

Radical Honesty: A Conversation with Shary Boyle

BY LAUREN LEVATO COYNE

THIS PAGE:

Pupils,
2019.

Porcelain and
stoneware,
19.69 x 16.13 x
7.88 in.

OPPOSITE:

Two installation
views of “Outside
the Palace of Me,”
with (top) ***White
Elephant,*** 2021,
aluminum, foam,
textiles, porcelain,
and motor,
96 x 50 x 57 in.
Museum of Arts
and Design, New
York, 2023–24.



Shary Boyle has had a dynamic international career, yet, somehow, the United States is just catching on to her captivating interdisciplinary work. Boyle, who represented Canada in the 2013 Venice Biennale, works fluidly across many modalities. Her sculptures, once very personal miniatures made from Sculpey, have now become oversize porcelain or silicone animatronic spectacles with political intent. Her animations have also increased in technical ambition and scale, moving from classroom projectors and live drawing performances to cinematic experiences. “Outside the Palace of Me,” her current exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, highlights the pressing social issues that animate and drive her work.

LAUREN LEVATO COYNE:

I first saw your work about 15 years ago. Since then, your values, politics, and cultural concerns have been coming through more clearly. The fantastical elements are still there, but the political content seems equal now.

SHARY BOYLE: As a young artist, I was focused on subversion, creating my identity and sexuality, exploring the internal, and working through my family of origin. I had a lot of patriarchal and misogynistic socialized self-harm from when I was a child. There was value in examining family condition-

ing, a training in resistance. I was driven to question and destabilize what I was being taught to think of as “reality” (what I should expect and limit myself to) through a fantastic realm of female sexuality, and the female body. I was trying for a kind of radical honesty by refusing shame. It was my personal story, as a young white woman from a working-class, male-dominated place, and it wasn’t until I got a little older that the larger world started knocking, insisting that there were other things going on than my issues. It’s a process of maturation and evolution. The concerns of the art world do not always create the environment or honesty required to look clearly at oneself, or the greater world. We need time and space to learn, outside institutions.

LLC: I sometimes feel myself



being pulled out of the studio to act in some tangible way, as art starts to feel almost useless stacked against the world’s realities.

SB: The process and practice of art-making have a capacity to keep your soul intact. If you’re not a religious person—if you don’t have a central, specific idea of God—then art can take that place. We see how people have survived brutalities through singing, drumming, or making images. It’s a form of communication that can be sacred and insistent on something bigger than your limited self.

LLC: You created a program for “Outside the Palace of Me” in the form of a playbill, organizing the show in the language and landscape of a performance. With your history

of performing, did you feel a bit like a director?

SB: In a way I did. I’m still performing, but I’m also orchestrating, composing, and directing, but without feeling like the master of anything. The unknowable still holds the baton.

When I approach other artists to collaborate, my approach is to ask: Will you bring your practice, expertise, and skill into this project, and have freedom in your part of it to do whatever you want to do that’s best for our larger whole? In that, we share credit for the joint. Other times, I invite and pay skilled makers to participate and acknowledge that their input makes the work possible. It can take two years to make a giant animatronic sculpture. I might work with two or three primary people,

and the exchanges we develop over time become the most meaningful part of the work for me—because in presenting it, the artist isn’t necessarily a part of the effect it may provoke. Making *White Elephant* (2021) with the technical and deeply skilled participation of Colin Harry, Alexa MacKenzie, Heather Goodchild, and Julianne Wilding was a highlight of my artistic life. It was a labor of many peoples’ love to put that out in the world, and it took a lot of risk, vulnerability, and slowly developed trust.

LLC: The show directly addresses whiteness. We know that museums are still majority white and hold fast to that European legacy of whiteness, despite endless land and solidarity statements. This seems like a perfect moment

for your work to arrive at an American museum.

SB: No one really wants to hear white people talk about whiteness. Yet it's crucial for white people to talk among ourselves about whiteness. In that way, the work is directed at a white audience and presented in traditionally white spaces. Other than living in a white body, I'm not an academic or

expert studying whiteness and race. I would never presume to teach anyone who is not white about whiteness. Racialized people already know way more and have a much longer and larger perspective on whiteness than white people themselves. But there is a unique perspective in *being* white. This is something that white folks need to unpack, without being

too uncomfortable, scared, or defensive to acknowledge and explore it. In terms of museums, it's not an easy thing to deal with precisely because their boards are usually majority, or exclusively, white; many of the donors, too. Some people have not wanted to address this, though to be fair, some white staff have taken the lead and run with it. Some

museums refuse to meaningfully program *White Elephant*, but they don't refuse outright. Even though I'm pushing and pushing, suggesting, connecting, and offering all these ideas from the side, the response is often, "We don't have the budget for that" or "We don't have time for that."

Outright saying the words "white supremacy" is not comfortable language for museums. Some don't believe that this is the right place or time to have this conversation, which is baffling. Why? They're acknowledging land and treaties, programming diverse, radical artists. So, where's the mirror to look at ourselves, our systems, our culture—to sit with the idea that well, we're white? What does that even mean at this moment in history? So much is taken for granted, silently. Can we explore this openly, with curiosity, grief, humor? Can we deaccession whiteness? Create repair or reparations? See the potential for actual, relational change? Before we can absorb DEI training, we need acknowledgement training.

LLC: This is one of the gifts that your current work gives people. Everybody needs a permission slip to have these conversations, and they can get it from an artwork. They can start to tiptoe into it if this is new, shame-provoking stuff.

SB: When the person speaking shares your experience, it can disable a type of defensiveness. Shame feels terrible, which





textiles or natural materials, the handmade, decorative, small-scale, or domestic. The feminine. The sacred. Of the earth. For years, I felt sidelined by gate-keeping resistance. My approaches were patronized as a folk thing, not sophisticated or worthy of the art world; all of these restrictions were ways of shutting artists down into replicating a male, Eurocentric, classist cannon of approved materiality.

When the white art world opened its doors to artists other than European men, much more interesting and complex material forms and content became acceptable. As a white

woman, I know that I was never, could never be, a big enough or important enough artist to achieve those changes myself. But now, finally, thanks to Indigenous, Black, racialized, disabled, women, and LGBTQ+ artists pushing back on museums, all of us benefit. Their advocacy and insistence on diversity in material practices has enabled a greater general acceptance of material complexity, which white institutions had rarely “let” white artists engage. ■■■

“Shary Boyle: Outside the Palace of Me” is on view at MAD through February 24, 2024.

OPPOSITE:
The Sculptor,
2019.
Terra cotta,
porcelain, and
china paint,
11.81 x 11 x 10.25 in.

THIS PAGE,
FROM TOP:
Centering,
2021.
Coin-operated
pottery wheel,
electronics,
wood, textiles,
and foot pedal,
70 x 26 x 22 in.
Collaborative
textile design with
Grant Heaps.

Installation view
of “Outside
the Palace of
Me,” Museum
of Arts and Design,
New York, 2023–24.

can cause some white people to get quiet, in fear of “doing it wrong.” The self-consciousness of being white in this larger moment can be head-spinning. And head-spinning is also a frightening and violent act, which is the heart of racism.

LLC: One of my favorite things about your process is that it’s not precious. You seek out experts and study with them even if the industry would disparage them with labels like “artisan” or “amateur,” despite their years of material mastery and success.

SB: I’ve always worked with unconventional, non-institutional materials and learning methods, and I am medium fluid. I’ve sought mentorship from tradespeople and hobbyists, made work and performed in and for communities with zero “cultural currency.” My forms are chosen by the ideas I’m immersed in at that moment. But there was always an art-world resistance to anything crafted or intimate—like

