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**Article DOI****Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/veronica-ryan-along-a-spectrum>

**ISSN**

2631-5661

**Cite as**

Kathryn Lloyd: 'Veronica Ryan: Along a Spectrum', *Burlington Contemporary* (18th August 2021),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/veronica-ryan-along-a-spectrum>

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Cover image: **Fig. 7** Detail from *Drift Seeds*, by Veronica Ryan. 2019–21. Crocheted fishing line, cotton, plaster, clay, seeds and fruit skins. (Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Alison Jacques, London; photograph Max McClure; exh. Spike Island, Bristol).

# Veronica Ryan: Along a Spectrum

by Kathryn Lloyd • 18.08.2021

The artistic practice of Veronica Ryan (b.1956) is one marked by devastation. In 1995, after centuries of dormancy, the Soufrière Hills volcano on the Caribbean island of Montserrat erupted and never stopped. Plymouth, the island's capital and the town of Ryan's birth, was buried in volcanic ash and debris.<sup>1</sup> Nearly ten years later, in 2004, a fire broke out at an industrial estate in east London. The flames ripped through factory units, eventually reaching a warehouse owned by the art storage company Momart. Here, along with many other works of art, a significant number of Ryan's early sculptures were destroyed.<sup>2</sup> These events of erasure, separated by time and geography, left two absences in the artist's life: one in her personal history and one in her artmaking. Ash – a substance that comes into being only through the destruction of another – is one of many materials Ryan repeatedly includes in her recent sculptures. Along with the incorporation of seeds, fruits and plants, it is indicative of the artist's preoccupation with the cycle of the (natural) world: its ability to die and rebirth itself, or transform into new matter.

Supported by the Freelands Foundation, *Along a Spectrum* at Spike Island, Bristol, is Ryan's largest solo exhibition in the United Kingdom to date.<sup>3</sup> The work is the result of an extended – and interrupted – artist residency that took place from 2019 to 2021. In 2018 when Spike Island and Ryan were selected for the Freelands Award, the central premise of their proposal was to situate new works in dialogue with those lost in the Momart fire – an act of remaking and returning that would attempt to bridge past and present.<sup>4</sup> This notion of recovery was an autonomous and self-referential one, an exercise in exorcising the myths that are constructed around absences. Instead, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, it was displaced by an exploration of globalised trauma and recovery. The works Ryan has created during this residency are at once characteristic of her longstanding interests – which, in addition to absence, renewal, loss and displacement also include containment and the abject – and bound to the wider psychological implications of the pandemic.

In the first gallery, a low, white shelf spans the length of the wall **FIG.1**. A series of objects populate its surface, spaced at even intervals. Each shows a process of enclosure: a cacao pod sits snugly inside a purple medical pillow; seeds are stuck in between layers in a thick roll of tape, creating a rosette-like pattern that disrupts the continuous, circular ravelling **FIG.2**; volcanic ash clings

to the underside of a food packaging tray, resembling the dusty mould that collects on the skins of rotting fruit; coral and stones hang heavily in hand-crocheted nets. On the wall above are two small rectangles of fabric decorated with lines of stitching that follow the kidney-like contours of large beans, simultaneously concealing them inside the material and signalling their presence. Aptly titled *Multiple Conversations*, this composite work demonstrates the plurality of Ryan's practice. Created over the past two years, these small objects make reference to what Ryan terms our 'multiple pandemics': COVID-19; its subsequent, and disproportionate, socio-economic impacts; racial injustice; and the climate crisis.<sup>5</sup>

A pile of beige cushions sits on the gallery floor – their strange shape reminiscent of disembodied torsos **FIG.3**. Plump, with intricate, proud seams and the soft meeting points of fabric, only the chalky residue on their surface belies their real makeup: plaster. Cast from medical pillows that have been manipulated and resized in correspondence to the artist's body circumference, the objects are devoid of the restorative qualities that pillows usually signify. Buried beneath the plaster iterations is their original, soft counterpart, visibly straining and squashed under the unexpected weight. Elsewhere pillows and fabrics reoccur: hand-quilted, dyed or readymade, and suffused with seeds, peel, tea, dye or thread.

Ryan's selected materials are coded in multiple ways: their potential for germination, growth or death; how they relate specifically to cultures and geographies; and their potential medicinal or ameliorative attributes. The soursop – a fruit that has both been classed as neurotoxic and an alternative cure for cancer – reappears numerous times throughout *Along a Spectrum*. Native to the Caribbean, the soursop becomes a signifier for migration, of people and of products, as well as the contradictory characteristics one object can hold – or be said to hold. Mango and avocado stones are sewn into the insides of fabrics; orange skins are left to dry and crudely stitched together with thread; cacao pods are cast and glazed in volcanic ash from the birthplace to which Ryan is unable to return.

Despite her interest in the actions of binding and casting, Ryan's sculptures are often not entirely closed. In the exhibition works sit on and underneath glass-top tables or on large, open shelving units, allowing the eye to see through, past, along and under **FIG.4**. In *Not a Singularity* **FIG.5** stacked fruit trays sit on the floor, underneath a glass table, their round dimples mirrored in the bowl-like objects directly above on the glass, which are blackened and mottled, coated in volcanic ash. The last, cavernous gallery space is filled with sculptures that hang – from the ceiling or from varying points on the wall **FIG.6**. Long, tubular lengths of crochet hold bundles of seeds, fruit stones and skins **FIG.7**. Despite their capacity to hold, Ryan's crocheted nets are open and precarious: their

structure is one of holes. The bulbous forms created by the weight of what they carry at once evidences their strength and fragility; over time they may strain, split and spill. They exist in a state of potential trauma, when the container will unravel and the contained will come tumbling out. For Ryan, ‘capsules, divisions [and] compartments, are all metaphors for wider issues of dissociation, fracture, displacement, alienation and so on’.<sup>6</sup>



**Fig. 1** Installation view of *Veronica Ryan: Along a Spectrum* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2021. (Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Alison Jacques, London; photograph Max McClure).

In her 1980 book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes extensively about the subject of abjection, which she defines as the sensation of disgust at the breakdown in meaning caused by a loss of distinction between subject and object, or self and other.<sup>7</sup> Ryan’s interest in Kristeva’s theory of the abject is demonstrated by her use of discarded materials that often sit at the cusp of disintegration. This is perhaps most evident in her 1994 sculpture *Empty Compartments Full of Dust*, in which the contents of a vacuum cleaner have been emptied into a series of compartments. Dust, hair, skin particles and nail clippings are the epitome of the abject: the jettisoned waste from our bodies that situate us at the border of our condition as living beings.<sup>8</sup> Kristeva posits a number of examples of abject – in relation to the self, the body and criminology – but names ‘food loathing’ as ‘perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection’.<sup>9</sup> She cites the experience of drinking milk only to discover she has consumed the skin that sometimes forms on its surface. Entering her mouth, this milky film is no longer ‘other’, and so in expelling it, she expels herself: ‘I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself’.<sup>10</sup> In *Along A Spectrum* the abject is present in Ryan’s continued use of food, organic matter and debris, but also more obliquely in her actions of binding

and containing. Tying, sewing, filling, casting and stacking can all be read as a defence against the human experience of the abject – a way to control the uncontrollable.

The town of Plymouth has been uninhabitable since 2010, making it the only ghost town that is the capital of a political territory. It remains buried in ash. It is inevitable that this loss informs Ryan's practice, not least in her incorporation of the lasting material from the disaster. Her sculptural interventions are, in essence, a process of housing impermanence. However, as evidenced by the exhibition title, Ryan is an artist who defies singularity. In her work, displacement and trauma give way to recovery and control. Her work at Spike Island is inevitably framed by the events of the past two years, but rather than limiting it, this allows for a proliferation of readings. Her explorations are given meaning by the moments of crisis from which they derive, but they also signal their own spillage beyond this, mirroring the delicate balance of her own precariously constructed containers.



**Fig. 2** *Multiple Conversations III*, by Veronica Ryan. 2019–2021. Plastic, custard apple seeds and ink. (Photograph the present reviewer).



**Fig. 3** *Its Own Cushion*, by Veronica Ryan. 2020. Plaster and medical pillows, dimensions variable. (Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Alison Jacques, London; photograph Max McClure; exh. Spike Island, Bristol).



**Fig. 4** Installation view of *Veronica Ryan: Along a Spectrum* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2021. (Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Alison Jacques, London; photograph Max McClure).



**Fig. 5** *Not a Singularity*, by Veronica Ryan. 2020-21. Steel, glass, crocheted doily, plaster, cord, fabric, fruit, cushions, orange peels, plastic net, volcanic ash, ceramic and other materials; three components, each 710 by 1800 by 730 cm. (Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Alison Jacques, London; photograph Max McClure; exh. Spike Island, Bristol).



**Fig. 6** Installation view of *Veronica Ryan: Along a Spectrum* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2021. (Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Alison Jacques, London; photograph Max McClure).





**Fig. 7** Detail from *Drift Seeds*, by Veronica Ryan. 2019–21. Crocheted fishing line, cotton, plaster, clay, seeds and fruit skins. (Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, and Alison Jacques, London; photograph Max McClure; exh. Spike Island, Bristol).

## Exhibition details

### Veronica Ryan: Along a Spectrum

Spike Island, Bristol

19th May–5th September 2021

## Footnotes

- 1** Ryan's parents relocated to London when she was eighteen months old. In 1966, when she was ten, her family returned to Montserrat for a short period of time. Ryan had always planned to make further trips to the island; she had started investigating funding opportunities in the hope of conducting a research trip, but these plans were curtailed by the disaster in 1995 and she has not been able to return since.
- 2** The fire is thought to have destroyed works of art totalling approximately £50m, including works by Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst, Chris Ofili and more than fifty by Patrick Heron. See C. Higgins and V. Dodd: '50 years of British art lies in ashes', *The Guardian* (27th May 2004), available at [www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/may/27/thebritartfire.arts1](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/may/27/thebritartfire.arts1), accessed 17th August 2021; and Anon.: 'Brit Art fire site "was burgled"', *BBC News* (3rd June 2004), available at [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/3775177.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/3775177.stm), accessed 17th August 2021.

- 3** Catalogue: *Veronica Ryan: Along a Spectrum*. Edited by Carmen Juliá and Rosa Tyhurst. 96 pp. incl. 36 col. + 34 b. & w. ills. (Spike Island, Bristol, 2021), £18. ISBN 978-0-9574490-6-0.
- 4** See 'Freelands Award year 3 winner announcement', *Spike Island* (22nd November 2018), available at [www.spikeisland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FF-Press-Release-16-Nov-2018-FINAL.pdf](http://www.spikeisland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FF-Press-Release-16-Nov-2018-FINAL.pdf), accessed 17th August 2021. Although the exhibition itself has shifted somewhat from this initial impetus, the accompanying publication remains in line with this proposal, setting out to recover and connect Ryan's early, lost works with those now on display. In particular, see N. Rudd: 'Attempts to fill vacant spaces: the early work of Veronica Ryan' in Juliá and Tyhurst, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.8-17.
- 5** See 'Veronica Ryan: Along a Spectrum at Spike Island', available at [vimeo.com/572521589](https://vimeo.com/572521589), accessed 18th August 2021.
- 6** Veronica Ryan, quoted in S. Santacatterina ed.: exh. cat. *Veronica Ryan: Compartments/Apart-ments*, London (Camden Art Centre) 1995, p.7.
- 7** For an extended discussion of the object in Ryan's practice see D. Price: 'Fragile propositions' in Juliá and Tyhurst, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.24-32, esp. pp.26-29.
- 8** See J. Kristeva: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York 1982.
- 9** *Ibid.*, p.2.
- 10** *Ibid.*, p.3.

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**BURLINGTON**  
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

**The Burlington Magazine**  
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ