

Veronica Ryan: 'Along a Spectrum'

Zoe Banks Gross

My first visit to a gallery since early 2020 was to see Veronica Ryan's exhibition 'Along A Spectrum', at Spike Island in Bristol. This work was created during an extended residency at Spike from 2019-2021. Situated at a former tea-packing factory in a city which toppled a statue of a slave trader during this period, it reflects the intersection of the global pandemic, the physical environment and the cultural landscape.

Ryan, a British sculptor born in Montserrat in 1956 and usually based in New York, melds parts of her life, including ash from a volcano in Montserrat and clothing she has worn, into objects. 'Along a Spectrum' includes forms cast in clay and bronze, sewn and tea-stained fabrics, and crocheted fishing line pouches filled with a variety of seeds, fruit stones and skins. Avocado pits, orange peel, and soursop fruits all feature in different ways, some undergoing transformation. Whether visibly decaying whilst held together by string, or sewn (sown) into fabric, these fruits have been dispersed. After a year of living through a period of extremely restricted movement and travel for humans, the natural world appears to continue as before; with people sidelined, migratory birds, fish or seeds on the wind have had more freedom and possibly additional ease.

Permeable and impermeable containers generate ruminations, whether or not we are aware of what we bring with us when we move house or

country. With my perspective of years of work as aquatic ecologist, and also hailing from another continent, the exhibition encouraged me to think about how ships have held visible 'goods', and about the ballast, transferring water and other species, unseen, below. Some species need intentional care and nurturing to take root, or spread, while others surprisingly thrive in a new, unknown environment. Migration changes us migrants, but also transforms the places we leave behind as well as our new homes.

Transformation in 'Along A Spectrum' is visible, through the grades of colour of tea-dyed fabric, and progressive – in the levels of decay of orange peel or through wear, for example in the honeycomb-patterned quilt, held together by straight pins, that is made of clothing Ryan wore in the eighties and nineties, embroidered with words like 'comfort', 'duvet' and 'cover'. Exploring these objects, I felt the presence of an overarching sense of care, care-full creation and making, which may have also doubled as self-care during the pandemic.

Ryan's work is well curated in the light-filled gallery. Whether hanging from the ceiling, on shelving with transparent layers, or arranged on the floor, the different angles and positions provide a variety of viewing experiences, seeing through and into pieces.

It is also a very tactile exhibit. There is a haptic focus to this work created during the last 18 months, a time in which all similar activities have either been forbidden or heavily discouraged. Re-connecting with the sense of touch is an aspect of life which everyone will need to re-learn as we shift from pandemic-driven hygiene rules.

'Along A Spectrum' considers and captures what it was like to live through 2020 and the bleak days of early 2021, giving us an opportunity to reflect on collective experiences in a more playful way.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

© Zoe Banks Gross