

***Sculpting Lives* podcast transcript**

Series 2, Episode 2: Veronica Ryan

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Dorothy Price: I was really interested in those ideas as kind of this was the global reach that her work has without being sort of declarative about it. It's a very quiet nod towards possibility.

Sarah Turner: Welcome to Sculpting Lives with me, Sarah Turner.

Jo Baring: And me, Jo Baring.

Sarah Turner: In this episode, we are exploring the career of the sculptor, Veronica Ryan, born in 1956 on the Caribbean island of Montserrat. We had another Sculpting Lives road trip didn't we, Jo?

Jo Baring: Oh, we did. We had the best time. We went down to Bristol, to Spike Island, to interview Veronica in her exhibition *Along a Spectrum*, which is her biggest retrospective to date, isn't it?

Sarah Turner: It is, yeah. Sponsored by the Freelands Foundation, it's an important moment in Ryan's career. And those issues about visibility, about how women sculptors and artists gain prominence and have exhibitions, how our history deals with them, writes about them. These are all issues that we really grapple with in this episode.

Jo Baring: (silence) Well it's so exciting. So we've come to Bristol to Spike Island to Veronica Ryan's exhibition *Along a Spectrum*. And actually, we are lucky to be here with Veronica herself.

Sarah Turner: Can you describe the space that we've just entered?

Veronica Ryan: Well, we've come into the first gallery that has beautiful sunlight. Although when we started installing the end of... I'm losing track of time, actually, the end of April, the weather was still overcast quite a lot. And so this particular space with the skylight, see the light changes dramatically from day to day. And it's really nice seeing the variety of light, and the way the light hits the work in different ways.

Jo Baring: And just thinking about actually Spike Island and the history of Spike Island itself, can you talk a little bit about the impact of that? The historical research and the building that's had on the preparation and the work that you've made?

Veronica Ryan: When I first came to Spike Island, I wasn't aware that it was a tea factory. And I found that really exciting because some of my previous work I had been sewing tea bags together, and I like the fact that they're like these little cushions and they're a bit like little pillows, which in a sense alludes to some of my earlier work, pillow landscape structures.

Veronica Ryan: And so once someone said this, I went to the archives and looked up some of the documents about Spike, and other parts of the country which have been formerly tea factories. And so I decided how far do I want to pursue the research in that direction? So it was quite good just to have a sense of the history of Spike Island and there's this connecting dimension with some of my work. And then I decided I could become really involved with tea and its history, but wanted to keep a fluid conversation in the work.

Sarah Turner: Yeah. That it's not didactic.

Veronica Ryan: Right, exactly. That the work hints and makes references to a number of multiple paradigms. And it's the connecting threads between these various conversations that I'm interested in.

Jo Baring: I suppose that's reflected in the title, isn't it? Along a Spectrum.

Veronica Ryan: Exactly.

Jo Baring: And already we're sort of jumping between different things, and the pillows, and the seas, the organic forms, history...

Veronica Ryan: Right.

Sarah Turner: Yeah, past and present.

Veronica Ryan: Yes, exactly. Time and space, and weaving moments. And so I'm interested in some of these moments that kind of refer to each other in time and space, and on stitching, on picking and the back story. So I think those are some of the kinds of connections of stitching as well.

Sarah Turner: Yeah. Can we take a walk? I do like that idea of this refusal of perhaps a linear history as well that you seem to be interested in shuttling

between, not only past and present, but I guess the future as well. Thinking about what's to come.

Veronica Ryan: Right, right. Yeah, that's very interesting thinking about the future because thinking about time and space, and black holes and so on, that kind of complexion, whether we're in a kind of mirage of time. And so are we in this moment? And how we're experiencing the past, the present, and how does that reflect the kind of other moment?

Sarah Turner: To someone who's recently written about Veronica Ryan's work, and whose texts are included in the Spike Island catalogue is Professor Dorothy Price who is at The Courtauld Institute of Art in London. And we spoke to Dot in the exhibition to ask her about Veronica's sculpture and how it interweaves the personal and the political, particularly through the materials that she works with. And we also asked her to tell us more about how we go about writing about Ryan's practise within the context of the histories of sculpture, and British art more broadly.

Sarah Turner: So we stood in front of a piece called Hung from 2019, and it's this kind of tangled mess of fabrics, I think, stained with turmeric.

Dorothy Price: Turmeric.

Sarah Turner: Yeah. And Dot, in your essay that you wrote for the catalogue for the Spike Island exhibition, you talked about how Veronica Ryan uses fabrics and materials in this kind of way that entangles history, that kind of pulled all sorts of things, whether it's personal memory, but also kind of speaks to bigger historical moments and concerns. And you use this work as a way in. Can you tell us more about your thought process, as well as an art historian and writing about her work and her way of entangling histories?

Dorothy Price: Yeah, I can. I mean, it's a really interesting work because when I first encountered it, it was in a different form. It was looser than it is now and I spotted it immediately, as soon as I walked into the studio. And I asked Veronica, obviously, how it was coloured. And she said it was stained with turmeric. And then she started to talk about turmeric, and she started to talk about the healing properties of food. So immediately we were into such a world of associations.

Dorothy Price: But for me, of course, the turmeric also played immediately into this kind of stitched. I mean, it's much more obvious in the way it's hung in the gallery space today. But in the studio, it was hanging at the bottom and you couldn't always see it in full. So this idea that the entanglement was visible but not visible, going in and out of view, was really interesting to me. And I immediately thought of these kind of

entangled histories of trade and empire, the relationship with the East India Company, the fact that spices and tea in particular are very important in Veronica's thinking about matter. And matter and materiality is so important in her work and the way she works, as well.

Dorothy Price: And I was really interested in those ideas as kind of sort of the global reach that her work has without being sort of declarative about it. It's a very quiet nod towards possibility. And I think that idea that her work always sits on this sort of threshold between possibility is quite significant to her practise. I think Veronica would agree with that in terms of her discovery that Spike Island used to be a tea-packing factory. So for her, tea was already an important material and she picks up these little tea bags from the airport. And so she drinks the tea, dries the bag, and picks the bag and re-stitches it into new sculpture. It's about, I think, making new forms out of familiar forms, and therefore constructing new associations for them as well, I think. And that's quite important to her practise, I think, in particular.

Sarah Turner: We heard from Dot there about how Veronica takes things from everyday life, such as tea bags, and uses them not only as the matter of her sculpture. She actually uses tea bags as material, but also translates them into a kind of sculpture vocabulary working across scales and forms.

Jo Baring: Yeah, she doesn't just take manmade objects such as tea bags. She also uses organic things as well that you'd find in nature like seed pods. And she was born on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, as you said earlier, Sarah. Imagery from that reappears in the work. And there's a little clue from what Dot said about how she picked up the tea bags at the airport. So Veronica travels a lot, and for many years she worked and lived, between New York and London. And that's something that we asked her to elaborate on.

Jo Baring: Can we talk a bit about travel actually, because I think that's really interesting? I've read that you sometimes would carry pieces. You described yourself as a bag lady and sometimes would carry bits of bronze in your bag and transport them between New York and London. Love that idea. Can we talk a little bit about how that sort of impacts the work? That transporting pieces between time zones?

Veronica Ryan: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Sarah Turner: I just got a funny image of you at customs, you know?

Veronica Ryan: I know.

Jo Baring: With all your packed seed pod getting them out.

Veronica Ryan: I know. It's true. I remember when a friend and I went to Nigeria and when I just left with this, I tried to bring cocoa pods into the country. Of course, they opened this at customs and they had rotted. So at that point, they're always looking for people trying to leave the country with original artefacts and so on. And so in my bag, in my suitcase, all they had were these sort of rotten cocaine pods.

Veronica Ryan: Anyhow, I really like collecting. I collect things. I'm a bit like a magpie. I collect things all the time and I quite like pound shops. And in New York, their 99 cent shops. I quite like the way that particular kind of object, as it were, evoke a kind of visual way that I might want to make something. So for instance, this salmon pink tray is actually some kind of sieve. There was only one in the shop. I wish there were more because I particularly like this sort of slightly under the skin colour. When you look to colour charts and so on, this particular colour would call it flesh pink or something. And I like the idea, actually, it's more connected to what's happening under your skin, the kind of residual thinking about interiority.

Jo Baring: I'm just looking around the room and talking about materials, there's all sorts of different materials. There's different textures, there's different shapes, different forms. And in sculpture, we talk about materiality a lot, and I'm interested to know what that term materiality means to you.

Veronica Ryan: I'm interested in materiality. I feel that there's a trend that's come back into vogue, in a sense, because I feel there's been a period where I was working in a bit of a void, and that I feel that this sort of interest in materiality is one reason people have been interested in my work over the more recent years. I think part of my training at art school where we learnt to carve wood and weld, but also at that point in art school, the thinking about how in stone carving and so on, how you could make a material look soft... You could carve to make an area look soft or hard. And so at some point I started to think, well actually, I want to use materials that already have some of those qualities rather than making sort of traditional materials evoke particular kinds of qualities.

Veronica Ryan: A long period of years, actually, where I was sending work out to people and then I wasn't getting any kind of positive responses to showing work. I suppose because I always make things, there were whole periods where I didn't have any materials, or really couldn't when I was taking care of young children, the priority had to be making sure that their needs were taken care of. A lot of what I did was just continued working with things around me. But also, I had to do quite a lot of work with working with my confidence and

self-esteem, and working through lots of feelings about being excluded and evidence of exclusion.

Veronica Ryan: So there is a whole body of work that really addresses being excluded for various reasons. You know, if you've had moments where there's been some visibility and then all of a sudden there isn't any visibility. But I've also had a few people who have always been very encouraging. And I understand that any given time if you have two people who encourage you to keep going, and to keep working with what you've got around you. So I like the idea of using actual stuff that you've got around you, but also internally using one's state to be the driver of continuing a kind of occupation.

Jo Baring: It's really interesting to hear a sculptor talk so frankly about issues such as visibility and exclusion, and how that makes you feel, and how that impacts the work. And it's something that we asked Dorothy Price to pick up on.

Jo Baring: Dot, one of the things we wanted to talk to you about as well is about how a sculptor like Ryan has been positioned or not within the histories of British arts and British sculpture, and she's spoken about this sense of not belonging. And your work as a writer and as an editor has been to address those issues of not belonging, thinking about the exclusions of art history, of the art world more broadly, as well. But what is the kind of work that we need to do to reckon with this huge body of work in this exhibition? It's such a significant exhibition. It represents a lot of history, as well. So can you just talk through that process of writing, and the work that art history has to do to tackle not only Ryan as a sculptor and her place within the art world, but more broadly as well?

Dorothy Price: I think it's both simple and complicated. So simply, it's attending to the practise of people who have been canonically left out of certain accounts. And attending to them on their own terms, I think is important. And I think the problem with a lot of, particularly Black women, artists who have been left out of the frame is because their work brings a certain kind of sensibility, an aesthetic sensibility. And Veronica's, I mean, it's just this exhibition is a testament to that that isn't neatly categorised.

Dorothy Price: And she's ploughed her own furrow, if that's a metaphor, irrespective of trends, or fashions or whatever. And she hasn't tried to fit into boxes and she's had to work really hard not to be subsumed under that sort of sociological discourse in which Black British artists were so, for so long, misrepresented and not well served, actually. I mean, on the one hand, they were sort of made visible within sociological discourse but then it was also enabled them to be sidelined as only issues-based artists, and only identity issues-based artists, which identity is inherent

in art production anyway for whomever. Park that and let's re-attend to the work in front of us. What do we see? How does this work signify within a trajectory of sculptural practise? Where can we think about that?

Jo Baring: Thinking about those early years, can you tell us a little bit about how you first became interested maybe in sculpture? Or you were drawn to sculpture, or forms?

Veronica Ryan: Yeah. I think that's really interesting that early on, I think I must have always thought about things that you pick up. And I remember one of the earliest things at school in the infants that a teacher making Christmas trees out of cotton reel and sticking a bit of fern. I don't remember having Christmas trees really, but I remembered how I liked the idea that you could have this suggestion of a Christmas tree just from a cotton reel and put a little twig in it.

Veronica Ryan: And I think also just because my mother sewed. One of my early memories is a patchwork cover blanket that my mom made. And I think that's one of my early memories. I must have been about one and a half, two. And I love thimbles and I like all the accoutrements around sewing. Those are some of the early things I remember, and pencils, and match sticks and...

Sarah Turner: Like that haberdashery.

Veronica Ryan: Yes, exactly.

Sarah Turner: Even that word's brilliant, isn't it? Haberdashery and all the things that that evokes.

Veronica Ryan: Yes, exactly. Yes.

Sarah Turner: Like you say, the accoutrements. The things that you need. These little, almost like treasures actually, aren't they, when you open up a sewing box? And often, if you have that memory of a mom, or a grandmother who liked to sew those button boxes in sewing are like treasure chests, aren't they, for you as you're growing up?

Veronica Ryan: Right. Exactly. Well, that's right. I mean, somebody asked me about my mother's jewellery box trinkets. My mother never wore jewellery so you might find a powder puff. I quite like the shape of those powder puffs. I must have a sense that they were always things that you held onto or held. I think I didn't grow up with lots of dolly's. It was more to do with other kinds of things around. So I think that's where my early interest in three-dimensional structures comes from.

- Jo Baring: And it's so interesting. As we walk around we can see the sewing and the stitching. Some of the stitches are in much darker materials to really stand out. And it's not only the stitching, I suppose, but it's also the language around sewing that's quite interesting, isn't it? I'm thinking about particularly something like unpicking. You were very interested in psychoanalysis as well, and unpicking is a verb that we use now to say, well, let's unpick what's going on here in your head.
- Veronica Ryan: Yes, yes. Right, right. Yeah, yeah. There's been some quite traumatic that one has to process. But I've wanted to make some of the investigation accessible visually. Not that it just is a theoretical position to make use of unconscious investigations, and see what that says. When we were talking about materiality just a few moments ago, so when I'm thinking about the work talking back to me, how far that's been propelled by unconscious motivations, or unconscious memories coming to the surface. So I'm interested in what's feeding what.
- Veronica Ryan: I was listening to somebody talking about collective moments in our zeitgeist, in psychological moments in a wider context. So the pandemic is an example of this, isn't it? How we've all been experiencing different kinds of psychological states that we manage according to our backgrounds, and cultural heritage and so on, and economic facility. But there are these collective kind of psychological moments that we all experience along a spectrum.
- Dorothy Price: I think anxiety is a kind of strong theme in her work. Actually anxiety and trauma, and how then we as individuals, as humans globally, deal with anxiety and trauma. What are our mechanisms to cope with trauma sort of psychically and materially? And I think those are the things that are really kind of interesting about her work. And her work is demanding. I think her work is demanding. It demands of the viewer. And it's associative. It offers us little clues into how it might signify for you, but I think we have to also work with it to understand it as well.
- Dorothy Price: And so I think I know that for Veronica, the theories of Donald Winnicott are particularly important in telling, and of particularly this focus on childhood and traumatic experiences and incursions. And the idea of sort of transitional object for a child, and how the child externalises a sense of safety through a fixation on a specific transitional object. But what she's also interested in, I think, and in the way that Winnicott is also interested in it, is that what happens to that transitional object when the child feels safe, as the child grows up into an adult? And then what happens if trauma returns? What happens to the object? And a lot of her sculptural pieces, I think, speak to that thinking through object in relation to trauma and healing.

- Jo Baring: Along a Spectrum, the exhibition at Spike Island is her biggest exhibition to date, but she has had other residencies and exhibitions. She had a residency at The Hepworth Wakefield, and The Art House, Wakefield in 2017. And before that in 1998 to 2000, she had a residency at Tate St Ives in Barbara Hepworth's studio.
- Sarah Turner: Yeah. And we asked Veronica Ryan what it was like to engage with the figure of Barbara Hepworth and those histories of British sculpture.
- Veronica Ryan: My first experience of Barbara Hepworth was... I forget. At school in some of these books like language and sculpture, and she was one of the few artists represented. And of course, Germaine Richier and Elisabeth Frink. And I remember just at school really being interested in Barbara Hepworth at that point because we didn't see anyone else. I mean, I didn't know of any American women artists. Of course, we were just becoming more familiar with American non-white artists.
- Veronica Ryan: But I was invited to respond to Barbara Hepworth in 1998 first, and I went to visit Tate St Ives. And at that point, I hadn't really carved in marble. It was then I went to carving wood. I think I was anxious about the notion of responding to Barbara Hepworth, and how I tackled that first invitation was travelling around the landscape that she was so moved by. So I-
- Sarah Turner: So in Cornwall?
- Veronica Ryan: In Cornwall. So I got on one of these bus trips where you got tickets that took you all over the place. Travelled around St Erth and different parts of the countryside. Land's End, all the countryside going towards Land's End. And then Penrith where the quarry is. And so my feeling all the time was that I didn't feel I wanted to make work like Barbara Hepworth. It was more the life around her inspiration.
- Veronica Ryan: By the time I finished the residency at Tate St Ives, I was really interested in her overalls and what she had in her pockets. And so one of the pockets had a whisk in that she used to mix up her plaster. The whisk itself was interesting because it had some of that original plastic, which was interesting... The way it was made was very sculptural. And then she had other things. There might have been little notes on paper and little tin. And so I think it's alongside Barbara Hepworth.
- Dorothy Price: I love the way that Veronica talks about the fact that she works alongside Barbara Hepworth. She's not in her shadow. She's not influenced by her. She just uses Hepworth to think about her own making. And those are the sort of subtle genealogies and relationships

that are so often overlooked, I think, when thinking about particularly Veronica's practise, but other artists as well.

Sarah Turner: It's really interesting actually just articulating that because it makes me think we have to have a history of British art that accounts for Hepworth and Ryan together.

Sarah Turner: So that's really interesting to hear Dot talk about how he might reimagine the histories of British art and change those narratives through thinking about particular practises. And I think part of that changing narrative involves how sculpture is encountered, the kinds of exhibitions we see, and how it's publicly displayed through our national collections as well. And the kinds of institutional support that artists receive.

Jo Baring: Well that's right. It's about the role of institutions and curators in giving opportunities to artists to intervene in those ways. And Veronica's actually got an intervention at The Hepworth Wakefield at the moment in the Hepworth retrospective. So when we were up there, we spoke to Abi Shapiro, Assistant Curator at The Hepworth, to tell us a little bit more about that.

Jo Baring: Thinking about that wider context of artists who are women who make sculpture, there's a really great installational intervention by Veronica Ryan upstairs as well. And perhaps we could talk a little bit about that and the Hepworth's, as a gallery, your mission to support women sculptors.

Abi Shapiro: Yeah, absolutely. And it's one of the really exciting things that we can do in the programme, and having a museum dedicated to the legacy of a female artist is really being able to explore and support some of those ideas of what does it mean to be a female sculptor today, and what kind of legacies are possible.

Abi Shapiro: We had two commissions for this exhibition, and Veronica Ryan's piece was responding in a very personal way to the time that she had spent at Hepworth's garden. So she cast some seed pods from plants that grew in Hepworth's garden, and she's made these beautiful bronze pieces, which you probably saw kind of enveloped in fibre. And she was actually knitting those in the gallery just this week while she was installing and kind of really having a hands-on kind of way in which that was being shaped within the space, which was really nice.

Abi Shapiro: And Veronica's worked with us before. This is the second commission of her work and this kind of way in which she's bringing aspects of her own practise, and materials, and themes, and issues, but also responding to Hepworth's work. And it's just such a lovely way of

opening up Hepworth from a new angle to think about her work in a different way.

Sarah Turner: Well, as we're recording today, actually the 1st of October, Veronica Ryan's public sculpture honouring the Windrush generation has been unveiled in East London.

Jo Baring: That's right. It's a really major commission for her, isn't it? So it's made of marble, and bronze, and the work depicts fruit and vegetables. And it's the first in a series of public works dedicated to people arriving from the Caribbean between 1948 and 1971. It's a significant statement for her, isn't it? And over the last 18 months public sculpture has become hugely political. It's very much part of debate, of newspaper headlines, and it's something that we asked Veronica about how she even begins to approach such a sensitive and a personal subject for her.

Veronica Ryan: I was a bit reluctant when I was first invited to put forward ideas because I didn't want to somehow become a Windrush artist because... and it's absolutely appalling what's been happening, and people dying while they've been in this deported state. And people who were born in Britain, and because they didn't have passports being sent to countries that they've never been to in some instances. People having serious breakdowns, and so on.

Veronica Ryan: And of course my parents came to England with me when I was a baby during that 50s period. Of course, they started coming in the 40s, but there's been a longer history of Caribbean people, African people, people from different diasporas in Britain. And so I was having a lot of complicated feelings about what this meant. In the end, I felt that I could agree to be shortlisted because I was thinking about as a child going to markets with my mother to buy fruit and vegetables. So as well as Ridley Road Market, there's Portobello Road, and I think Shepherd's Bush was the other market I seem to remember. You could get some Caribbean food stamps.

Veronica Ryan: I felt that my recollections as a child shopping with my mother, and often with my sister in the pushchair, that that was where I could focus. And yeah. There are these sort of quite complicated, sort of resonances as to my choice of how I wanted to represent the community in Hackney, because at one point we lived in Haringey and then we would go on that bus that goes through to Hackney. So, yeah. It's a kind of myriad of experiences that connect up with my mom buying fruit and vegetables, and fabrics and threads.

Veronica Ryan: And of course, Ridley Road Market, my sculpture's going to be on the steps just in front of St. Augustine's Tower, which is also, I think, one of

the oldest towers in the country. So I quite like moments of containing different histories. We were talking earlier on about the past, and the present, and the future in certain ways, and different ways of evidence that people exist. And the Windrush scandal is absolutely horrific. People are still waiting to be compensated and it's just too abhorrent, really.

Veronica Ryan: And so I'm not working in a void unaware of politics, but I also think that positive representation is a way to embody one's psyche, in a sense. We were talking about psychological resonances and representation, which could help to engender a sense of confidence, and that you belong, and that there are signs and signatures of belonging. So that's some of the concerns around thinking about my fruit and vegetables.

Jo Baring: So since we've done the recordings for this episode, Veronica's fruit and vegetables, as she calls them, have had a really great critical reception. And the writer and art critic, Hettie Judah, who we interview for episode six of this series has described them as the way public sculpture should be done.

Sarah Turner: Yeah. It's interesting to think why she says that. And I think it's something to do with the way in which people are interacting with these sculptures. They're not on planes, they're on the street level. So you see kids kind of climbing all over them, people touching them, interacting with them in a way that we are not allowed to do often in galleries. So I think through sculpture, we can see these new relationships being formed with the public.

Sarah Turner: Thank you to all our contributors to today's episode. In particular, the sculptor, Veronica Ryan, and also Dorothy Price and Abi Shapiro. If you want to see any of the images we discuss in this episode, visit our Instagram feed at Sculpting Lives.

Jo Baring: Join us next time on Sculpting Lives for an episode on Gertrude Hermes. (silence) This podcast series was written and presented by Sarah Victoria Turner and Jo Baring, supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, produced by Claire Lynch with research support from Chloe Nahum.