FREELANDS FOUNDATION
Issue 3 – March 2021

FOCUS

WORKING ALONG A SPECTRUM

IN CONVERSATION WITH VERONICA RYAN

***Along a Spectrum* at Spike Island, your Freelands Award exhibition which opens in May 2021, will be your second show in Bristol. You stayed in the city for an extended residency as part of the project. How did the city affect you and your work?**

It's impossible for me to do a residency in a particular place without being aware of its history. I think I always see connections within the socio-political environment as well as in a place's history. The deconstructing of ideas in my mind relates to how I arrive at conversations in my work.

I have quite a fondness for Bristol: it isn't far away from Corsham (Bath Academy of Art) where I went to art school, and I always remembered the [Clifton] Suspension Bridge. So, these connections were important. They made the place feel familiar and enabled me to have a closer connection to its incredible history and historical connections. I became particularly aware of Bristol's history of medieval trade and the unique stone architecture, which is something that I drew on in my work.

During a residency at Porthmeor Studios in St Ives, Cornwall, before my residency at Spike Island, I saw the fishermen making their nets. It was interesting to see how close this process was to crochet and knitting. I liked that element of craft and the idea that the same structure had these different purposes. This carried on in Bristol, where I would walk along the river and be reminded of the kind of knots used there.

Veronica Ryan's works in progress in the Residency Studio, Spike Island, 2020

What was your experience of art school, and how have the particular materials and workshop processes that you first explored there continued to influence your work?

I think early experiences as a young student at Corsham (Bath Academy of Art) really coloured my perspective on my possibilities for the future. I didn't think I could become an artist professionally based on the kind of training I had.

There was one tutor, Michael Pennie, who has since died, who had spent time in Africa and his use of carved wood was very influential for me. I felt that he was very empathic and had a particular kind of sensibility that made it possible for me to move through some of those early anxieties. But I could also see that some of those early anxieties were more to do with the fact that I was the only non-white student in the whole of Corsham for the first two years, so I was thinking about some of those anxieties in a very particular way. I was pretty much on my own in a very new environment, and so the way people related to me was based on them noticing that I was the only non-white person. Looking back now, I can see that the situation was bigger than the actual circumstances that I was in.

Corsham seemed like a different space that I could never be part of, but now I think it was the way that we were taught. I have always had a bit of an antipathy to welding. There was a particular occasion at art school in my first year where I wasn't dressed properly for welding and I didn't realise but my dress had caught fire. Another student came and wrapped a leather apron around me. So that made me hate welding; now I think that if I hadn't had that experience, it might be a medium that I incorporated into my work.

It was wonderful getting a postgrad place at The Slade where I could apply the skills I had learnt at Corsham.

Has your time in the workshops at Spike Island also influenced your interest in reconnecting with materials and techniques?

When I'm in environments where there are workshops, I tend to gravitate towards working with what is around me. When I first went to visit Spike Island, I was really excited by the fact that it had all these facilities that allowed me to have access to workshops to cast in and make moulds. Doing a residency or an exhibition is a bit like working in a laboratory: I initially make an accumulation of small things, which are then expanded on.

During my Fine Art course at Corsham I studied printmaking and what I have found, which only recently occurred to me, was that although I didn't continue with printmaking, the way I draw incorporates printing modalities, such as layering.

So much has happened in the last year, both in the UK and in the US, where you also spend much of your time. How have these recent events affected you and your work?

Boundaries and meaning are important in understanding the kind of politics that has dominated recent years. We are seeing a lot of non-truth in the West and [it seems] if you repeat something that isn't factual over and over again that some people are going to believe it. Something like half of the population in the US really believe that Trump won the [December 2020] election, and it isn't just his influence, but there [seems to be a wider] collective pathology that has enabled such a large number of people to have been radicalised.

Also, on another level, there is a kind of anxiety about the fact that the next generation of America will be mostly non-white. So, part of 'Make America Great Again' is also this notion of ethnic cleansing. Those have been some of my realisations when thinking about Trump and the notion of truth and non-truths.

At a time when public discourse is so polarised and divisive, your approach, by contrast, connects multiple references and subjects and avoids single definitions. Has this always been a key concern?

It's something I am very conscious of and I pay attention to this proposition and the culture we are in. Because of my own particular set of experiences, I automatically have a resistance to being put in a singular box. This is something that I am always having to redefine for myself and for other people. It's not that I am avoiding issues, but some of my experiences are very contradictory, so the notion that something is a binary position, isn't my experience. That middle space is very complicated.

I talk about my work not being a singularity and I move back and forth between different conversations around history, memory, what we inherit…When I'm giving any kind of public talk about my work I go off on different tangents and then bring it all together as a summary at the end to connect these seemingly disparate moments.

I am currently in a space where I don't want to be pushed into any one singularity.

Some of your new pieces have similarities to votive offerings or protective objects. How has this developed, and do you see this continuing in future work?

I think it's to do with experiencing a kind of intense pressure and how to form a bit of

Veronica Ryan, work in progress, Residency Studio, Spike Island, 2020

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detachment, a kind of a safe space from trauma.

The work goes back and forth in terms of different levels of protective, talismanic or votive structures. I initially developed that way of thinking when I was looking at west African art when I was in Nigeria in the early 1980s: and thinking about traditional societies and how making things was very integrated into social systems. So, because traditional cultures often didn't have a word for art, objects would be made for a particular context in a social system. I have been thinking a lot [about this] again.

I see myself as a part of a wider social system where [the process of making these works serves as] a kind of metaphor for building my own protective structures. There's also a bigger parallel with traditional societies in the way a lot of people have started making things recently within the Lockdown – whether they call it art or craft or neither.

You have recently been commissioned to make a public sculpture in Hackney (along with sculptor Thomas J Price), the first permanent sculptures in the UK to honour the Windrush generation, which will be unveiled in October 2021. What was the thinking behind your choice to represent three pieces of fruit?

It has a lot to do with my experience of going to Ridley Road Market with my mother, from North London to Hackney on the bus.

Visits to Ridley Road were such a big event amongst my mum and her friends. They would buy fabric, they would buy their threads and you could buy different kinds of meat and fish. You could get all these different things. So [there's a] connection with my mum and her friends, primarily the women. It wasn't part of the male culture; it was where the women would spend time.

Ridley Road Market was an environment where Caribbean people got familiar food that would have been part of the market systems in the islands that they came from. When we went back to Montserrat for a little while when I was a child, I remember the market there.

So, [my commission] is to do with an early memory of going to Hackney, which is one of the main places that people from the Windrush generation, and their descendants, live.

I have also been thinking about the notion of monuments: a soursop, a breadfruit and a custard apple aren't monumental in any way; and this puts the sculpture on a kind of domestic human scale. Kids can sit on them and the idea is that there won't be any separation between the public and the sculpture, so I also see them as works that will have an ongoing conversation with the public.

Veronica Ryan's exhibition *Along a Spectrum* opens at Spike Island on 19 May and runs until 5 September 2021 and will be accompanied by a comprehensive monograph.

Veronica Ryan's commission for Hackney Council and Create London is due to be unveiled in the east London borough in October 2021, and Thomas Price's in 2022.

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Edited by Nancy Dewe Mathews

Design by HATO

Front cover image: Veronica Ryan, work in progress, Residency Studio, Spike Island, 2020

All photos: Max McClure. Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

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