A curious MIND

For VERONICA RYAN, *a historic* TURNER *win is the latest twist in an extraordinary life.* KEMI ALEMORU *meets her*

Veronica Ryan's life looks hectic at the moment. Not only because the sculptor has just landed in New York after her historic Turner Prize win. Nor that she has but a tiny window of time to catch up with her family before she'll have to prioritise preparation for her next shows. It's her room. The West Village home she is speaking to me from is overwhelmingly packed with oddities: ripening fruits and metallic columns that "have got as tall as they could get before they start falling over".

"When I go and stay in various places, within a day, it looks a bit like this," she says, laughing. "My father used to wonder why my room was always full of useless paraphernalia. I probably didn't look very normal."

The space is a glimpse into the 66-year-old's curious mind. The artist – who was born in Montserrat and grew up in London – is renowned for taking seemingly disparate objects, textures and ideas and poetically joining the dots between them. Over her impressive career, which spans back to the early '80s, she's exhibited her work across Europe and America, from the Whitney Biennial to the ICA, but this year is special. "I haven't absorbed the Turner Prize [news] properly yet," she says of winning one of art's most prestigious accolades. "It feels a bit overwhelming."

The reaction is typical for Ryan. She's far more at home talking about a nearby pomegranate and its significance to her artistic message than awards. She often speaks in meandering streams of consciousness, fascinated by the minutiae of the natural world. Swiftly, I'm carried along by her sense of wonder, considering how seemingly innocuous objects, markings or superstitions are emblematic of histories, heritage and psychology.

While we chat, the deep-thinking collector rifles through all of the scavenged items that will lay the groundwork for her next pieces. Ryan works at home, where she fills her workspace with the sound of Olivier Messiaen's "Quartet For the End of Time" and, more recently, Stormzy, while she uses materials such as

fishing line, flowers, bronze and clay to distil big ideas – about motherhood, ancient movement, diasporic experiences or ecology – into playful forms. "I've got all kinds of structures in here – these are like mountains," she says, holding white porcelain figures that remind her of the volcanoes of Montserrat and Martin Luther King Jr's "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech.

You can draw symbolism from Ryan's Turner win. Her displayed work used tropical fruits (of course), seeds and skins as a metaphor for her own cultural dislocation. Incidentally, the natural produce of the Caribbean islands built the wealth of port towns including Liverpool. And now Ryan, a Caribbean-born woman, is recognised for her craft in the industrial northern city, her work on display at Tate Liverpool, an institution built on the wealth of a titan from the slave-built sugar industry on those isles, within view of the city's International Slavery Museum.

The coverage, however, mostly focused on her age. A "prominent remark" Ryan has noticed in headlines surrounding her win is that she is the oldest person to have ever won the prize. "It seems arbitrary," she says. She wonders whether it is a dog whistle for the supposed decrease in value that ought to have happened to her as she aged. "I might just be projecting," she adds. Nevertheless, she self-counters, it's nice to be commemorated for one's work.

Ryan's story is one of rising from the embers. Her birthplace, Plymouth, is now a ghost town due to a volcanic eruption in 1995. (It inspired those aforementioned porcelain artworks.) In the '70s she studied at St Albans College of Art and Design, Bath Academy of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, gaining notoriety as an artist in London in the '80s alongside Sonia Boyce and Lubaina Himid. But many of Ryan's key works were incinerated in the Momart art warehouse fire in 2004.

In fact, while the spotlight burns brightly on the artist right now, she's previously felt left out in the cold by the art world. At times, over the last couple of decades, she struggled to find places that would exhibit her work.

"I remember not having proper shoes a few years ago and always having damp feet. I had to put plastic bags in my shoes. There's a romanticism about winning awards but there are periods where you can't really afford the bare minimum."

Ryan tells me that the joy of her current home, inside affordable artist housing project Westbeth, is that, during tougher times, the mother of two daughters has been able to keep a roof over her family's head, and have space to work on her craft. In her acceptance speech she said that when she "wasn't visible" she'd make work "from rubbish", but the panel awarded her the prize based on the "noticeable shift in her use of space, colour and scale" over time.

I first encountered Ryan's work when I walked past a bulbous custard apple, scaled breadfruit and wrinkled soursop that lay supersized and scattered on the ground next to St Augustine's Tower in Hackney, as if they'd rolled on to the courtyard after falling out of a brown paper bag. The marble and bronze monuments were unveiled in October 2021. They were the UK's first permanent and public artwork to honour the Windrush generation. The term, used as a shorthand for the scores

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of Caribbean workers who were invited to fill Britain's postwar labour shortages between 1948 and 1971, is embedded in Ryan's personal history. She arrived in the UK, during the late '50s, in the arms of her parents.

At the time, the Hackney artwork ignited discussion. Public statues had already become a contentious issue. The previous year a monument to slave trader Edward Colston was torn down by protesters in Bristol; the same month Ryan's fruits were unveiled, Art UK released a study revealing that there were more statues of animals than of named women or people of colour in London.

"I didn't want to opt for a monolith," she explains, maintaining that the work still holds meaning to the generation it honours. "At my opening an elder came up and gave me a christophine that he grew on his allotment. That was a special moment, because he's a generation who would not necessarily have gone into any gallery." (She later cast his gift and displayed a replica of it at her most recent exhibit at Alison Jacques.)

Ryan's speech quickens when she talks about fruit, reeling off snapshots of her youth. Most of the "fascinating" moments are from trips back to Montserrat, starting when she was eight, where women in the market would twist and flip the bright, hot and sweet produce in brown bags, almost creating their own sculptures. Her mother taught her which plants could be used as shampoo. She played among the mammoth mango trees. "I had this Alice in Wonderland experience of seeing fruit and vegetables that were so different," she says. To her, they're physically extraordinary, geographical landmarks and medicine tools – certainly not too insignificant to depict. Each structural feat Ryan creates garners meaning from the world around her. "I want to start different conversations," she adds. "I don't fit into one singularity."

Opposite: Veronica Ryan at her Along a Spectrum show, 2021. Below: Ryan, at work during her residency at Spike Island, Bristol

MAX McCLURE; LISA WHITING