

Ways of Looking

These pages are primarily intended for use by schools, but could be useful for anyone interested in exploring the ideas behind Sonia Boyce's *From Tarzan to Rambo*.

The discussion points are divided into four 'Ways of Seeing', different approaches to thinking about the work, which may in cases overlap. They are structured in terms of questions. Although there is plenty of information on the rest of the site, this will not always be necessary: the questions will help students to work with you to create their own responses and to decide what aspects they need to research further. Prompts, or suggested answers, are in brackets.

There are also suggestions for practical activities which could be adapted for both primary and secondary pupils.

Throughout these pages there are suggested links to other points of the site, which should enable your students to explore aspects of the work in more detail. They can also be used to investigate the way in which it relates to the other works in the *In Focus* display to which it gives its title.

While these pages form a self-contained way of using the website as the basis for discussion in the classroom, they could also be used as preparation for a visit to display itself – nothing can beat the experience of seeing a work of art in the flesh to get a proper understanding of its appearance.

The Personal – what do I bring?

Tate Modern's approach to learning encourages students to think not of one correct reading or interpretation of an artwork, but of plural readings. These will depend on who the viewer is, and when, where and how he or she encounters a work of art. To construct meanings, therefore, the viewer needs to be aware of the experiences they bring to looking, as well as the information an artwork holds.

As the work, and the *In Focus* display as a whole, is concerned with issues of race and colour, responses will clearly vary according to the cultural mix of your school or area. But as well as race it is also about image – how we see our selves and how we are seen by others. In both cases these issues are important to us all.

Discussion points

- **What are your first reactions to the work?**
- **Why do you think or feel this way?**

- **Are there any images in this work which are more (or less) familiar to you than others?** (maybe the cartoon images from comics, the leaves, or the patterns...)
- **Do you have any pictures of yourself that are at all like this?** (pupils may have used photo-booths, for example)
- **Does anything you see relate to your own personal experience, or is it about 'someone else'?**

The Object – what do I see?

One of the ways we can talk about a work of art is in terms of its intrinsic qualities such as colour, materials, processes and organising principles. These questions encourage us to look more closely and state exactly what we see.

From Tarzan to Rambo... is a large-scale black and white photographic work which has been treated through drawing and painting to create different effects. As such it is a multi-media piece – neither a photograph, a painting nor a drawing – and these different techniques are deliberately used as part of the meaning of the work.

Discussion Points

- **What different things can you see in the image? Who or what do you think these things are?** (there are twelve photographic faces – Sonia Boyce herself – in two groups of six, twelve 'golliwog' faces in the strip on the left, a central strip of fabric pattern and a strip of more patterning on the right. In between the first and second pair of faces on the left is a pale pink drawing of a man looking upwards – Tarzan – and between the second and third pair some comic strip 'natives' next to trees, with the words 'THE BUZZING BIRD SENDS US A VICTIM'. On the right there are photographic images of leaves overlying the faces).
- **How are the images arranged?** (symmetrically – with variations)
- **What is the connection between the faces on the left, and the ones on the right?** (the images are the same, but they have been treated in different ways)
- **What is the same, and what is different about the two sides?** (faces appear 'black and white' on the left, in 'colour' on the right, there are 'cartoon' leaves on the left, and 'real' ones on the right, for example).
- **How do you think this image was made?** (it is a large photograph, based on photo-booth images. The original images were treated as a form of collage, with a real leaf sewn on (on the right), photocopied strips of patterned fabric attached, and the images of Tarzan and the 'natives' traced from comic books and drawn on. This was then

photographed and blown up to a large scale, with parts of the surface then being redrawn and painted over.)

- **How are the faces made to look different** (the six faces on the right are coloured with paint, the lower three on the left have been drawn on, to make them look like drawings).
- **How many different ways are there to represent people in this work?** (six or seven – photography (black and white, and effectively colour), painting, drawing, and three forms of ‘cartoon’ or ‘comic’ representation – the ‘golliwogs’, the line drawing of Tarzan which has been painted over, and the black line drawing of the ‘natives’).

The Subject – what is it about?

The Title

Looking at the work

Relating the title to the work

Sonia Boyce has discussed her ideas behind the work at length in an interview with Emma Dexter, one of the curators at Tate Modern. Reading extracts from this with your pupils will undoubtedly help to unpick the image, and understand Boyce’s intentions in creating it. However a work will always mean different things to different people, depending on their own experience and background, and a lot can be learnt from looking at the work itself.

The Title: *From Tarzan to Rambo: English Born ‘Native’ Considers her Relationship to the Constructed/Self Image and her Roots in Reconstruction*

The title is long, and reflects the fact that behind this single work there are a large number of complex ideas – feel free to deal with as few or as many as you like, depending on the age or ability of your pupils. Similarly the discussion points below start at a more basic level and gradually lead into more complex issues – choose those which you think most relevant. The discussion points are divided into two sections, ‘looking at the work’ and ‘relating the title to the work’

Sonia Boyce is a black artist born in England who in this work is considering herself and her self-image in relationship to her ‘Roots’ – her African heritage – but in terms of the way in which that image has been constructed by others. The specific point of reference here is film, and the ways in which black people have been represented in film. The work was made in 1987 – at the time the *Rambo* films were being made – and looks back to the *Tarzan* films of the 1930s and 40s.

Looking at the work

We learn about people from the images that are presented of them in the media, in films, the news etc., but this is also the way in which we learn how to behave – learning from the example of others

- **What expressions do the photos have?**
- **What emotions do you think these represent?**
- **How many different images of people are there?** (the photos, the cartoon images of 'golliwogs', the line drawings)
- **Do any of the photographic images relate to any of the drawn images in the picture?** (the bottom right of each set of six is a bit like the 'natives' looking upwards, the top right like the wide staring eyes of the 'Golliwog' character)
- **Why do you think there is a similarity?** (is Boyce 'learning from' or 'trying to live up to' the images that are represented, for example?)

Think about the ways in which the people are represented:

- **What are the 'natives' saying?** ('THE BUZZING BIRD SENDS US A VICTIM')
- **What do you think a 'buzzing bird' is?** (an aeroplane) **What does this way of referring to a plane say about the 'natives'?** (perhaps ideas of naivety, of primitiveness, or even that they are uncivilised or in some way 'stupid')
- **Is this a positive image of black people? How about the 'golliwogs'?**
- **How do you, or how would you feel if you were represented like this?**
- **Again, how many ways are there of representing people in this work?** (the photographs are either plain or drawn or painted on, the 'golliwogs' are cartoon-like, as, in a different way are the line drawings).
- **Is the technique related to the way we see people?** (...perhaps there is more than one way of seeing people, more than one way in which they can be 'represented')
- **Is a stereotype an adequate representation, or are there other ways of seeing people?**

Relating the title to the work

Boyce is responding to the images of Black people in films – images she saw as a child. These 'constructed' images of black people – marginalised in their native habitat, while a white hero becomes 'King of the Jungle' – fed into her own self-image. She herself, though, is a 'native' of Great Britain, but through the portrayal of black people in films such as Tarzan – and of other 'outsiders' in more recent films such as Rambo – is made to feel an 'outsider' in her own country.

Discussion points

- **Who are Tarzan and Rambo? What do they have in common?** (they are both fictional characters, white, male action heroes)

- **Have you seen any of the films? If you have, what are they about?** (Boyce was interested in the way that Rambo is effectively Tarzan ‘re-packaged’ – a white man in a ‘foreign’ or ‘alien’ setting who nevertheless manages to come out on top. Boyce was also concerned to convey the sense that they also dominated the natural environment – most prominent in Tarzan but true to an extent in Rambo – ie overcoming a variety of natural and man-made obstacles)
- **Are they both represented in the image?** (no – the line drawing of Tarzan has all but been painted out with white and pink paint, Rambo does not appear at all. He is part of the context of the work)
- **Is there anything in the image which reminds you of a film, or of going to the cinema?** (the proportions of the piece were designed to be the same as a wide movie screen. The repeated images might remind students of the succession of frames in a film)
- **What is the most important aspect of the work visually?** (responses may vary – but the face of Boyce herself is repeated most often)
- **Are the photographic faces more closely related to the pale image of Tarzan, to Rambo (who is not present) or the stereotype images of black people also represented?**

The Context – relating this work to others, and to the outside world

Hollywood: true or false?

Sonia Boyce *In Focus*

Sonia Boyce, Tate Collections and further afield

Researching the context within which a work was produced (for example the political climate, social history and culture of the time) will tell us more. It is also interesting to place the work within the context of the artist’s career. Sonia Boyce’s work is part of an *In Focus* display, and it is illuminating to consider the work within the context of this display. Similarly, Boyce’s concerns about self- and constructed image are shared by artists throughout western culture. These different contexts are explored in three separate sections here.

Hollywood: true or false?

From Tarzan to Rambo was made in 1987, and one of its themes is the lack of a black presence within the Hollywood star system. It is also particularly about the absence of black women as positive role models. As Boyce has pointed out, despite being surrounded by black women in various states of undress Tarzan is only ever attracted to Jane, a white woman who, like himself, should not really be in this part of the world – the existence of the black women is effectively denied.

The absence of powerful black women in Hollywood – either in terms of characters portrayed, star status, or financial success, is also one of the

themes of *The Fae Richards Archive* by Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye. This started life when Dunye, a filmmaker, made a fictional documentary (or 'mockumentary') about Fae Richards, a black actress she had invented, and used photographs by Leonard as part of the visual evidence about the life of this imaginary character. The photographic and other documentation which was created has been put together to make up the *Archive*. Fae Richards's career as presented in the archive realistically portrays the options facing black performers in the US before the 2nd World War: from cabaret artiste, to the role of servant within Hollywood movies, to starring roles within the black movie industry. The existence of this specialist industry, which created movies by black people for black audiences is not so well known in the UK.

Discussion Points

- ***From Tarzan to Rambo* and *The Fae Richards Archive* have similar themes. In what ways does this differ?** (Boyce comments on the lack of female presence, Leonard and Dunye create one as if to compensate)
- **Do the works look at all similar?**
- **Is there anything in the technique which is the same?** (perhaps the use of photography)
- **Why is the use of photography important?** (perhaps because we tend to accept photographs as being 'true', or as being reliable evidence)
- **Which shows a wider range of characterisation?**
- **Do the characters played by the fictional character Fae Richards seem more or less stereotyped than the images used by Sonia Boyce?**
- **To what extent are both works about performance and playing up to expectations?**
- **While there has been a relatively small black presence in film for most of its history is that still true today?**

You might wish to consider the following facts:

It was only this year (2002), fifteen years after Boyce made *From Tarzan to Rambo*, that Halle Berry became the first black actress to win an American Academy Award (Oscar), as Best Actress in a Film. This is what she said:

"This moment is so much bigger than me. This moment is for Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, and Diahann Carroll. It's for the women that stand beside me - Jada Pinkett, Angela Bassett and it's for every nameless, faceless woman of colour that now has a chance because this door tonight has been opened."

On the same night Denzel Washington became only the second black man to win the award for Best Actor, nearly forty years after Sidney Poitier had been the first, in 1963. In its 74 year history only five black actors (including Washington in 1990) have won the award for best supporting actor.

See the BBC article which reports the 2002 Oscars, with a photo of Berry and Washington:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/entertainment/2002/oscars_2002/1886232.stm

Of the actresses who Berry mentioned Lena Horne was one of the few black actresses to have some degree of success during the period of the Tarzan films. In 1942 she was the first black actress to sign a long-term contract with a major Hollywood studio – MGM – in over 30 years. As part of her contract she stipulated that she would not appear in stereotypical 'black' roles.

See a painting of *Lena Horne* by Edward Biberman in the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington which is currently exhibited in *Americans* at the National Portrait Gallery, London until 12 January 2003

<http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/brush/horne.htm>

Sonia Boyce *In Focus*

From Tarzan to Rambo is part of an *In Focus* display in which all of the works are concerned with issues of race and colour. Her work was built up from black and white photos of which another black and white photo was made. We tend to use the term 'black and white' to imply a situation where everything is clear-cut – there are no 'grey areas' – and we also refer to 'black' and 'white' people. But of course things are by no means so straightforward. For one, 'black' people are not actually 'black', nor are 'white' people 'white', and, perhaps as one way of pointing to the complexity of the terminology, Boyce uses both the basic 'black and white' and also different colours. Notice how the line drawing of Tarzan has been all but eradicated by white and pink paint, whereas the images of Boyce on the right hand side of the image have been coloured with brownish paints.

Two works in the display are concerned with artificially changing colour – compare *From Tarzan and Rambo* to Anna Fox's *Zwarte Piet* and Anthea Hamilton's *Somewhere over the Rainbow*.

Discussion points

- **In what ways are these two works similar/dissimilar to Boyce's work?**
- **Does either of them deal with the idea of film?**
- **Do the people who feature in each work look naturally black or white, or is it obvious that their colour has changed?**
- **Do we respond to them any differently because of this?**
- **Why do the Dutch people in *Zwarte Piet* want to be black?** (it may help to look up the caption for this work)
- **Why would Anthea Hamilton want to show herself differently?** (again, the caption may help) It is important to stress that Hamilton does not precisely make herself white, but she has changed to some

other state in negative, which suggests white. There should always be an ambiguity about this.

-
- **What is the most important feature of a rainbow?** (you could think about the range of colours – all of the spectrum together, for example – or the fact that the rainbow has often been used in art as a symbol of optimism)
- **Why do you think she chose to sing this song?** (For one thing, it is a melancholy a song about an ideal world, ‘a land that I dreamt of’, which could have implications of acceptance or harmony. Also, the film in which it first appeared, *The Wizard of Oz*, is also very much about ‘finding oneself’ – realising your place in the world and achieving a more positive self-image...)
- **Would you respond to people differently if they were a different colour?**

You might wish to look up the Commission for Racial Equality’s advertising campaign ‘Would I...’ in which the race and colour of a number of celebrities, from Mel B to Ken Livingstone, was digitally altered to see if our reaction to them would change

http://www.cre.gov.uk/media/adverts/would_i.html

Sonia Boyce, Tate Collections and further afield

Although Sonia Boyce’s work is responding to her own particular circumstances and situation, it shares interests which are common to many artists represented both in the Tate Collections and elsewhere. Further information on these works can be found by clicking on the links.

Discussion points

Tate:

- **How does Boyce’s work compare to F.N. Souza’s *Crucifixion* (1959) [http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/AWork?id=20820&]?** Does his depiction of a black Christ have any parallels in her observations about depiction of black people in film? (perhaps this is related to who the ‘stories’ are told by, and for whom...)
- **There is a visual relationship between *From Tarzan to Rambo* and Andy Warhol’s *Marilyn Diptych* (1962). Is there any similarity in the ideas they convey? Do you think Warhol’s use of colour has any ‘political’ message, or is it just designed to ‘look good’?** (unfortunately there is no image of this on the website due to copyright restrictions – but you may be able to locate it elsewhere)
- **How does Peter Blake see himself in his *Self-Portrait with Badges* (1961) [http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/AWork?id=1032&]and how does that differ from Sonia Boyce’s ‘interests’?** (Blake and Boyce

are both listed as source materials for the QCA Key Stage Three Scheme of Work Unit 7a – ‘Self-image’)

- **How does this compare with the self-image of John Coplans in his *Self-Portrait (Torso, Front) 1984***

[<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/Work?id=27052>]

Elsewhere:

You could look at the way numerous artists have portrayed themselves – for example, consider the way in which Elizabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun depicted herself as one of the very few successful women artists of the 18th century – see:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/cgi-bin/WebObjects.dll/CollectionPublisher.woa/wa/work?workNumber=NG1653>

On the National Gallery’s website you could also look at the self-portraits of Rembrandt, Murillo and Salvator Rosa.

Activities

Different aspects of these activities can be adapted for either primary or secondary students. If you have access to the relevant technology, such as digital or Polaroid cameras, that would be great, although drawings which the pupils have made can be manipulated in the same way.

1. Take photographs of the pupils, if possible, or if not, ask them to bring in photographs of themselves. Alternatively draw a simple ‘self-portrait’. Multiply the images through black and white photocopying, and then ask the students to create new identities for themselves, by drawing or collaging new clothes, hairstyles, and by changing their colour etc. If you have access to photoshop this can also be done digitally.
2. Get the pupils to research images in magazines, newspapers, and comics or on the web of people expressing a variety of emotions – if possible ones with which they can associate. If you have the time, budget (and energy...) take them to a photo-booth and get them to take photos of themselves mimicking these expressions. If not, take Polaroid’s/digital images/do drawings of them with these expressions. These images can stand on their own, or can be used in a variety of ways.
3. Ask the students to bring in materials which are ‘important’ to them, in terms of how they see themselves. This would be best if related to *From Tarzan to Rambo* – so it could be a fabric or some other pattern, such as left-over wallpaper or carpet off cuts which they associate with themselves or their upbringing. As this is not always practicable, they

could make a drawing of the pattern. But it may be other things – objects, possessions, anything that helps to define ‘themselves’ – photographs of favourite bands, footballs teams, team colours or logos etc. Through photography, photocopying or drawing make a two-dimensional version or reduction of these – this can then be used either to create a different work through collage – a symbolic ‘self-portrait’, or as collage elements to add to the images made in ‘1’ or ‘2’ above.

4. Using your discretion, obviously, ask the pupils what they think other people think about them, or how they might be stereotyped (e.g. ‘Goth’, ‘punk’ ‘boy-band groupie’, ‘skateboarder’, ‘football supporter’ or whatever might be appropriate). Can they find some visual imagery to symbolise this? As before, this can be added to the work created so far, or could exist as a separate piece.