

Press Release

Sonia Boyce. Improvise with what we have

4 September – 18 October 2025

Hauser & Wirth New York, 22nd Street



New York... Over the past four decades, Sonia Boyce DBE RA has cultivated a multidisciplinary practice that explores play, language and pattern, while questioning the nature of representation and authorship. For her inaugural exhibition with Hauser & Wirth, Boyce will present two new films alongside her latest wallpaper and photographic works.

In the first film on view, Boyce weaves together footage captured at a silent disco, a paradoxically hushed event in which a roomful of dancers responds to music heard only through headphones. Inspired by both Roy DeCarava's 'Dancers, New York' (1956) and Adrian Piper's 'Funk Lessons' (1983)—groundbreaking works by artists who have centered Black culture—Boyce's 'Silent Disco' (2025) revels in the dancers' unguarded gestures, flickering emotions and ephemeral exchanges. Using montage and repetition, among other techniques, the film takes these lively impressions 'for a walk,' as Boyce would say, quoting Paul Klee's adage ('Drawing is like taking a line for a walk'). As the film begins, only ambient noises are audible to the viewer: we hear the soft shuffle of feet, train cars passing outside the venue, murmurs that erupt into sudden bursts of song. Gradually, the music builds, coaxing the dancers into collective movement, though their headsets are tuned to two separate channels. Harmony arises, improbably, from dissonance.

A key subject in Boyce's recent work, the silent disco is not a party, but rather a framework for close listening, improvisation and collective performance. This sense of openness and play continues in the exhibition space itself. Boyce has taken still images from 'Silent Disco' and arranged them into repeating, kaleidoscopic patterns to create wallpaper installations within the gallery, blurring distinctions between the artwork and its means of production and display. Boyce's installation immerses us in subtle cues from the original performance—the lights, the uncanny silence, the dancers' whirling bodies—suggesting that at any moment, the disco could begin again.



In 'Carmen' (2025), Boyce delves into the life and career of trailblazing Guyanese British actress Carmen Munroe, who reshaped perceptions of Caribbean migrants in the UK through her performances in such West End plays as Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin in the Sun,' and her roles on popular British television programs including 'Doctor Who: The Enemy of the World' (1967 – 1968), 'The Persuaders' (1971 – 1972) and 'Desmond's' (1989 – 1994). Part portrait, part historical document, Boyce's film traces Munroe's impact as an artist and activist.

'Carmen' was first conceived in 2022 as part of a landmark commission by King Charles III marking the 75th anniversary of the arrival of HMT Empire Windrush on Britain's eastern shore. The royal commission brought together leading contemporary artists to create portraits honoring 10 pioneering members of the Windrush Generation—Caribbean migrants who, like Carmen Munroe, arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1971. Despite facing widespread political, economic and social discrimination, these brave individuals played a pivotal role in the reconstruction of postwar Britain.

During Boyce's portrait session with Munroe, she amassed such a wealth of material that she was compelled to develop a more expansive project. The result, shown here for the first time, is a powerful two-channel film: one screen lingers on Munroe as she watches a montage of her own performances, while the other screen displays significant dates and milestones in her career. The two feeds interweave fact and sentiment, history and personal anecdote, illuminating Munroe's ambition, tenacity and prowess in her craft, while emphasizing her own voice and perspective.

'Carmen' (2025) was made with support from Wandsworth Council as part of the Mayor of London's London Borough of Culture initiative.

About the Artist

In 1980, Sonia Boyce completed a foundation course in art and design at East Ham College of Art and Technology, London, and in 1983, she received a BA in fine art from England's former Stourbridge College. During her time at Stourbridge, Boyce attended the First National Black Art Convention at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, where she was introduced to the British Black Arts Movement of the 1980s. She first received public and institutional recognition in the mid-1980s for large-scale pastel works that depicted domestic scenes of Afro-Caribbean life in the UK, and drew upon her own family and childhood experiences. However, Boyce soon moved away from self-representation, embracing an increasingly conceptual and social art practice. Since 1990, she has been collaborating with audiences and other artists, frequently initiating one-off improvisations and spontaneous performances. Boyce documents these actions and encounters without intervening and later constructs them into immersive multi-media installations. Regarding her explorations of social dynamics, Boyce has said, 'I'm more interested in human responses than anything else...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.'

For nearly forty years, Boyce has consistently worked within the art school context. Between 2012 and 2017, she was Professor of Fine Art at Middlesex University, and since 2014, she has been Professor at the University of the Arts London, where she holds the inaugural Chair in Black Art & Design. In 2016, Boyce was elected a Royal Academician and received a Paul Hamlyn Artist Award. In 2019, she received an OBE for services to art in the Queen's New Year Honours List. Boyce holds three honorary doctorates from the Royal College of Art (2019), the Courtauld Institute of Art and Birmingham City University (2023), as well as an honorary fellowship from Norwich University of Arts (2022).

In 2022, Boyce presented 'Feeling Her Way,' an immersive installation and video work commissioned for the British Pavilion at the 59th International Art Exhibition — La Biennale di Venezia, for which she was awarded the Golden Lion for Best National Participation. 'Feeling Her Way' premiered in North America at the PHI Foundation for Contemporary Art, Canada (2024), before travelling to the Art Gallery of Ontario (2024 – 2025). A major exhibition of Boyce's work, titled 'An Awkward Relation,' was organized by Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2024, where it was presented in dialogue with a survey of work by the Brazilian neo-concretist Lygia Clark, titled 'The I and the You.'

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Silhouette
2025
Digital print on wallpaper
Dimensions variable

Purple light (Lisa)
2025
Colour pigment ink print on archival Canson Prestige Paper,
mounted on 5 mm Kapamount
60 x 40 cm / 23 5/8 x 15 3/4 in

Carmen (video still)
2025
Two channel colour video with sound
Duration: 12:05 min