

Sonia Boyce (b. 1962) Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain so Great
1986



Key facts:

- Date: 1986
- Size: 4 parts, each 152.2 x 65cm
- Materials: Charcoal, pastel, and watercolour on paper
- Collection: (Arts Council 1989)
- Nationality: British
- Scope of work for Pearson A Level: Identities

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter

This is a large-scale four-panel history painting which includes a self-portrait of the artist. Nineteenth century British colonial history as told by the white missionaries is re-visited, critiqued, and brought up-to-date. Four panels represent four of the five areas of the British Empire: from the left Africa (Cape Colony), India, and Australia, as seen in **Walter Crane's illustrated 1886 Map** from exactly one hundred years earlier. On the right, Sonia Boyce has literally inserted herself as a specific young woman of African-Caribbean heritage, to represent the Caribbean and act as a witness to this history. The wallpaper of the past is in the background behind the contemporary Black British artist.

The title refers to two famous 'myths' of Empire. Firstly, "*Lay back and think of England*" refers to the (probably inaccurate) twentieth century view of what Victorian mothers told their daughters to do on their wedding night - i.e. to be passive and dutiful wives, put up with marital sex, and conceive and bear children for the Great British Empire.



The second reference is to the role of Christian missionaries in colonialism. “*The secret of England’s greatness*” was supposedly the description on the King James Bible given to a visiting diplomat from East Africa (now Kenya). This event was made famous by **Thomas Jones Barker’s painting The Secret of England’s Greatness c. 1862 (NPG)** showing a kneeling, exoticised, generalised African figure in profile receiving the bible.

Boyce also used words relating to missionaries in her panels. Look at the first panel, top left, for the vertical word ‘mission’ relating to Britain’s aim to build an empire. In the second panel ‘missionary’ refers to the conversions to Christianity. In the third ‘missionary position’ explicitly references not just a traditional heterosexual position for sex in European culture, but to the use of rape and sexual violence associated with slavery and imperialism. In the final panel the word ‘changing’ slants toward the right, showing that Boyce is not lying down, but is in the foreground, on a large scale and actively looking out at the viewer. This self-portrait brings historical events to the forefront of rethinking the issues surrounding colonialism in a post-colonial multicultural Britain. The details of the image explicitly relate to nineteenth century works of art and design that influenced Boyce.

Formal Qualities

The quadriptych is highly organised with a geometrical composition reminiscent of large-scale altarpieces from the medieval and Renaissance periods. This effect is heightened by the vignettes of the crosses, and the inclusion of Boyce herself (bottom left) where a spectator portrait of the patron would usually be (though often on a smaller scale). The rectilinear outlines to the crosses that represent the colonised groups contrast with the curvilinear, growing, organic roses, which curl around and bring the viewer’s eye to Boyce. With clear outlines the overall effect is very decorative with the crosses looking collaged. Do they suggest a graveyard of Empire? With a restricted palette of black and white (race), and complementary colours of red (blood/bloodshed) and green (land), Boyce uses colour symbolically. The stippled red of the background gets deeper from left to right moving from the faded past to Boyce herself, living flesh and blood. The use of line is significant and draws upon the styles of English nineteenth century artists. The decorative appearance deliberately relates to craft and design from this period as well as fine art.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain so Great is packed with references to nineteenth century British art and craft. Not only was it painted on the centenary of Walter Crane's map, but it uses similar racist visual tropes, repeated in the main source: **Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee wallpaper by F Scott & Son (1887 Victoria & Albert Museum)**. This features a bust length portrait of Victoria with the words 'Victoria Queen & Empress Jubilee Year 1887' surrounded by images and the words Canada, Australasia, Our Country, Cape Colony Peace and Progress and India, Virtuous Empress. The latter 3 continents are repeated in Boyce's work with animals taken from the original wallpaper; from left (i) Cape Colony with ostrich and hunter in background, (ii) India with tiger and elephant transport in background, and (ii) Australia with kangaroo and spear throwing hunters. These vignettes are all now viewed through the framing device of the Christian crosses of the missionaries. All the colonised figures are small and generalised, and stereotypically racist -undressed and in violent poses. The image of Queen Victoria has been replaced by Boyce herself.

The roses, with entwined thorny branches, leaves and stippled background recall **Walter Crane's design for his Rosamund wallpaper of 1908 (V & A)**. Reminiscent of flock wallpaper in her home in 1970's east London, Boyce wrote: *'I'm trying to be an oral translator through pictures... I gather things up which I remember... I am making visible the warmth as well as the confrontation of our daily lives.'* (2007)



The Tudor red rose of the British monarchy has become black. The rose is a traditional symbol of love and beauty, but shown with thorns represents unattainable love and beauty. The notion of a particular kind of beauty, the fair skinned 'English rose' is explored by reference to **Dante Gabriel Rossetti's The Beloved (1865-6)**. This was a popular painting by the famous Pre-Raphaelite artist whose work broke with the traditional establishment Victorian style. It shows a group of 'maidens' from an array of

ethnicities framing an ideal blond, blue-eyed pale beauty, referred to in the title - just as Victoria is framed in the wallpaper. At the bottom to the left of the central figures, is a small somewhat androgynous child, believed to be African-Caribbean, unclothed, with Oriental-style jewellery, holding a tribute of roses, looking out to the left as a foil to the English beauty. No doubt Boyce personally experienced discrimination in relation to western ideals of beauty. In her work she repositions herself within the frame, not only in the foreground but on a large scale, as a contemporary Black beauty with a fashionable flat top hairstyle. Victorian arts and crafts have been re-appropriated to make not just an aesthetic statement but a political statement directly addressing racial stereotypes past and present, while enabling Boyce to make a new image that is accessible to a wide range of gallery visitors.

Boyce is a Black British artist with African-Caribbean heritage (Barbados/Guyana) born in London. She studied Foundation Art at East Ham College and then Fine Art at Stourbridge College of Art in the West Midlands graduating in 1983. She became involved with the BLK Art Movement.

“We believe that Black art is born of a consciousness based upon experience of what it means to be an Afrikan descendant wherever in the world we are. ‘Black’ in our context means all those of Afrikan descent.: ‘Art’; the creative expression of the Black person or group based on historical or contemporary experiences. Black-Art should provide an historical document of local and international Black experience. It should educate by perpetuating traditional art forms to suit new experiences and environments. It is essential that Black artists aim to make their art “popular” - that is an expression that the whole community can recognise and understand”. (A Statement on Black Art and the Black Art Gallery, Finsbury Park OBAALA Committee 1983.)

Boyce exhibited in shows curated by Lubaina Himid. Firstly in ‘Five Black Women’ at the Africa Centre in Covent Garden, in ‘Black Women Time Now’ at Battersea Arts Centre in 1983, and in 1985 in ‘The Thin Black Line’ at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. In the 1980s in Britain the term ‘Black’ was a political term, it did not define an ethnicity, nor did ‘Black art’ define an aesthetic. Cultural historian Stuart Hall wrote:

“The term ‘black’ is used as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalisation in Britain, which came to provide the category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions, and ethnic identities... These formed the conditions of resistance of a cultural politics designed to challenge, resist, and, where possible, transform the dominant regimes of representation - first in music and style and later in literary, visual and cinematic forms.” (Stuart Hall ‘New Ethnicities’ ICA Documents 7, Black British Cinema (1988) p. 27)

Boyce’s earlier works Missionary Position 1 and Missionary Position II (1985) in Tate had also investigated issues of religion and gender from the perspective of her generation of diasporic artists at a time when media coverage of Bob Geldof’s Live Aid perpetuated images of East Africans as victims.



In 1986 British people were experiencing the impact of Conservative Party politics at the height of Thatcherism: monetarism, the free market, privatisation and the destruction of the welfare state led to civil unrest. The miners' strike had ended, but in London the death of Cherry Groce - shot by police in her house in Brixton, and the death of Cynthia Jarrett - after a police raid on Broadwater Farm Estate in Tottenham led to uprisings in 1985, described as 'riots' in the press. At this moment Boyce chose to look back into Britain's social, political and cultural history in the nineteenth century at the height of the British Empire, to comment on the legacy and find a new visual language for the complexities of how it felt and what it meant to be a creative young Black woman artist in Britain in 1986 living under the weight of Western cultural imperialism and institutional racism.

Second-wave feminists' work from the 1970s - researching, writing, and publishing on women artists from the past who worked within the European tradition - had become established within gender studies courses in schools, colleges and universities, alongside discussions of 'woman as image' and 'the male gaze' (Laura Mulvey, 1975). Boyce's work embodies the issue of the black woman's gaze in relation to the gender politics of representation where the dominant gaze is not only male, but white. She deliberately challenged the '*historical erasure that consumes black contributions to Western society.*' (Boyce). The title of her work challenges the viewer to rethink accepted histories of colonialism, empire, the role of religion and patriarchy.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Boyce deliberately uses media and techniques stereotypically associated with the European tradition of women's art, beginning with a charcoal sketch. In the nineteenth century 'amateur lady artists' might work on a small scale with pastel and watercolour as part of their 'feminine accomplishments' as a craft skill. Boyce was making a conceptual point about gendered differentiation within the arts by deliberately working in these materials yet on a large scale, using oil pastel associated with decorative rather than fine arts and with preliminary sketches rather than final pieces. She could also be drawing on the work of the most famous portrait painter in pastels - Rosalba Carriera. Choosing to work in a figurative style and using traditional materials from art college onwards, at a time when art teaching in Britain had been dominated by conceptual art, and contemporary US feminist art was often installations or performance, is significant for this period of black art as a counter-cultural project. [Boyce moved away from this in 1989].

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

In 1987 Chila Burman wrote forcefully about the struggle of Black women artists to establish a voice within the racist, sexist and classist society of mid-1980s Britain.¹ However Black women artists were making themselves visible. Artist and curator Himid wrote: ‘we are reclaiming history, linking national economics with colonialism and racism, with slavery, starvation and lynchings’², and she quoted Boyce herself from 1983: ‘I am British born of West Indian parents. I live a schizophrenic life, between an anglicised background and a West Indian foreground; to put it another way, between ‘but look at my trials nah’, and ‘gaw blimey’. My work tries to reconcile both of these.’³

The works of artists such as Boyce were more likely to be reviewed in the pages of the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* or weekly *Time Out* than in serious art magazines, and often in relation to politics rather than art. Guardian newspaper critic Waldemar Januszczak was unusual in including her in his 1985 show *Room at the Top*, alongside white artists. Himid summarised her opinion in these words, ‘Januszczak, while loathing black art, has tried relentlessly to single out her work for critical praise ... He believes that she is wasted in showing with other black artists. He is wrong.’⁴

Rasheed Araeen, in the exhibition catalogue for *Essential Black Art (1988)* at London’s Chisendale Gallery wrote: “*Black Art is, in fact, a specific contemporary art practice that has emerged directly from the struggle of Asian, African and Caribbean people (i.e. black people) against racism and the work itself specifically deals with and expresses a ‘human condition’: the condition of black people resulting from their existence in a racist white society or/and in, global terms, from Western cultural imperialism.*”

In 1994 Homi Bhabha’s concepts of ‘hybridity’ were applied to art which was a hybrid of the artist’s colonised cultural identity and the coloniser’s cultural identity, in order to express ‘cultural difference’ rather than the ‘cultural diversity’ associated with multiculturalism. So in 1995 Katy Deepwell, looking back at the 1980s wrote about this work by Boyce: ‘... like the designs which paper our walls, the pre-existing frame of history is conceived of as something which envelops our everyday life. In other words, history’s designs decorate our present and it is those designs - in every sense of the word - which the artist Sonia Boyce appropriated and transformed ... the black woman stares out at us from the final panel - a self-portrait of the artist herself - suggests that this English rose, as woman or as identity, inherits a history of resistance as well as a history of oppression, that is, separate histories but ones which are locked together inextricably.’ She went on to comment on the choice and position of the words in the image: ‘Like language, Boyce seems to suggest, history and historical relationships are subject to change from within the very framework of representation. Artists like Boyce have articulated other histories and positions of difference within the dominant cultural and

¹ Burman, Chila *There have always been great blackwomen artists*, Robinson, Hilary (Ed) *Visibly Female* Camden 1987

² Himid, Lubaina ‘We will be’ in Betterton, Rosemary (Ed) *Looking on - Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts* Pandora (1987) p. 261

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*

epistemological frame and they have deconstructed Western historical narratives within the very frame of representation.’⁵

Works such as *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain so Great* firmly established the Black Art Movement. ‘*Boyce is known and celebrated for her wonderful oil pastel drawings that explored a range of personal and social narratives, touching on an astonishingly wide range of subjects. The ambiguities of Christianity and its troubling and troubled relationship with Black people; the legacies and the consequences of the British empire, Predatory and abusive behaviours that often remain hidden from view; the importance of memory. All these topics and many others have featured in Boyce’s earlier work.*’⁶

The Black Art Movement laid the foundation for a later generation of individual artists such as Steve McQueen, Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare to emerge within the Young British Artists of the 1990s. *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Made Britain so Great* was exhibited to a new generation at Tate Britain’s controversial *Artist and Empire* exhibition in 2015-16. Joanna Bourke from *The Lancet* reviewed it, writing ‘*In this painting, she reflects on Englishness, the role of religion in the imperial conquests, sexual violence, and the contingent nature of identity. The work is also an act of resistance...*’

Boyce is now a professor at the University of the Arts London, a Royal Academician, and was awarded an MBE and an OBE for her services to the arts. She will be the first black woman to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 2022.

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

Bailey David A, Baucom, Ian and Boyce, Sonia (Eds) *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (2005)

Burman, Chila *There have always been great blackwomen artists*, Robinson, Hilary (Ed) *Visibly Female* Camden (1987)

Deepwell, Katy *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* (1995)

Eddo-Lodge, Reni *Why I’m no longer talking to white people about race* Bloomsbury (2018)

Hirsch, Afua *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* Penguin (2018)

Himid, Lubaina ‘We will be’ in Betterton, Rosemary (Ed) *Looking on - Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts* Pandora (1987)

Orlando, Sophie *British Black Art: debates on Western Art History* (2016)

<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw00071/The-Secret-of-Englands-Greatness-Queen-Victoria-presenting-a-Bible-in-the-Audience-Chamber-at-Windsor>

<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s182.raw.html>

<https://makinghistoriesvisible.com/curations/thin-black-lines/>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bcy4kd> ‘Whoever heard of a Black Artist? Britain’s Hidden History’

⁵ Katy Deepwell *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* (1995)

⁶ http://new.diaspora-artists.net/display_item.php?id=36&table=artists

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/sonia-boyce-ra>

<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/sonia-boyce-a-revolutionary-face-of-contemporary-british-art>

<https://theplaceishere.org/page/2>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/sonia-boyce-obe-794>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/kids/explore/who-is/who-sonia-boyce>

<https://literariness.org/2016/04/08/homi-bhabhas-concept-of-hybridity/>