

PAULA COOPER GALLERY

Mitter, Siddhartha. "Veronica Ryan's Uncanny Objects," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2022

The New York Times

Veronica Ryan's Uncanny Objects

At 65, the British artist based in New York is in the Whitney Biennial and on the Turner Prize shortlist. Her sculptures blend strange and common items to make sense of the world.

By **Siddhartha Mitter**

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Veronica Ryan at Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea, where her current exhibition is titled "Along a Spectrum." Ryan, who lives in New York City, is experiencing fresh acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Elias Williams for The New York Times

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A soursop. A breadfruit. A custard apple. Incongruously large but otherwise realistic, the three [sculptures of tropical fruit](#) sit right on the ground in a busy pedestrian plaza in the Hackney section of London, as if the produce had tumbled from a grocer's stand and magically expanded on the pavement.

The work of the artist [Veronica Ryan](#), they honor the [Windrush generation](#) — the half-million immigrants who arrived from Britain's colonies in the Caribbean between 1948 and the early 1970s and who settled, joined the work force, raised families.

Ryan herself is a daughter of Windrush, born in the Caribbean island of Montserrat in 1956. She arrived with her family as a child and watched them struggle, with whole sections of London unsafe for Black people. "My parents had a difficult time navigating a very racist postwar situation in England," she said. But there were also spaces of safety. One was Ridley Road Market in Hackney, which had become largely Caribbean, serving the needs and tastes of the growing community.

So when the [Hackney local council](#) issued a call for public art in 2020 — part of a push to commemorate the Windrush generation after a [major scandal](#) over the wrongful detention and deportation of hundreds of its members decades after their legal arrival — Ryan did not go for a grand monument or heroic statuary. Instead, her oversized fruits evoke that childhood salve, and the sense of people asserting a home.

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"Custard Apple (Annonaceae), Breadfruit (Moraceae), and Soursop (Annonaceae)," 2021. Ryan's homage to the Windrush generation, immigrants to Britain from the Caribbean between 1948 and the early 1970s, consists of tropical fruit sculptures. They evoke childhood memories of Caribbean families making a home in England. Veronica Ryan, Paula Cooper Gallery and Alison Jacques; Andy Keate

Ryan, 65, is earning belated recognition herself, on both sides of the Atlantic. In New York, her base since the 1990s, she is in the current Whitney Biennial and has an [exhibition](#) at the Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea. In Britain, her Hackney sculptures and a 2021 show at the [Spike Island art center](#) in Bristol vaulted her onto the shortlist for the 2022 Turner Prize.

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Ryan's objects serve a winning blend of familiar and mysterious. In the Hackney sculptures, the perception shift involves scale. A bit smaller, and the fruits would get lost; larger, and they would be grotesque. "You recognize what they are but they start to take on an abstract form as well," she said. "I quite like the way that it has these different realities."

Her works on view in New York showcase odd combinations of common materials — some found, some modified, some cast in bronze or plaster so precisely that they look like the real thing — suggesting a hidden grammar of daily life. A cocoa pod nestles in the hollow of a medical pillow. A stack of takeout boxes is topped by bead necklaces in pink netting. Packing blankets rolled like a pastry reveal, in the central hollow, seed packets stitched on like barnacles.

Small hybrid items sit just-so on shelving units. Others rest on the floor, or dangle from the ceiling. The list of materials is dizzying: Hairnets, mango stones, volcanic ash, orange peels, linoleum, dried coral, jute rug are just some of those in her current gallery show.

Ryan thinks through objects so as to understand herself — and the world. "I want to talk about psychological resonance, about the extended self, and how we relate to objects that relate to us and the wider culture," she said in an interview at the gallery.

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Ryan's sculptures involve odd combinations of everyday materials. "I collect a lot of stuff and cast things that look as though they might work," she said. Elias Williams for The New York Times

She is a gatherer and experimenter. "I collect a lot of stuff and cast things that look as though they might work," she said. The studio is a movable concept: It can be her live-work space in the [Westbeth Artists Housing](#) complex in Manhattan, or wherever she travels. "I come from different places," she said. "I carry bits of work with me wherever I go."

Every material Ryan uses draws on private history. In the early 1980s, after studies at the Bath Academy of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, she was casting small pods that nestled into recesses on [bronze works](#); the play with cocoons, platforms and receptacles, which continues into her recent soft sculptures, began at a time of questioning how she belonged — and how others categorized her — in the world.

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From the outset, Ryan said, she was uncertain where she belonged. Her career took off fast but was bifurcated between the establishment — she was the only Black artist in a Tate showcase of emerging sculptors in 1984 — and the alternative scene, where she took part in several influential shows of Black female artists.

While Black British creation was bubbling in the Thatcher years Ryan felt both inside and outside. "I was very aware of what was going on," she said of the politics of the time, "but protecting my internal self." People sought racial themes in her sculptures, but really, she said, "I was thinking about psychological boundaries — basically, how you survive."

She solved the problem by leaving. In 1989, she arrived in New York to visit a friend from England, and ended up marrying him. They had two daughters and later separated, but New York remained her base. She caught up with American Minimalism, read Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. For a time she worked in a cramped 12-by-12-foot studio in the Bowery.

The work took on an industrial, purgative edge. "I started making these enclosed spaces," she said. Returning to Britain for a short residency and an exhibition at the [Camden Arts Center](#), she showed stark metal pieces with compartments filled with debris and vacuum-cleaning dust.

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On the wall, "Dem Mash You Up Man," 2020; on the floor, "Cocoa Passion in Tandem," 2021. Elias Williams for The New York Times

In 1998, another residency brought Ryan to England, this time to the studio in St. Ives, Cornwall, once occupied by the sculptor [Barbara Hepworth](#), who [died](#) in 1975. The sea and mild climate, shaped by the Gulf Stream, summoned inchoate memories of the Caribbean, opening up fresh ideas.

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She became interested in how seeds travel on the water, an appealing metaphor in her own life. "Coconuts, for example, can travel across the ocean for three weeks, and then, if they find a good location, they'll germinate," she said. "So there's something about travel and moving through history and different locations where things might find a natural habitat — or not."

Hard events have affected the work, which Ryan relates forthrightly.

Three of her siblings died by suicide. In 1995 the volcano on Montserrat erupted, ultimately [burying the capital](#) in ash, forcing its abandonment, dashing her hope to revisit her birthplace. In 2004, she and other British artists lost works in an [art-storage fire](#) in London; her Camden Arts Center pieces perished. "For a long period the work was making sense of how one inherits trauma," she said. "What you inherit and what's your own — sometimes it's not distinguishable."

Through it all, said Courtney Martin, director of the [Yale Center for British Art](#), Ryan has perfected a language that owes to the British formal lineage of Hepworth and Henry Moore yet travels somewhere altogether new. "She has fleshed out a vocabulary," Martin said. "She's coming out of traditional British sculpture and shifting it into something else."

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Lately Ryan's work has grown colorful, the materials softer and combinations vivacious. A frequent element is colorful netting: A more recent Cornwall residency, she said, introduced her to fishermen who shared wisdom on lines, knots, and how different colors draw different fish. Crocheted fishing line has become a new mainstay.



Ryan's installation in the current Whitney Biennial, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," includes assortments of cryptic objects laid out on shelving units. One inspiration, she said, was remembering visits in 1980s London to a museum storage facility for ethnographic objects. Ron Amstutz

Her Whitney Biennial installation includes shelving units that house an assortment of cryptic objects. The inspiration goes back to visits in the 1980s to a storage facility for the British Museum where ethnographic objects were carefully labeled yet shelved pell-mell. Somehow, she said, she was reprocessing impressions seeded back then. "I like that sense of re-experiencing an emotional moment, a context moment," she said. "The shelf became a way to form some kind of composite."

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When installing an exhibition, Ryan will spend time setting out objects, adding or removing elements up to the last minute. The Biennial is embracing the energy; her installation will change during its run.

The idea that the work can change gets to the heart of Ryan's concern with "the possibility to transcend any situation," said Adrienne Edwards, the biennial's co-curator. "In sitting with these things over time, they get applied and redirected into different works."

Ryan's universe of objects operates like a map that keeps adding dimensions. "The work is a kind of therapy, but it is more," she said. "It is a way of understanding one's interior self vis-à-vis the world."

Her fruit sculptures in Hackney are immobile. But are they really? The flow of foot traffic, the weather, neighborhood life, means they too are also constantly evolving.

"Every time I'm in London I go to say hello to them, and see people interacting with them," Ryan said. The works address Caribbean migration, yet they are also for everybody. She is keen to make more public art: "I like the way that it creates equal space," she said. "And for me that is equal justice."