationship of the individual to the state), then it is determined by government policy. As we have witnessed over the past five years, major policy changes – Brexit or the Windrush Scandal, for example – are often a result of feeling-based narratives and driven by fear of immigration, the point being that feelings exert incredible power and influence on the governance of our society. This extends to all areas of our lives, playing a significant role in how we conceive race, nationality and gender at any given moment in time.

During our conversations about *Feeling Her Way*, I ask Boyce about her current thinking around defining the term ‘British’. ‘In relation to the *Devotional* project’, she tells me, ‘it is a question of geography; being in one place [the British Isles] that is related to many places. And the circulation [of cultural influences] between geographies. It’s about the redundancy of nationalism, and also the redundancy of circumscribed ethnicities.’ By way of example, within the *Devotional Collection* numerous musical artists, including Tanita Tikaram and Errollyn Wallen, are British citizens who were born in other

nations, yet ‘citizenship’ as a definition is narrow in relation to the geographical definition that recognises the interplay of cultural influences. Sofia Jernberg, who is not part of the *Devotional Collection*, is an artist who has frequently collaborated and performed in Britain over the last decade and so in that way is part of the cultural life of the nation. She told me,

Britain means a lot to me, I have many colleagues there . . . I’ve found myself being there almost every month for several years, so I feel a strong connection with that country. [The idea of] Nation is a bit difficult. It is very complex because I’m adopted. [Nationality] has been an issue all my life . . . my nationality is questioned constantly . . . people don’t believe I’m Swedish. I also lived in many different countries when I was younger. [Then] I just decided one day that, no, I’m an international being. I like international circumstances and that’s it.

Boyce mentions that her own daughters (both born and raised in England) are part of a generation that ‘have attachments to multiple places and really revel in it. They can switch between and embrace all of the

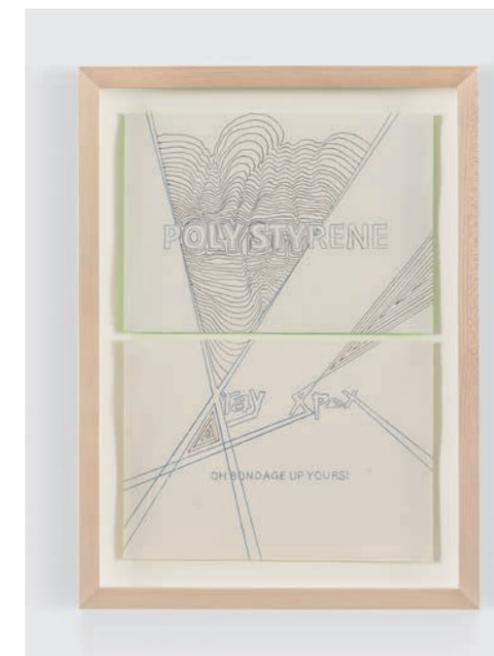
places they feel they belong to’. This self-narration, the idea of being a distinct individual with multiple places of belonging, is expressed by both Jernberg and Wallen. Boyce explains that in the 1980s, there was ‘a kind of denial about the multitude of relationships between the West and rest of the world’ in terms of significant cultural exchange and the occupying of cultural spaces. For Boyce, in reality,

we have all been on the move. There isn’t a ‘white space’ and a ‘black space’ – if one wants to use those essentialist kind of camps – we are all in relation to [one another]. The pandemic has exposed how connected we are . . . But we still want to see ourselves in these neat, separated domains – actually we are not, and we haven’t been for [centuries].

In 2005, Boyce was the co-editor of the landmark contemporary art publication *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Art in 1980s Britain*, which set out the ongoing critical cultural debate on shades of ‘blackness’ in relation to ‘Britishness’ and internationalism in the UK. As principal investigator in the collaborative research project *Black Artists and Modernism* (2015–18), Boyce contributed to

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There isn’t a ‘white space’ and a ‘black space’ – if one wants to use those essentialist kind of camps – we are all in relation to [one another]. The pandemic has exposed how connected we are . . . But we still want to see ourselves in these neat, separated domains – actually we are not, and we haven’t been for [centuries].



(opposite) P. P. Arnold / *Just call me angel of the morning*
2021. Pencil, carbon transfer and acrylic on paper, in two parts. 32.5 × 22.5 cm.

(top left) Sade / *The Sweetest Taboo*
2021. Carbon transfer, acrylic gel pen and acrylic on paper, in two parts. 32.5 × 22.5 cm.

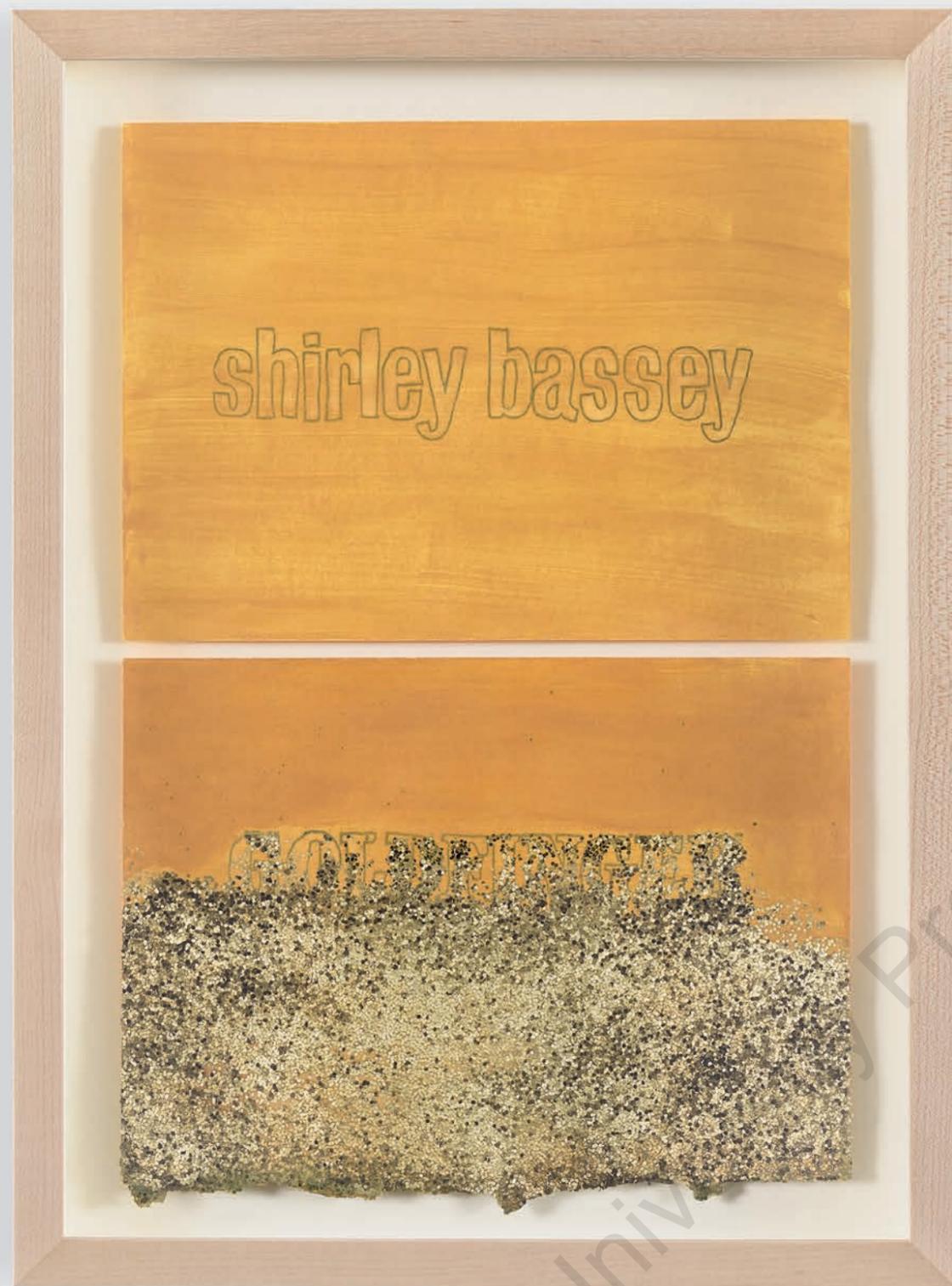
(top right) Sheila Chandra / *Ever so lonely MONSOON*
2021. Carbon transfer, acrylic gel pen and acrylic on paper, in two parts. 32.5 × 22.5 cm.

(bottom left) Miss Elizabeth Welch 1933–1940 / *A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square*
2021. Pencil, carbon transfer and acrylic on paper, in two parts. 32.5 × 22.5 cm.

(bottom right) POLYSTYRENE / *X-ray Spex OH BONDAGE UP YOURS!*
2021. Pencil, carbon transfer and acrylic on paper, in two parts. 32.5 × 22.5 cm.

(following page) Shirley Bassey / *GOLDFINGER*
2021. Carbon transfer, acrylic and glitter on paper, in two parts. 32.5 × 22.5 cm.
All courtesy of the artist.

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enriching the debates on art programming in the UK, reinvigorating the salience of a more complex conception of racial identification. In a recent text co-authored by Boyce and art historian Dorothy Price, the two authors explore the history of racial terminology:

The etymology of the term 'Black' to describe a group of people is rooted in the early confrontations of racial difference between Africans and Europeans. On encountering the Bantu in sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth century, Spanish and Portuguese traders referred to them as 'Negre'. With the onslaught of the transatlantic slave trade, the word became Americanized as 'Negro', 'Colored' and then 'Black'. It replaced the nuanced ethnicities and geographies of African people across a vast continent of many different countries to become an abstraction, a homogenized skin colour (and not even an accurate one at that). Colonial discourses about race and the difference between Africans and Europeans became reduced to a binary system, an epidermal and corporeal schema in which African people and the African diaspora were continually positioned as inferior. 'Black' was relegated; it languished as the 'other' to normative whiteness and continues to signify a deficit that speaks of difference. 'Black' bodies became matter out of place, interlopers to the recognizable norm, hived off as a form of symbolic boundary-maintenance. And 'Black' remained a pejorative term for centuries until it was discursively 'reclaimed' in the wake of the American civil rights and Afro-European liberation struggles of the post-colonial era. Yet in more recent configurations such as BAME or BME, the terms 'Black and Asian', or 'Black and Brown' bodies, suggest a doubling of displacement: a hierarchy within the abstraction of non-normative groups of people.⁴²

This impactful passage articulates how the term 'Black' can shift as a categorisation within different narratives, while emphasising the aggression of imposing hierarchies of language on people who experience racial prejudice. Looking at the images of the women featured in *Feeling Her Way*, Boyce's nuanced and political articulation of 'Black' is apparent.

Shirley Bassey is a central figure among the visual representations of Black British women in the memorabilia of the *Devotional* display. It was the recollection of Bassey's power ballad 'Big Spender' by the community group of Liverpool Black Sisters two decades earlier that began the whole project. The question of the singer's racial identity continues to intrigue her audience; typing 'Shirley Bassey' into a search engine brings up popular related questions, prominent among which is the phrase 'Is Shirley Bassey black?' As a popular singer Bassey pioneered visibility for Black female singers in the UK, earning her first number one in the UK charts in 1959, while her final single reached number five in 2020. As I look over exhibition material with Boyce in her studio, she mentions with laughter that 'Goldfinger', Bassey's most famous James Bond film theme song, keeps running through her head. Boyce observes that the fact that Bassey's music is always so easy to find in UK charity shops, where items that have been donated are resold for good causes, is indicative of her enduring popularity. For music devotees, it is the familiarity of particular songs that makes them relaxing; the predictability of the words and feelings about to come to mind.

Boyce employs music in her art practice because it brings people back to the present moment and may facilitate autobiographical conversations between strangers. Our memories are unique to us and directly affect our feelings; it's this embodied knowledge that forms our intuition. Boyce's own intuitive understanding of the social narrative role music plays is compellingly articulated in the cognitive sciences too, another route to making sense of the human condition. Music is a human tool for modulating emotions, and as such it can shape our self-identity and how we respond to other people. As psychologist Elizabeth Margulies explains, 'music evokes more vivid autobiographical memories than familiar faces', as we remember things when we are in highly charged emotional states.⁴³ Such states can shift the full focus of our attention onto a specific experience, inscribing memories into our bodies. It is our memory of events that shapes our self-identity.

5

THE SINGERS

In Feeling Her Way, singers Poppy Ajudha, Jacqui Dankworth, Sofia Jernberg and Tanita Tikaram give performances of new musical pieces. Each has been invited to sing freely, exploring aspects of their voices they enjoy, so that exhibition visitors can appreciate their unique vocal styles. In the British Pavilion, the vocalists appear on colour-filtered monitors in four separate gallery spaces, their walls partially covered by angular sections of Boyce's bespoke geometric wallpaper. The sound of singing spills through the open doorways between the galleries.

Every professional vocalist has learned to fully command the breath within her own body in order to engage people's attention. To perform is to manifest the self in relation to others. Singing is the most vulnerable form of vocalisation because of the expectations of a listener. We listen from different states within ourselves, at times with open curiosity or clouded by judgemental assumption. For the duration of a singer's performance, the euphoria and dysphoria of intense and intimate feelings are made socially acceptable through their voice. When singers perform, every inhalation and exhalation is in the service of communicating a specific inner emotional state for the listener. We know this to be true because we have felt it within our bodies as we listen: songs can convey feelings that give near-overwhelming sensations of connection. The flood of feelings unleashed through listening to the human voice singing – whether with lyrics or without – overwhelms our domineering verbal cognition, allowing us to reconnect to our intuition.

Song lyrics make public the most private aspects of interpersonal relationships. Lyrics speak of love, the desire for connection – whether the love they address is familial, romantic, erotic or spiritual. For example, the transcribed lyrics of Dankworth and Ajudha (see pp. 115 and 121) reveal our shared conception of demons as metaphors for socially unacceptable feelings. In the collective imagination, intense feelings (for example, disquieting thoughts, personal inadequacies or the bright light of inspiration) are often cast out of our bodies as separate entities. Rationally, we may know that feelings are generated within ourselves, but there is a persistent power to such metaphors, even for secular singers and listeners. Designating internal feelings to external sources reveals something deeper: our fear of social judgement and the existential risk of isolation if we reveal our true, imperfect selves. This ultimately belies our inextricable connection to one another and makes the risk of improvisation worthwhile, so that we might be known and accepted for who we are.



Still of Jacqui from *FEELING HER WAY: 'Reach Out'*
2022. Single-channel video. 7 minutes,
53 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

JACQUI DANKWORTH

Jacqui Dankworth is best known for her richly resonant jazz vocals that blend folk with rhythm and blues. On a purple-filtered screen inset into an angled wall, we hear the precision of her performance in terms of pitch, enunciation and lyrical interpretation, this last perhaps shows evidence of her former career as an actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company. For her final verse, she creates the sound of a chiming bell from single notes over-dubbed through recorded playbacks of her voice. Sofia Jernberg's vocals from a neighbouring gallery overlay the chimes in an apparent duet.

When I asked about her solo performance *Reach Out* (2021), Dankworth explained that the lyrics of the song honour the wisdom of her charismatic mother, Cleo Laine. Born in London, Laine is one of the world's leading jazz singers.

I said to my mum, 'What's the secret to you?' Because even now, as a 94-year-old woman, she has this light that everyone's drawn to, she's still incredibly powerful, though not in a dictatorial way. . . . It's just there: she's like a Buddha, she stays still and everyone comes to her; she's always been like that. So I asked, 'What's the secret, Mum?' She sat there and said, 'You've got to imagine there's this light, just there, and you're reaching towards it. It's always there and you've got to reach towards it.' It really struck me. So that's what the song's about . . . not letting your demons devour you, but constantly seeing [that light ahead] . . . I found it so moving when she told me, because it opened up such an incredible life for her; because my mum was from the street [born into poverty]. She just has this belief (although she's not religious) . . . at all times she has this faith, probably in herself.⁴⁴

Reach Out

Written by Jacqui Dankworth and Charlie Wood, 2021

*Dearest Momma,
You told me reach out for the light,
Never let it go, never let it out of sight.
But, you left us in the darkest of the darkest night.
I slept alone by the silent church, and I left the lights on.
I always leave the lights on,
Trying to illuminate the fear in my mind.*

*Oh, afraid the demons will devour me once again.
As I look in the mirror getting ready for bed,
Every line on my face tells my story;
That the valleys carved there on my skin
Are a beautiful channel for my tears,
A riverbed of memory.
Dropping a heavenly balm of forgiveness,
Onto those who hurt my soul
So many years ago, in the dark.*

*I am healing now and so are they,
For whom the bell may toll.
The morning sun shines through my window and onto
my face.
And its glorious rays reveal that I am still alive,
I have not been devoured,
And that I am everything.*

*And every chime of morning bells,
Goes deep into my bones and travels through my
troubled mind
Filling me with ancient understanding
And a healing nature of time and of hope.
Dearest Momma,
You told me to reach out towards the light.
And never let it go,
And never let it go,
And never let it go.*

Ahhh . . . Ahhh . . . Ahhh . . . Ahhh . . .

[As she sings this verse, we can also hear chiming morning bells, created by layered recordings of Dankworth's voice as she sings single notes at one-second intervals.]

SOFIA JERNBERG

In this dramatic installation two large screens are suspended by reflective gold pyrite structures protruding from the ceiling and walls. On one, through a glowing orange filter, we see Sofia Jernberg, a composer and soloist acclaimed in jazz, classical music and experimental sound art. With its vast range, Jernberg's extraordinary voice is pitch perfect, but she chooses to disrupt it with abstract sounds as her body becomes a playful vocal instrument. The adjacent monitor, in purple, shows only a microphone at Abbey Road Studios, until Jacqui Dankworth appears in frame as a companion for the final section of Jernberg's improvisation.

During Sofia Jernberg's solo, her voice loops and pulsates in a seemingly ceaseless flow of breath from the back of her throat. She is vocalising alone, until an interjection of sound from Dankworth, one minute of a steadily repeated pitch-perfect note. While both vocalists make sounds that are entirely abstract, within their imaginations they are emulating specific instruments. Dankworth's pre-recorded vocalisation is her imitation of a single note from a church bell, originally recorded as part of her own solo.

Jernberg, when given the freedom to sing as she wishes, chooses not to use language but instead evokes electronic and other sounds. Immediately after recording her piece at Atlantis Grammofon Studios in Stockholm, she explained to me over a video call that being a vocalist when studying at college had made her feel separated from the rest of the musicians: she had to use words, whereas they simply played instruments. She wanted to perform as one of them. 'I felt that every time I enter, it's like, "Oh, here comes the text"', she said.

*Here comes the narrative . . . I wanted to do a solo voice piece that was not about language, where the voice is like an instrument or electronic sounds. And [to make sound] continuously with not so many silences; I wanted to be able to make sound without having to breath. So I do things with my lips while breathing simultaneously, then I sing again to camouflage the breathing.*⁴⁵

Since then, for the past seven years she has had an ongoing solo a cappella project underway. In this exhibition, the 7 minutes of vocal sounds she makes are the result of meticulous physical control: she works the muscles of her throat in extraordinary ways and uses her mouth as a versatile chamber for amplification. In 2016, in a different iteration of Jernberg's a cappella project titled *One Pitch: Birds for Distortion and Mouth Synthesizers*, her voice moves between different melodic sounds that tunefully evoke musical styles from different countries around the world, which she then interrupts with abrupt bursts of throat singing, which sound like that of a bird, then electronic sounds. When asked about this, she mentions that she has a number of sources of influence, including northern European music, such as English folk, as it blends musical styles and vocal lilt. I sense in her joyous vocal ambition inspiration from Peruvian Yma Sumac, who emulated birdsong, and Jernberg also cites Tuvan throat-singer Sainkho Namtchylak. Above all she is drawn to folk traditions from different geographies, including places she has lived – Vietnam and Ethiopia – part of her self-conception as 'an international being'.

For Sonia

Improvised performance by Sofia Jernberg with Jacqui Dankworth, 2021

Improvisation 1

Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . .
[Jernberg vocalises within a small range of notes, moving between melodic singing, insect-like buzzing and open throat sounds, then pulsating beats, and a raw vibrato.]

Ahaa . . . Haaa . . . Whaa . . . Whaa . . .
[Now with more variation in volume, three short calls extend into a long pulsating note, followed by an effect akin to an electronic sound, including a persistent staccato that pauses with a diminuendo.]

Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . . Arrg . . . Whaa . . .
[Her open notes are shaped into constricted growling, then penetrating sounds of rapid-fire staccato notes, before leaping to a higher pitch for a fusillade of single notes, which then shifts to grinding buzzing.]

Yaaa . . . Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . . Ahaa
[A short blast of staccato, then Jernberg's voice sweeps upwards in pitch to duet with Dankworth's chimes. Jernberg responds with long notes in a soprano range, ending with a soft yodel by moving her tongue side to side on her lips.]

Ahhh . . . Ahhh . . . Ahhh . . . Ahhh . . .

[As she sings this verse, we can also hear chiming morning bells, created by layered recordings of Dankworth's voice as she sings single notes at one second intervals.]

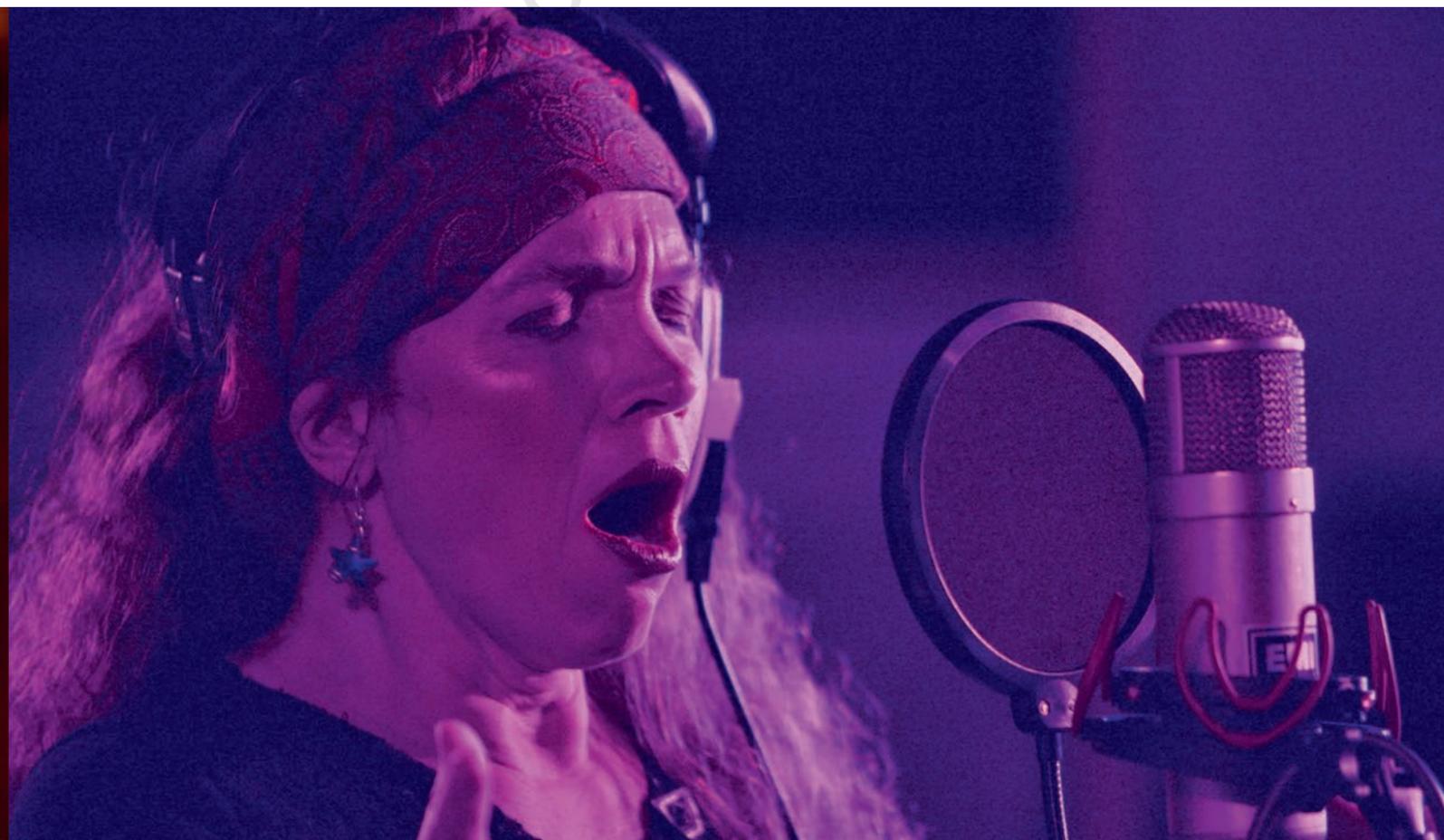
Improvisation 2

Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . .
[Jernberg opens with a sustained vibrato note that increases in volume, then breaks up the sound by punctuating it with small intakes of breath. Long and short sounds then glide between notes.]

Naaa . . . Ahaa . . . Ahaa . . . Ahaa
[Long, electronic-sounding tones quickly become penetrating sounds of rapid-fire staccato notes, which at times sound as if she is singing two notes simultaneously.]

Ahaa . . . Aeee . . . Aeee . . . Aeee
[A rapid volley of open-throated sounds, a glide up to a heady high-pitched extended note, then pulsating, before jumping down to a low buzzing growl. A quick staccato, before moving up to a soft, high held-back soprano note.]

Vvrr . . . Vvrr . . . Vvrr . . . Vvrr . . .
[Here Jernberg drops into deep growling wordless sounds which dialogue with Dankworth's precise chime. She concludes with a single, slow, high-pitched whistle that resonates with Dankworth's chiming tone in F that both sustain for 10 seconds.]



Still of Sofia and Jacqui from *FEELING HER WAY: 'For Sonia'*
2022. Two-channel video. 7 minutes, 53 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

POPPY AJUDHA

Poppy Ajudha appears on screen through a blue filter; the red fabric of her dress is visible in full colour on the tessellating wallpaper that covers two walls. Another wall is hung floor to ceiling with a repeated large photograph of her flame-coloured cropped hair and upper back. Ajudha recently came to prominence in the UK via the underground jazz scene in south-east London. Her sound is infused with jazz, soul and R&B, her message conveyed through lyrics informed by her critical thinking on politics, gender and race. Strongly independent, and largely self-taught as a singer, she has a distinctive way of fading the start and end of words as she sings. Her blues-infused a cappella song *Demons* combines an imploring vocal style with astute confessional lyrics, calling out to the vulnerability inherent in each of us.

As Ajudha explains,

to perform when there is no beat to stay in time with, no note to stay in tune with, is quite a unique experience. It can be quite beautiful and means that you get to focus on conveying the emotion in the note. What became quite central to my performance was actually thinking about the notes that I'm singing and elongating them and actually like – I don't know how to explain it – there was something in the way that I was singing that I wouldn't have been able to focus on if I was there with other people. There is an intimacy in the lyrics of that song. It's quite a heavy song, which I think most people could probably identify with, to be honest, in some way or another.

Inevitably, the location of the recording session – studio two of Abbey Road Studios, made internationally famous by the artists that have worked there in the past, from The Beatles to Aretha Franklin, Amy Winehouse and Adele – had an impact.

Yeah, there is an element of 'these are the walls that have seen so many incredible, inspirational and innovative artists sing their most intimate work before it meant anything to anyone else'. That's something that I didn't really think about until I was in the space. That there is always a point for every artist where nobody's heard your work – consider that: when you hear your favourite artist, you are hearing the music when everybody's hearing it. But there is an earlier point [when a performer first sings a song] where there's no expectation, and you're just experimenting or feeling or expressing.



Still of Poppy from *FEELING HER WAY: 'Demons'* 2022. Single-channel video. 3 minutes, 36 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

Demons

Written and performed by Poppy Ajudha, 2021

*He got demons when he's alone
I got demons deep in my bones
We're all broken
Don't know which way to go
Thought these streets
Were paved with gold*

*This world is crippling you
But you stand strong just like I do
Wear your mask
Put that makeup on
Don't you disappoint
Die poor or
Give them what they want
Demons, Demons
Demons, Demons*

*Always smile instead of frown
What's the point in being down
Ain't no happiness in this old town
They say love won't make the world go round*

*Sure there's reason I got reason too
Feels like nothing that we can do
Society gone wear you to the ground
If even love can't make the world slow down
Demons, Demons
Demons, Demons*



Still of Tanita from *FEELING HER WAY: 'Instant Singer-Songwriter'*
2022. Two-channel video. 10 minutes,
49 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

TANITA TIKARAM

On two red-washed screens in the final gallery, we watch singer-songwriter Tanita Tikaram, hearing her pop-folk style infused with an intensity conveyed through her soft, low, voice. *Feeling Her Way* is her first ever vocal improvisation. She describes the group session as 'amazing, as there's so much trust in that situation . . . you kind of unify and come together. Maybe that's the whole point of music, and any creative endeavour, that you somehow find common ground.' For her solo, she found performing a cappella too exposing, instead co-opting the Steinway piano in the recording studio and spontaneously creating a sequence of original song segments. As privileged witnesses of her first freeform composing session, we notice some rogue notes and hesitations, inevitable in the context of creating something new. Later, she tells me of the sense of liberation she found in a process in which 'the only limit is your imagination'.

I asked if she thinks of her audience when she sings.

I just want people to be moved really, and I want them to feel connected to me, to have a connection. Every time I sing a song of mine, especially songs that people know, I have always tried to find the emotional parts of it and not just sing, you know, I'm not really doing the song the same way they have heard on the record. So I have to believe that what really excites people when they're listening to music is the emotional connection. Because that's what excites me when I see performers. So I'm always trying to define that place in the same way that when you write a song, you're trying to find that openness so that you write with fluidity. It's the same for me when I'm performing, I'm trying to find that release that you have. And you know, obviously there's a point where you have to be very professional because when you do find that, it's magical.

Instant Singer-Songwriter

Improvisation performed by Tanita Tikaram, 2021

*I don't like playing with you
I don't like the things that you do
I spend my nights just raining down
I spend my nights just raining down
Oh Lo Lo, I still like keeping you around
I feel the world is changing
I feel the world is changing way too fast
I think the best of us is better
But I couldn't ask for more than what I ask
It makes me want for best
And if you want to ask of me
What would that be
What would that be*

*Lonely people, they don't say what they mean
Lonely people, they don't say what they mean
Lonely people, they don't say what they hide
They hide, they hide, they hide, so strong*

*Feel like baby wants to change again
Feel like baby wants to change again*

*Face me, tell me everything's gonna be
so much like we meant it to be
Face me, tell me everything's gonna be
I've got lots of joyful days
I've got lots of joyful days
I've got lots*

*Who's calling? Who's calling out my name?
Who's calling? Who's calling out my name?*

*For every brave soul, there's a sinner
For every smart heart, there's never time
If you know, you know, I've been losing this time*

*I feel so sad, I feel so sad
About your love is losing you
It feels so cruel, so cruel, she doesn't choose you
It's such a drop from where you're standing
It feels so cruel, it feels so cruel,
to be like you, it must be hurting
To feel her gaze is not on you, it must be scary
And all the while I know the feeling
All the while I know the pain*

*Ask me why I'm still smiling
Ask me how I want to live
Ask me how I'm still laughing
I got so much more to give
Ask me why we're still loving
Ask me who would take you from me*

*After all, you're still giving me all I need to feel whole
To feel the sun upon my face
To feel the rain between my fingers
And holding you cannot be changed
And holding you still feels the same
Yeah holding you still feels the same*

*You can't go away from where you've been
Can't get no better from what I've seen
There ain't no way for another storm
I feel my best shot is already done
I'm already done, I'm already done
I'm already done, I'm already done*

6

BEHIND THE SCENES

At Abbey Road Studios, London, in June 2021, the singers reflected on their experience of the warm-up session. They re-assemble into their positions behind the mics and put on headphones, then record their personal recollections of the initial improvisation session that has taken place about half an hour earlier.

ERROLLYN WALLEN: Out of the [private] conversations we've just been having about togetherness – just know that each of your voices is very special and that it may get mixed together, or they may layer things [in the final edit].

POPPY AJUDHA: What I loved in what we were talking about, is that we are all women singing together and we are all lead singers, but we're singing in a way we haven't sung before. We're negotiating the space in ways we haven't done before. And that idea of breaking down societal [stereotypes] that say that we [soloists] are in competition or we can't do things together.

EW: It's a lot to think about, isn't it? When singing you are at your most vulnerable, and yet powerful too.

PA: Yeah. I feel my most safe when I'm around women. I feel like I'm not sure I could sing it this same way in a room of male singers.

EW: What about you, Jacqui?

JACQUI DANKWORTH: It's interesting after what's happened with lockdown and Covid-19. This is the first time (for me) singing with other people, rather than singing in showers. It's quite moving really – to hear the sound of everybody singing.

EW: And Tanita, how do you feel?

TANITA TIKARAM: It's amazing, and it's very important. Not just because we're singing together and we don't know each other – I'm not used to singing with anyone at all – but also because you're

asking us to do something so different. I don't have a reference for what we're doing. And it's also that fear of not making a beautiful sound. You're not necessarily asking us to make a beautiful sound. It's funny. When you have the head of someone used to writing songs, you want to create something which, kind of, seduces people.

PA: I feel that's part of being a female singer; that you have to make things that are beautiful, that are nice, that are pleasing to the ear, so that you don't disrupt anything.

TT: Exactly. So being asked to make sounds that are so counterintuitive, that makes me feel very vulnerable. But obviously, everyone is so nice here. But I am second-guessing myself sometimes when it's something I'm totally not comfortable with. At the same time, it's very liberating. And also to think on your feet. Maybe Jacqui has more experience, given your jazz background? But for us, we're not necessarily thinking on our feet as pop singers, it's a different kind [of singing].

EW: You were also saying that weren't you Poppy? That the vocals have to be perfected, the whole thing.

PA: Because of the level of criticism around the way that you sing, and the way that you talk, and talk back. To me it seems very gender-based. There are many famous male singers that if a woman sang that way wouldn't be seen as that [successful]. [As a female singer] you have to be like Beyoncé.

EW: I've always felt the same. And now we are in a safe space, so we will just start.

With their conversation concluded, there is a momentary pause. Those of us in the room watch silently in anticipation with no fixed expectations, as there is no knowing what will come next. In the freeform improv session that follows, Wallen silently guides the singers without the need for words or gestures, purely by compassionate listening. Simultaneously, the singers vocalise soulful a cappella sounds, each confidently folding her own distinct voice into those of her collaborators. Together their improvised harmonies have a haunting elegance, until they are abruptly punctured with shouts and breathy notes. A lyrical cry, 'You're next to me', sparks a playful call-and-response between the group, which later moves into status games provoked by the three words 'I am queen'. The uninterrupted 15-minute improvisation unfolds as freeform vocal powerplay, cut through with expressions of tender camaraderie. The vocalists sing with and for each other, together pushing the emotive impact of their voices in order to spark an emotional response in us, the imagined future audience for the work of Sonia Boyce.

In the months that follow, Boyce decides against selecting material from that perfectly performed improvisation with careful deliberation. Instead, the material she chooses for her central montage is from the private warm-up session, with initially tentative voices, before the singers are fully confident of their position in the game. In doing so she highlights the singers learning how to play together, respectfully led by Wallen, responsively adapting to new and unfamiliar circumstances yet swiftly discovering a strong sense of togetherness – a new shared voice.



Behind the scenes at Abbey Road Studios
2021. Photograph courtesy of Sarah Weal.

NOTES

1. Una Marson, *Tropic Reveries. Poems* (Kingston, Jamaica: Gleaner Co., 1930), p. 1. Marson (1905–1965) was a poet and BBC producer of Caribbean Voices (1941–6).
2. At the time of writing (December 2021), the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia, 2022 includes 48 pavilions (national and institutional/collateral), of which 29 are located within the Giardini della Biennale within permanent buildings owned by each country; the British Pavilion was built in 1909.
3. Sonia Boyce, interview with Tim Marlow, 'Sonia Boyce: Objects of Obsession', Manchester Art Gallery, Facebook Live recording, available at <www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=10157151911569128> (accessed 23 December 2021).
4. Sonia Boyce, private conversations and interviews with Emma Ridgway, January to December 2021. All subsequent quotations from Boyce date from these conversations unless otherwise referenced.
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* [1958] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 178–80.
6. Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 133–5.
7. Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 33.
8. Françoise Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), pp. 5, 108.
9. Mary Beard, *Women and Power: A Manifesto* (London: Profile Books, 2017), pp. 17, 87.
10. Emma Ridgway (ed.), *Claudette Johnson: I Came to Dance* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2019), p. 73.
11. Ella S. Mills, 'Doing the Discourse: Spaces of Black Feminist Subjectivity in British Art History', in *ibid.*, p. 73.
12. Jean Fisher, 'Diaspora, Trauma and The Poetics of Remembrance', in *Exiles, Diasporas & Stranger*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2008), pp. 195–6.
13. A 'yuppie' is a young urban professional.
14. Gilane Tawadros, *Sonia Boyce: Speaking in Tongues* (London: Kala Press, 1997), pp. 7, 66–68.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
16. Stuart Hall, 'Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three "Moments" in Post-War History', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 61 (2006), p. 2.
17. D-M Withers, 'Recovering Traditions, Inspiring Actions', in *Unfinished Business: The Fight for Women's Rights*, ed. Margaretta Jolly and Polly Russell (London: British Library Publishing, 2020), p. 187.
18. Jean Fisher, 'For you, only you: The Return of the Troubadour', in *Sonia Boyce – Thoughtful Disobedience*, ed. Sophie Orlando (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2016), p. 50.
19. Sonia Boyce in conversation with Mikhail Karikis and Tessa Jackson, *Scat – Sonia Boyce: Sound and Collaboration* (Institute of International Visual Arts (Iniva), London, 2013), exhibition guide, pp. 16–17, available at <https://iniva.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/sonia_boyce_exhibition_guide_o.pdf> (accessed 6 January 2022).
20. Fisher, 'The Return of the Troubadour', p. 55.
21. Boyce in conversation with Karikis and Jackson, *Scat – Sonia Boyce: Sound and Collaboration*, p. 17.
22. Allison Thompson, 'Crop Over', in David A. Bailey and Allison Thompson (eds), *Liberation Begins in the Imagination: Writings on Caribbean British Art* (London: Tate Publishing, 2021), p. 267.
23. Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 18.
24. Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 103.
25. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* [1938] (London: Routledge, 1998).
26. Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1993, 6th edn), p. 94.
27. Sonia Boyce in conversation with Zineb Sedira, chaired by Gilane Tawadros, 15 October 2021, British Council and Institut Français, London.
28. David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 20.
29. Adrian Piper, *Coloured People* (London: Book Works, 1991).
30. Jennifer Higgie and Sonia Boyce, 'Sonia Boyce on Adrian Piper', *Bow Down: Women in Art* podcast, 20 August 2020, available at <https://frieze.libsyn.com/sonia-boyce-on-adrian-piper> (accessed 6 September 2021).
31. Ana Cristina Llompart and Jeremy Munday, *Radical Geometry: Modern Art of South America from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2014).
32. David Rickard, *Pyrite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
33. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
34. Ken Burns (director), *Jazz*, episode 3: 'Our Language' (Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2001).
35. Emma Ridgway (ed.), *Experiment Marathon: Hans Ulrich Obrist and Olafur Eliasson* (Cologne: Koenig Books, 2008), p. 171. 'Mind Matter: a Solo Peace, performance by Pauline Oliveros with Expanded Instrument System', 26 October 2007, Serpentine Gallery, London.
36. David Crystal, *Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices* (London: The British Library, 2012), p. 156.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Errollyn Wallen, interview with Emma Ridgway, 8 December 2021.
39. Musa Okwonga, *One of Them: An Eton College Memoir* (London: Unbound, 2021), p. 32.
40. Loretta Graziano Breuning, *Status Games, Why We Play Them and How to Stop* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021).
41. Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music* (London: Atlantic, 2008), pp. 243–4.
42. Sonia Boyce and Dorothy Price, 'Dearly Beloved or Unrequited? To Be "Black" in Art's Histories', *Art History*, vol. 44, issue 3 (June 2021), pp. 462–80, at pp. 463–4.
43. Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, *The Psychology of Music: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 98–9.
44. Jacqui Dankworth, interview with Emma Ridgway, 8 December 2021.
45. Sofia Jernberg, interview with Emma Ridgway, 14 June 2021.

FURTHER READING

This is a general reading list on the work of Sonia Boyce and some select themes. Texts covering other figures, schools of thought and time periods are cited in the notes to the chapters (pp. 41 and 128–9).

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——, 'From Substrate to the Riverbed', in Crippa, Elena (ed.), *Frank Bowling*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Publishing, 2019)

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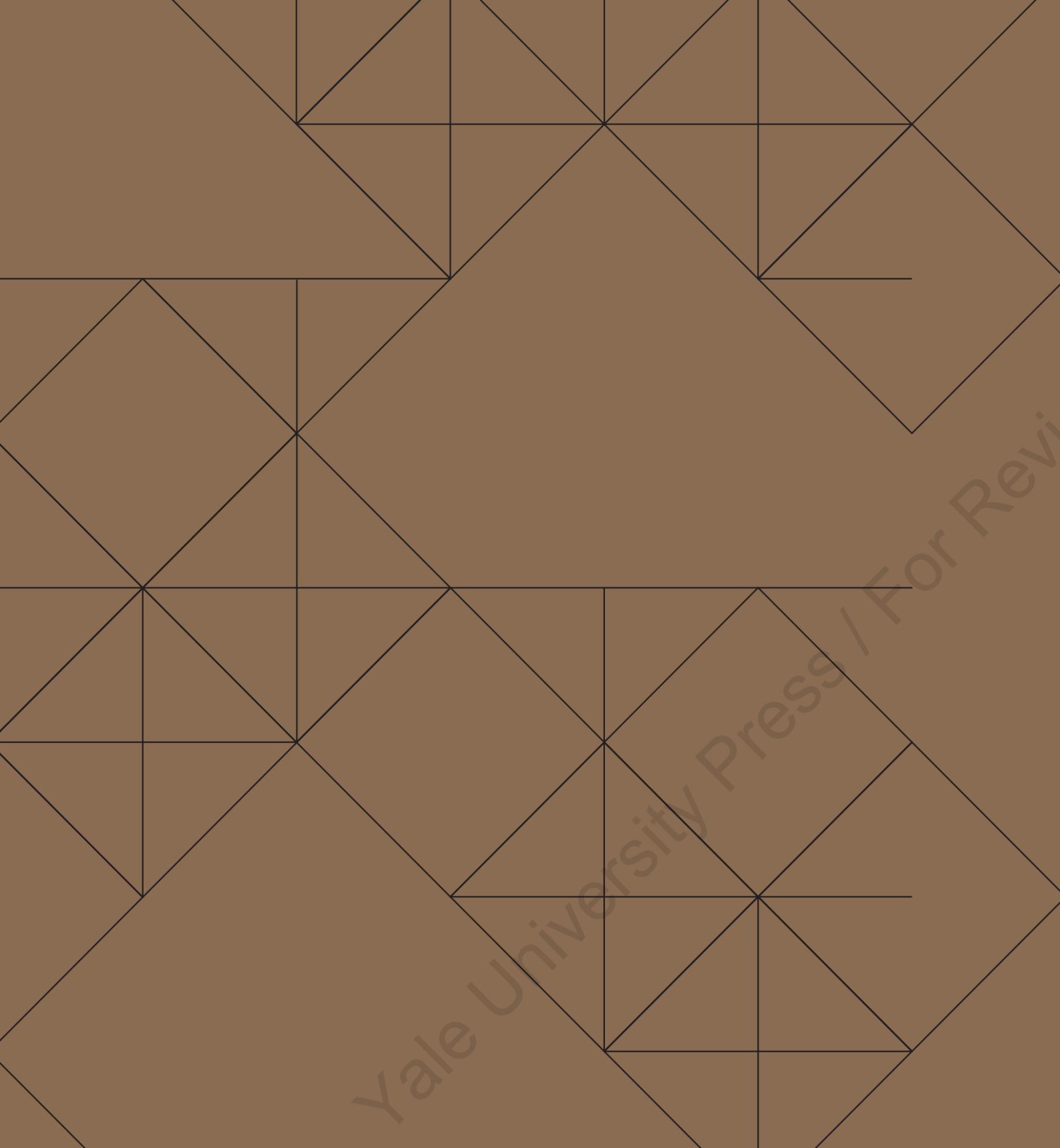
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**FEELING
HER
WAY**

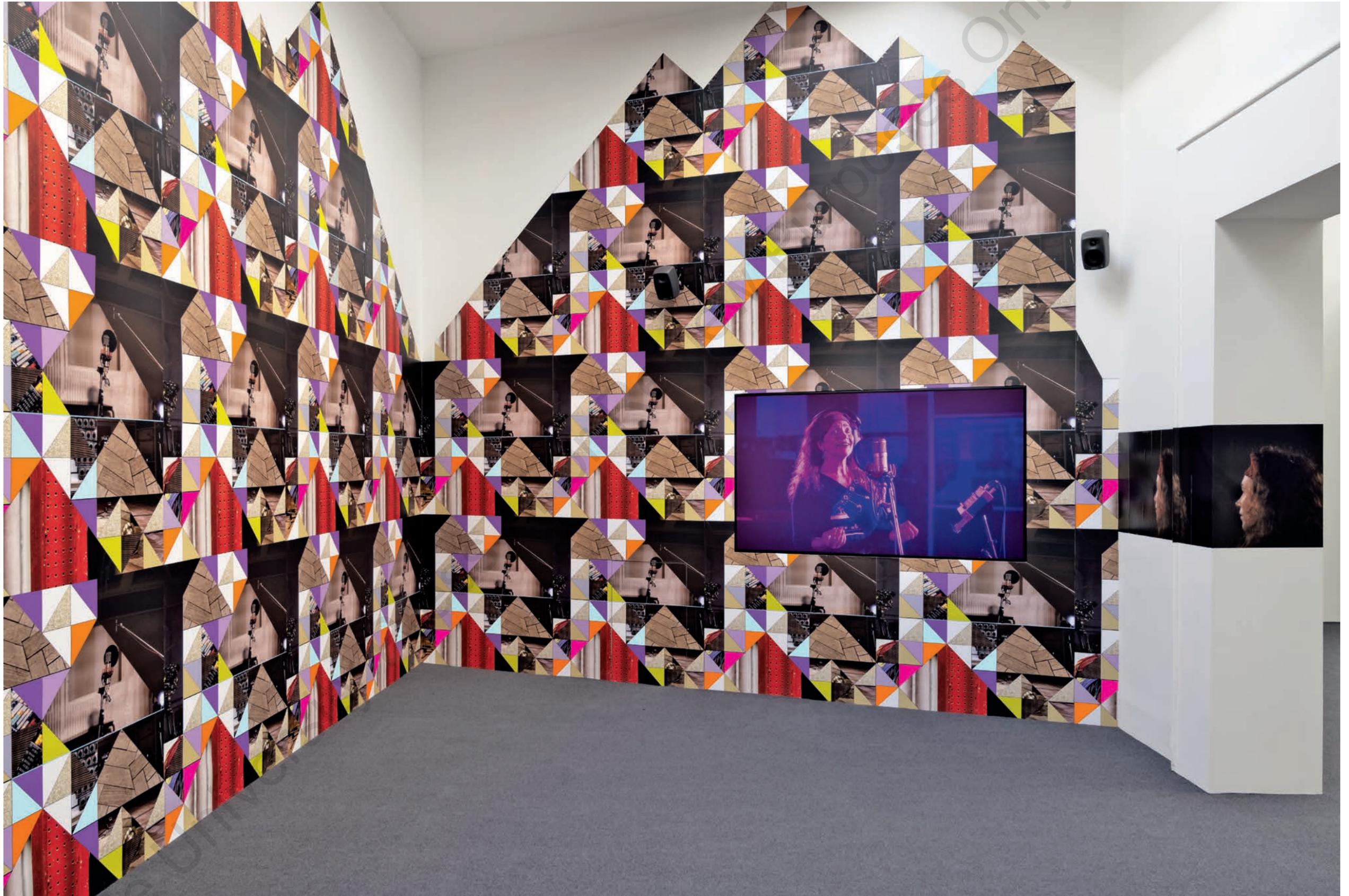
INSTALLATION PHOTOGRAPHY

Commissioned by the British Council for
the 59th International Art Exhibition –
La Biennale di Venezia, 2022



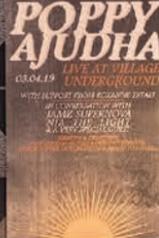
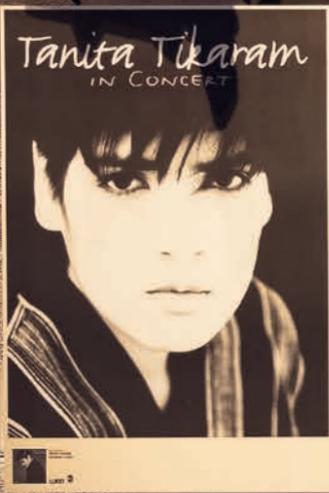


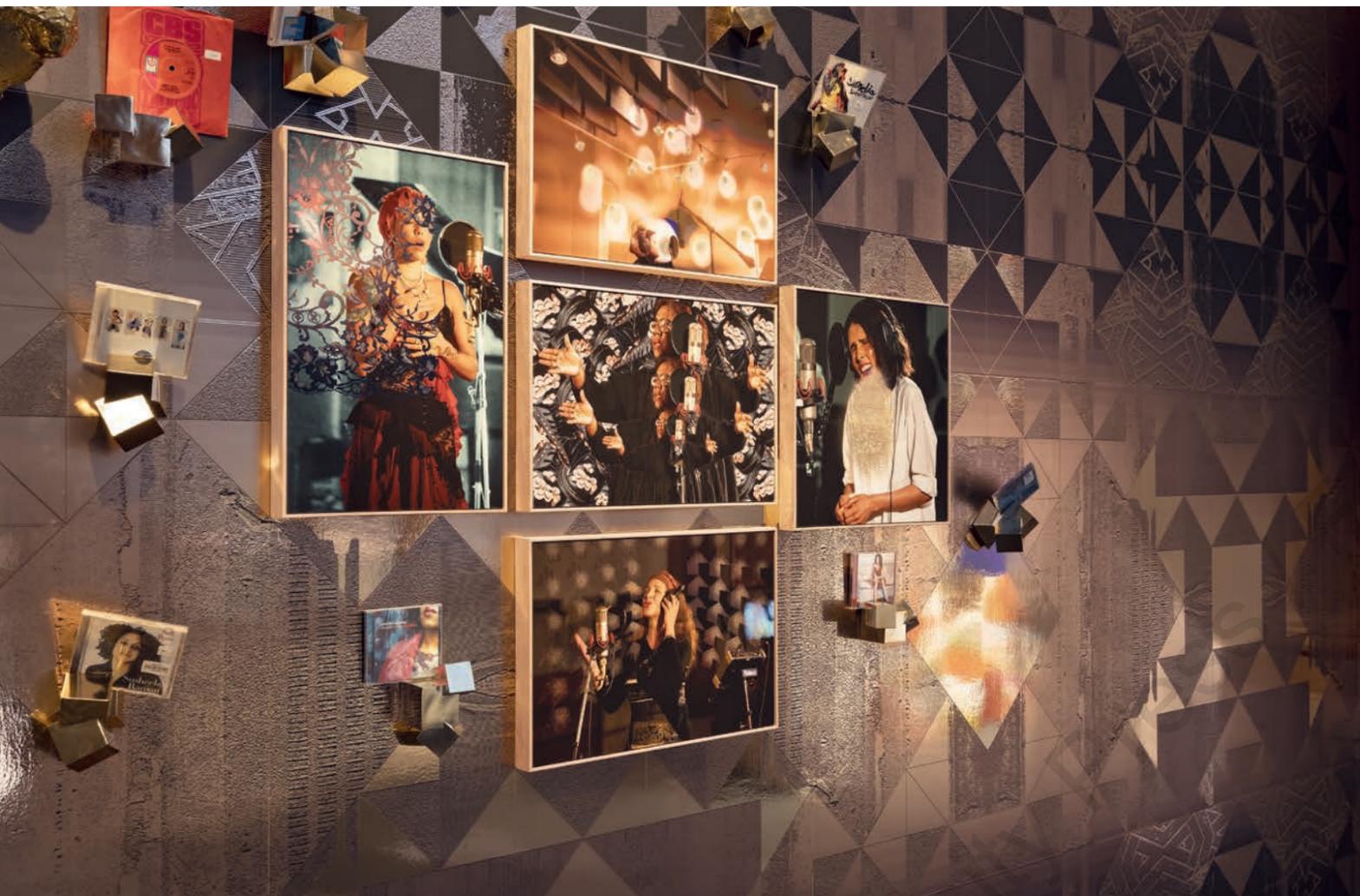




















Photos Only



LIST OF WORKS

1

GALLERY

See pp. 136–9

FEELING HER WAY, 2022

Four-channel video. Performers: Poppy Ajudha, Jacqui Dankworth, Tanita Tikaram and Errollyn Wallen. 12 minutes, 28 seconds.

Errollyn wallpaper, 2022

Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.

Production still (Jacqui), 2022

White-back flyposter. Dimensions variable.

Untitled (gold structures), 2022

Poplar plywood, sheet brass with gold finish. Dimensions variable.

2

GALLERY

See pp. 140–41

FEELING HER WAY: 'Reach Out', 2022

Single-channel video. Performer: Jacqui Dankworth; Composers: Jacqui Dankworth and Charlie Wood. 7 minutes, 53 seconds.

Jacqui wallpaper, 2022

Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.

Production still (Jacqui), 2022

White-back flyposter. Dimensions variable.

3

GALLERY

See pp. 142–5

FEELING HER WAY: 'For Sonia', 2022

Two-channel video. Performer and composers: Sofia Jernberg with Jacqui Dankworth. 7 minutes, 53 seconds.

Sofia wallpaper, 2022

Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.

Jacqui wallpaper, 2022

Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.

Untitled (gold structures), 2022

Poplar plywood, sheet brass with gold finish. Dimensions variable.

4

GALLERY

See pp. 146–51

Gold wallpaper, 2022

Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.

Sleeping Satellite, 2022

Mixed media with items from the *Devotional Collection*. 72 × 54 × 24 cm.

Legends 5 Star, 2022

Mixed media with items from the *Devotional Collection*. 94 × 61 × 42 cm.

5

GALLERY

See pp. 152–4

FEELING HER WAY: 'Demons', 2022

Single-channel video. Performer and composer: Poppy Ajudha. 3 minutes, 36 seconds.

Poppy wallpaper, 2022

Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.

Production still (Poppy), 2022

White-back flyposter. Dimensions variable.

Untitled (gold structures), 2022

Poplar plywood, sheet brass with gold finish. Dimensions variable.

6

GALLERY

See pp. 155–7

FEELING HER WAY: 'Instant Singer-Songwriter', 2022

Two-channel video. Performer and composer: Tanita Tikaram. 10 minutes, 49 seconds.

Tanita wallpaper, 2022

Printed wallpaper. Dimensions variable.

Untitled (gold structures), 2022

Poplar plywood, sheet brass with gold finish. Dimensions variable.

All courtesy of the artist.

BIOGRAPHY



Sonia Boyce OBE RA was born in London, UK, in 1962, where she continues to live and work. In 2019, the artist received an OBE for services to art in the Queen's New Year Honours List, as well as an Honorary Doctorate from the Royal College of Art. In 2016, Boyce was elected a Royal Academician, and received a Paul Hamlyn Artist Award. Between 2012 and 2017, Boyce was Professor of Fine Art at Middlesex University, and since 2014 she has been Professor at the University of the Arts London as the inaugural Chair of Black Art & Design, where she directed a three-year research project into Black Artists & Modernism, which resulted in a BBC documentary: *Whoever Heard of a Black Artist? Britain's Hidden Art History* (2018). Recent solo exhibitions include *In the Castle of My Skin*, Eastside Projects, Birmingham, UK (2020), touring to Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA), Middlesbrough, UK (2021); *Sonia Boyce*, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, UK (2018); *Sonia Boyce: We move in her way*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, UK (2017); and *Paper Tiger Whisky Soap Theatre* (Dada Nice), Villa Arson, Nice, France (2016). In 2015 she was included in *All the World's Futures*, the International Exhibition of the 56th Biennale di Venezia, curated by Okwui Enwezor. Her work is held in the collections of Tate, London, UK; Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK; Arts Council, London, UK; The Government Art Collection, London, UK; British Council, London, UK; and Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, UK.

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Nicholas Thornton, Head of Fine Art, Amgueddfa Cymru, National Museum Wales

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Exhibition Production Management: Svetislava Isakov, Design and Production Manager, M+B Studio

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Film by Sonia Boyce

Director & DOP: Michelle Tofi

Second Unit Director & DOP: Paul Wu

Performers

Poppy Ajudha
Jacqui Dankworth
Sofia Jernberg
Tanita Tikaram
Errollyn Wallen

Editor: Michelle Tofi

Sound Engineer: Richard Thomas

Assistant Engineer: Neil Dawes

Second Unit Sound Engineer: Zebastian Swartz

Sound mixer: Richard Thomas

Producers

Niamh Sullivan, Michelle Tofi and
Louise Morton Murray

Camera Operators

Michelle Tofi
Louise Morton Murray
Phil Macdonald
Curtis Blair
Beatriz Delgado Mena

Steadicam Operator: Luke Oliver

Second Unit Camera Operator: Paul Wu

Make-up and Hair

Tanesha Coley
Michaela Samuels

Stills photography: Sarah Weal

Second Unit Stills photography: Jessica Lindgren-Wu

Abbey Road Studios: Claire Renfrew, Events Manager

Studio Runner: Freddie Light

Health & Safety: Claire Renfrew

Atlantis Grammfon Studio Manager: Stefan Boman

Online Editing: West Digital

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Equipment: Procama Take 2

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