

Observatory

Veronica Ryan

How loss, migration and materials shape the British artist's work.

By Precious Adesina

PORTRAIT by NAOMI WONG

When British artist Veronica Ryan's sculpture "Custard Apple (Annonaceae), Breadfruit (Moraceae) and Soursop (Annonaceae)" was installed

in a square in east London in 2021, she visited it every day. She became so preoccupied with checking on it that she called a friend to confess. "It's like letting your children go," she says now, no longer monitoring it daily. The three-piece bronze-and-marble artwork of Caribbean fruits was created to commemorate the Windrush generation. It echoes the 69-year-old's wider practice, in which she often transforms everyday organic forms into mesmerising creations.

Ryan and I meet in a makeshift studio at London's Whitechapel Gallery, where a major retrospective of her work will open in April. It comes after she became the oldest artist to win the Turner Prize, in 2022. When her Caribbean fruits were unveiled in Hackney, they were the first permanent public sculpture by a Black female artist in the UK.

On seeing me, the first thing Ryan notices is the gold egg-shaped pendant hanging from my necklace. It reminds her of the charm on her bag, a replica of Anish Kapoor's "Cloud Gate" in Chicago (known as "The Bean"). The connection feels apt. Ryan's practice is defined by unexpected links between objects, memories and ideas. "My mind doesn't work in a linear way," she says. "It's often making these sorts of tangential connections with other things."

We sit down on a large sofa. Dressed in a black cap and a brown Fairisle sweater, Ryan seems relaxed, if slightly distracted. After a couple of minutes, she asks to swap sides. Having the piece she's currently working on in her sightline is making her want to make drastic changes. On tables wrapped in plastic are the beginnings of a new installation.

The most difficult aspect of putting together the new show, she explains, has been locating

older artworks. Long active as an artist, she only gained mainstream recognition in the 2020s, meaning the whereabouts of earlier works isn't always neatly documented. Some have been lost, others destroyed.

Ryan clutches a black-and-white photograph she's using as a reference for recreating a piece she made in the 1980s. She left the original at an Essex barn that had served as her studio before moving into a studio house in east London with the artist Cornelia Parker in 1988. When she returned to the barn, used today by a new group of artists, she learnt that most of what she'd left behind was gone. Her successors had "buried [previous] artists' work in a cesspit," she says. "The whole thing is bizarre." Ryan is so softly spoken that you might be forgiven for thinking she is not as furious as she is.

She hands me the photograph. The piece, "Attempts to Fill Vacant Spaces", comprises eight round pods made of plaster (which she is recreating) that hold various seedlike bronze structures (these she largely recovered from the barn). The new version looks broadly the same, she says, although given its organic form, it has been difficult to replicate exactly.

Other works were destroyed in 2004, in a fire at a storage facility in east London, along with those by other artists, including Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. Ryan has also discarded her artworks herself at times. "I couldn't afford to have all these separate storage spaces," she explains matter-of-factly.

We look at the bronzes, which have turned green through oxidation. One was stolen and Ryan, who is certain she knows who took it, is working up to asking for it back. She jokes that it will probably turn up on eBay.

RYAN WAS BORN ON THE CARIBBEAN ISLAND of Montserrat in 1956. Many of the materials she used early in her artistic career, such as avocado trays and egg boxes, were inspired by her mother,

who would make pillowcases from the flour sacks that arrived on the island, made of "very good, thick cotton". She would wash them until they were soft, then embroider them.

Such memories have taken on new meaning over time. In 1995, a volcanic eruption destroyed the town of Plymouth, where Ryan was born, and it was permanently evacuated. Two years ago, her mother died, something she says was "very traumatic".

The family moved to Britain in 1958. Ryan's fruit sculptures remind her of visiting Ridley Road Market in Hackney with her mother. I grew up not far from the market, and tell her my mother would go there on Sundays. A few weeks before I started secondary school, she left me at the market to learn how to take the bus on my own. Ryan says she would have found this scary. "You just want to be with your mum all the time, holding her hand," she says. "Or in my case, holding on to my sister's pushchair."

The shy child she describes seems a far cry from the artist sitting opposite me. Like many Black female artists of her generation, Ryan built her career despite considerable pushback. She studied at leading institutions – the Slade School of Fine Art; the School of Oriental and African Studies. In 1985, she was one of 11 Black and Asian women artists in *The Thin Black Line*, a landmark exhibition at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. But like many of her peers Ryan's rise would be slow and steady. The show's curator Lubaina Himid would win the Turner Prize in 2017. Sonia Boyce, another who was featured in the show, won the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion in 2022, the same year that Ryan was awarded the Turner Prize.

She tells me she has been thinking a lot about her father, who died more than two decades ago. "My mother dying has made me think about him in ways that I hadn't thought about before," she says. "Radical" life changes such as having children can transform one's perspective, she says. As can big societal changes.

"Things are pretty extraordinary at the moment: we're seeing changes that seem to have happened suddenly, but of course they're not sudden." What does she think of the present moment at a time when she is looking back into the past? It's the first moment I sense that certain topics may be off-limits. "We can't work outside of the time we're in," she says, "so my work operates within that framework." For Ryan, art doesn't exist in a vacuum; even if there aren't explicit political references in her work, politics still permeates.

She talks about her art as she talks about the past – fluid, associative, non-specific. Everyone and everything is linked somehow. "Memory moves according to an experience one might be having at a particular time," she says. Remaking an artwork from a photograph from the 1980s feels like mining her past. "But, you can't actually recreate the same moment," she says. "It's very emotive because people have died and places no longer exist." ■

"Veronica Ryan: Multiple Conversations" is at Whitechapel Gallery, London, from April 1 to June 14. She will unveil a new site-specific commission at Mount Stuart house, Isle of Bute, on May 30

