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'My parents' trauma is my trauma' – Veronica Ryan on making first Windrush monument

She used to worry about 'not making enough to pay the rent'. But with a solo show, a commission to make UK's first Windrush monument and an OBE, the artist has stepped out of the shadows

▲ 'I was hoping for a quiet week' ... Ryan at her solo show at Spike Island, Bristol. Photograph: Max McClure

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Veronica Ryan's handbag is always heavy. The British sculptor has been a collector since childhood, and her bag is her toolbox, her magpie's nest, her anchor for a life lived in many places. It's also fertile ground. Ryan's mother once caught a glimpse of a date stone she was attempting to germinate in there. "You're not going to get dates to grow here," she said, referring to Britain and its climate. "I'm just really excited to see if I can," replied Ryan. And she did.

Much like the seed, Ryan too is flourishing. For years, she worked in the art world's shadows, using whatever materials she could find and often "not really making enough money to pay the rent". But in 2018, aged 62, she won the Freelands award, which puts £100,000 towards showcasing a mid-career female artist yet to receive the recognition she deserves. The artist gets £25,000 and the gallery the remainder.

Last month, Ryan opened the resulting exhibition at Spike Island in Bristol, her largest solo outing to date. She has also contributed standout works to the Henry Moore Foundation and the Hepworth Wakefield's current exhibitions. In October, she will install the UK's first public monument to honour the Windrush generation. And she's been made an OBE. "I was hoping for a quiet week so I could get on with some work in the studio," she says with a smile. "But I don't think it's going to happen." She is on the Bristol train, pulling into Paddington mid-sentence, rushing to her mother's house to collect the letter about the award, then to the foundry in Stroud for a first look at her bronzes and some BBC filming on the side. "It's all a bit strange," she says, "because, in fact, my work hasn't really changed that much."

Ryan makes the kind of objects you want to explore with your fingers. An installation from 2016-19, entitled Arrangement in Layers, Stacking up Moments I-X, features hundreds of blue wholesaler avocado trays, gleaned from bemused shop-owners at the end of a day's trade. "I've been collecting them for years. Some shops were sympathetic. Others thought, 'We've got a weirdo here.'" She was a mother trying to make ends meet and an artist without a budget. But she was also thinking about wider political questions. "You've got landfills and toxic waste being exported - poorer countries being the recipients of the west's overindulgence."

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▲ At work in her studio ... Ryan in Bristol. Photograph: Max McClure

Born in 1956 in Plymouth, Montserrat, Ryan came to Britain as a toddler. Her childhood was spent between London and Hertfordshire, with a brief return to the Caribbean when she was 10. She studied fine art at the Bath Academy of the Arts and the Slade School of Art in London, but credits her mother as much as she does her tutors with her artistic training. "My mother has enormous tenacity. She found ways to keep her family going. She made all our clothes. She bakes. I baked as well, with her, because there were eight children. I suppose I was little mummy, in a way, because I really had to help her quite a lot." When Ryan was tiny her mum taught her to knit. She'd practise with pencils and matchsticks.

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"People are, rightly, questioning how things have been commemorated and the relevance of certain monuments

When she emerged on the British scene in the early 1980s, curators and critics homed in on her enigmatic works, which appeared domestic in size yet ancient and unknowable. Experiments in dental plaster, secret structures wrapped in twine, bronze seedpods and leaden pouches. Lubaina Himid cast her in a number of group exhibitions showcasing black British art. From the outset, though, Ryan resisted being pigeonholed or defined by her heritage, in the same way that she has been unswayed by changing moods and fashions since - even when that has meant no one saw what she was making.

The third time we speak, she's back in her Bristol studio, silhouetted on the screen by brilliant afternoon sunlight. "I feel more comfortable outside of any prescribed box," she says. "It's because I was born somewhere else, and I've inherited customs and belief systems from my family, mostly through my mother. Recently I've been thinking about what I do - about art - as a kind of protection, a talisman."

The Bristol show, entitled Along a Spectrum, features new works made during an extended residency on location. Giant crocheted doilies and outsized neon nets cradle stacks and containers, parcels and shells. She's fashioned cocoa pods and mango stones out of clay, and stitched grapefruit peels back together with black thread and the help of her mother. ("She wanted to see what it was like to do, to experience why her daughter would want to do such a thing.") By chance a neighbouring potter had some ash from the Soufrière Hills volcano, the eruptions of which in the late 1990s saw half of Montserrat evacuated, and the city Ryan was born in destroyed. She used the ash to glaze strange casts of spiked soursop skins.

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▲ Crocheted doilies, containers and shells ... Ryan's Punnet I (2020). Photograph: Max McClure/Copyright Veronica Ryan. Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York and Alison Jacques, London.

For her Windrush commission, Ryan has plumped for Caribbean fruits too: a custard apple in milky, off-white Carrara marble and two bronzes, a breadfruit and a soursop, green and cream-coloured patinas, respectively. "It's important that the community see themselves - and our cultural heritage - represented visually, where they live," she says. "People are, rightly, questioning how things have been commemorated and the relevance of certain monuments. Part of addressing that is by having different kinds of work in public spaces." She wanted the sculptures to be small enough that children might also want to investigate their surfaces. Maybe climb and sit on them too.

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Navigating your own, lived experience in order to make art that speaks to the wider community is no small task, I suggest, especially when the experience is so harrowing. "I sometimes ignore some of the rhetoric around it," she replies. "It would be impossible to work otherwise."

Of the Windrush scandal, which saw hundreds of elderly people of Caribbean heritage who had lived in Britain for decades detained or deported, purportedly for not having the right visa, she says: "We're talking about British people. It is absolutely shameful. I remember, as a child, the adults around me, dealing with complications. Which is my parents' trauma? Which is my trauma? They're indistinguishable."

Much of Ryan's practice has involved navigating erasure and invisibility, not least in the wake of the 2004 Momart fire which saw an entire show's worth of her artworks go up in smoke, and no mention of her losses in the news reports. "I've made work about reclaiming one's space and being pro-active after mourning," she says. "You have to define as much as you can the parameters you want for yourself."

The anecdote about the seed in her bag strikes me as illustrative of precisely that - a rebellion of sorts, a tenacious belief in creative potential. "Yes!" she replies. "I love the literalness of that. And the metaphor. The way that language is transformative." She's left some plants - a custard apple and a soursop - growing under the kitchen light back home. She's a little worried they're being neglected. "Because after a while you begin to understand how much water they like and how much light, and whether you need to keep them in the dark. Things that are taken care of thrive."

- Along a Spectrum is at Spike Island, Bristol, until 5 September. The Hackney Windrush commission will be unveiled on 1 October.