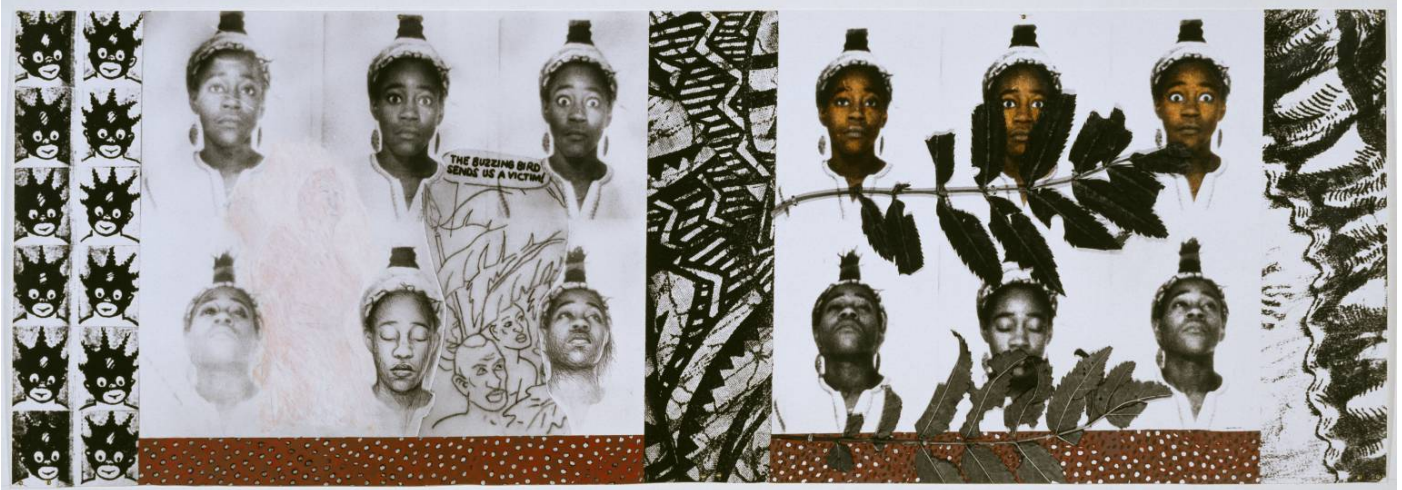


Sonia Boyce

From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born 'Native' Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction 1987 , Tate



Summary

In the title of this work, Sonia Boyce makes clear that she is exploring her own sense of self within a wider context, in which the idea of identity has been dominated by a mass media stereotype of white, male, physical strength.

Composition

The panoramic work is divided into two main panels with three framing strips to either side and in the centre. This gives it a feel of regularity and order which might refer to the idea of the triglyphs and metopes of ancient Greek architecture, where the 'story' (metope) is presented and locked in by the order imposed by the three bars ('triglyphs'). This reference works well to support Boyce's message here as she explores the tight grip of white media on the panorama of our landscape and highlights the difficulty of being seen as a black individual within this.



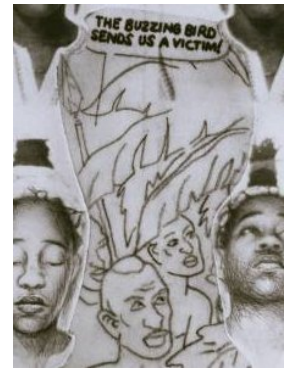
Imagery

Andy Warhol had famously used the idea of repeated imagery in his Pop Art works of Marilyn Munroe and others. This reference seems to be used by Boyce in an ironic way here, as unlike Munroe, whose image was eternally popular despite the realities of her life, the image of the black woman is eternally 'tainted with the jungle' and the insulting warning to 'go back to where you came from' that is too often thrown at British born people of colour. While the left-hand side of Warhol's work uses colour to idolise the film star, Boyce makes clear that black 'colour' is not seen positively by an audience fed on a diet of exclusively white images in the

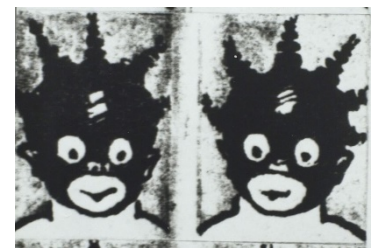


media. The Tarzan films reiterated this invisibility of the black woman: despite being surrounded by large numbers of women throughout the film, there is an inevitability about his one true love – Jane the only white woman of the film.

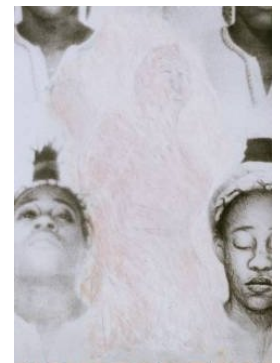
Between the left-hand heads, a cartoon collage appears like a speech bubble. The text reads 'a buzzing bird sends us a victim' which again explores the assumed ignorance of 'native' or black people according to a western, colonial, white audience. In his similarly ground-breaking novel 'Things Fall Apart', Chinua Achebe uses a similar device when the people of Umuofia refer to the white man's bicycle as 'a metal horse'. In this reference, the buzzing bird is a helicopter and the victim is a bomb, or, to use the Rambo reference of the title, the hideously destructive Agent Orange that was used by Americans to kill Vietnamese people in the jungles of their country. In this way, Boyce exposes the ignorance of the white audience and laments their ability to continue to control the agenda and to ensure that the English born (black) native continues to be silenced.



On the left-hand side of the work, the frame consists of 12 images of pickaninnies ('golliwogs'). This caricature image was commonly found across cartoons and packaging right through Boyce's own childhood and was used to reinforce the negative stereotype of colour, and the prejudice and discrimination to which people of colour were submitted. The term itself was used by Enoch Powell in his 'Rivers of Blood' speech (1968) and also by Boris Johnson in 2008. Here, Boyce uses 12 faces in the frame and her own face 12 times in the main image to emphasise how this negative branding has haunted her own sense of identity and problems of self-belief.



On the left-hand panel, the image of Tarzan can be seen almost 'whited out', but nonetheless in a triumphant and powerful pose. Although the figure of Tarzan is a literary construct (first published in 1914) the story has a wide fan base and awareness – whilst real British people of colour have neither. In the story, the highly skilled (white) Tarzan returns to conquer the jungle – living a white colonialist's dream, which of course takes little account of the 'others' who previously considered that environment home. By the time Edgar Rice Burroughs' book was published, more than 90% of Africa was under European control, with only Ethiopia, the Dervish state (part of Somalia) and Liberia retaining independence.



In 'reconstructing her roots', Boyce finds that white history does little to explore the white actions, consequences or guilt of hundreds of years of indulgence in the systematic capture and exploitation of African slaves for their own gain. Nor of recognising the loyalty/sacrifice of those people to a British flag through two world wars and the rescue contribution of the Windrush generation. Despite the heroism and efforts of black people through the ages, the white audience is more likely to 'see' faces of black people in police line-ups (suggested by her 12 faces here) than as iconic image and so the prejudice continues.

Rambo (another Hollywood white construct) does not appear in this work beyond the title. On the one hand, the character is associated with an anti-establishment fight and experienced false prejudice in his life, but his screen dominance and following could, Boyce suggests, never have been achieved by a character of colour. His story is in many ways, a repackaging of the 1940s Tarzan films for a (still white) 1980s Hollywood audience.

Use of materials and techniques

In using collage and photographs for this piece, Boyce is literally quoting from the real world. In this, she strengthens our awareness of the validity of her 'identity' problems as the component parts of this work are

literally 'evidence'. In avoiding oil and canvas, she also avoids the traditional tools of traditional, academic (white, male) art, preferring instead to create a new means for a new challenge.

The layering of image, photograph, collage, textile and paint also reiterates the layering that is identity for everyone. In particular, the overwhelming dominance of white images and icons (and corresponding black prejudice and invisibility) makes the search for identity for Boyce and thousands of other 'English born natives' hugely problematic.

Conclusion

This is a work which asks us all to rethink the value judgements we ascribe and to consider the validity of both the role models we cherish and the criticisms we throw. The large-scale nature of this work makes clear that this is a large scale problem which may have been centuries in the making, but demands urgent action now.

Further reading

- <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/sonia-boyce-794/explore-tarzan-rambo>
- <https://www.ica.art/whats-on/sonia-boyce-we-move-her-way>
- Afua Hirsch 'Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging' Penguin 2018
- Reni Eddo-Lodge 'Why I'm no longer talking to white people about race' Bloomsbury, 2018