

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

Spence, Rachel. "Fruits of experience—the subtle work of Veronica Ryan," *Financial Times*, May 13, 2021; <https://www.ft.com/content/566940f9-aeb9-45f9-8792-d95b17c6f03f>

Fruits of experience – the subtle work of Veronica Ryan

The Caribbean-born British artist on celebrating immigrant lives through her organic and quietly radical sculpture



P A U L A C O O P E R G A L L E R Y

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Veronica Ryan, like many of us in pandemic times, is not where she planned to be. We're Zooming between Shropshire (me) and New York, where Ryan spends some of her time. But had coronavirus not intervened the British artist would have been on my side of the Atlantic preparing for her solo exhibition at Spike Island in Bristol. Slated to open earlier last year, the show, a result of the Freelands Award, which supports mid-career women artists, will now open on Wednesday, May 19.

"There has been a lot of configuring and rejugling," she admits, her stylish appearance — dreadlocks coiled into a sumptuous topknot above sculpted cheekbones and capacious spectacles — and steady tones suggesting that the upheaval has done little to ruffle her inner calm and no-nonsense practicality. In truth, her hands-on brio coexists with a thoughtful, inquiring intellect that leads her to talk in slow, looping sentences that veer off on tangents and scoop up abstract ideas.

That gift for compromising neither mind nor matter is reflected in her oeuvre. She was born in 1956 on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, and after a degree in fine art at the Slade School of Fine Art and a spell at the School for Oriental and African Studies, her career has encompassed solo shows at the Arnolfini gallery (1987), Camden Arts Centre (1995) and group shows, including one inspired by the writing of Virginia Woolf at Tate St Ives in 2018.

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Her work defies simple interpretation. Regularly working with organic forms — fruits, seeds, plants, husks, pods — her objects are always immaculately made or cast. Often contained in crates, nets or packaging like fruit and vegetable trays, Ryan's sculptures are at once candid and encrypted, grounded in their material origin yet mysteriously transformed by the artistic process. Even the title of her show at Spike Island — *Along a Spectrum* — whispers of Ryan's refusal to be pinned down to a single position. It's really about "different ways that we interpret and understand information, a wide spectrum of conversations", she says.



'Punnet I' (2020), crocheted doily, cardboard, clay © Max McClure

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Ryan arrived in the UK with her parents as a child. With a mother who was a gifted seamstress, the practice of sewing from childhood prepared her for a creative career before she reached art school. After graduation, she participated in exhibitions devoted to artists of colour such as *The Thin Black Line* at the ICA in 1985 and *From Two Worlds* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh in 1986.

The necessity for such events speaks volumes about the racism that permeated the mainstream British cultural establishment and saw artists such as Lubaina Himid, who won the Turner Prize in 2017, all but completely overlooked. As well as neglect by white curators, Ryan also struggled with critical efforts to pigeonhole her as an artist making work exclusively about blackness. "Of course I'm affected by colonialism and racism as everybody else who is non-white," she says now. "But there isn't a monolithic experience. We are part of a collective society but there are individuals within a collective and they are experiencing their realities in their own skin."

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As yet untitled (2020), pillow and cocoa pod © Max McClure

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Ryan's works — so faithful to their physical roots yet resistant to obvious narratives — are material statements of this right to a private history. As such she is in a lineage of abstract female sculptors that encompasses Phyllida Barlow, Eva Hesse — a key influence on Ryan — and Barbara Hepworth. (Ryan has been commissioned to create new works to be shown alongside a major new exhibition at the Hepworth Wakefield this summer.)

To conjure meaning from Ryan's art it's essential to follow the threads of "interconnectedness" she loves to weave through her works. For her Bristol show, she has dyed pillow cases and other fabrics with tea then hung them on the wall so that they fall in intriguing, secretive folds. She tells me she was already "drying tea bags and stitching them together" before she arrived in Bristol for the residency that preceded her show. But only when she got to Spike Island did she discover that the gallery had originally been a tea factory. "I liked the sense of synchronicity," she says.

As an artist appalled by "the attitude of excess and not really taking care of the world", Ryan's meticulous remakings and containings of vegetables, fruits and seeds can be read as attempts to immortalise forever organisms that are essentially transient.

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'Pouch' (2020), net, orange peel, thread © Max McClure

A similar mesh of public and private concerns is also woven into Ryan's forthcoming project to celebrate the Windrush Generation in Hackney. The first local authority to pledge opposition to the criminalisation of Britain's Caribbean migrants, in 2018, Hackney has now commissioned two sculptures — one by Ryan, the other by Thomas J Price — to acknowledge this generation's contribution to the borough where many made their home.

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Ryan, while noting she doesn't want to be described as a "Windrush artist", has strong bonds with this story. "My mum and my aunt and their friends would go to Ridley Road market," she recalls, naming the well-known food market in Dalston.

"It was a place where you could get tropical fruits and vegetables . . . There

was a whole culture around food that you could only get there."

For her sculpture, she has decided to celebrate the courage and resilience of her parents and their peers by sculpting Caribbean fruit and vegetables in marble and bronze. Through her use of the grandiose materials beloved of the likes of Donatello and Michelangelo, she at once bestows canonical status on the humble foodstuffs and topples those western gods off their lofty plinths. Such subtle redefining is typical of her art's quiet radicalism. "I'm trying to turn the history of the Windrush generation on its head," she says. "So that people understand that British history is Caribbean history."

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Ryan's journey has traversed the art world through the best and worst of times. Her rich, material practice in part came from, at times, having so little money she was obliged to "make work out of the things that I had". Yet she also says that scarcity of means "gave me the freedom to expand the ideas in the work".

Today, life is easier. For the first time Ryan has gallery representation, through Paula Cooper in New York and — since our conversation — with Alison Jacques in London. "It's fantastic," she replies with a wide smile when I ask her how she is finding this new working relationship. "I'm beginning to understand I don't have to do everything on my own!"

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