



View of "Veronica Ryan," 2022. Photo: Eva Herzog.

Veronica Ryan

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Veronica Ryan's many varieties of small sculpture often feel cushioned from the world. In the Turner Prize-winning artist's floor works *Memento Mori I* and *III*, both 2022, cast-bronze life-size seeds and fruit—each about the size of your hand—rested comfortably on spongy medical pillows. Quilted fabric softly encased broad beans in the wall work *Collective Moments VIII*, 2001. In *Oblong Space in the Corner*, 2022, a stack of cardboard containers kept cast-bronze mango seeds aloft, as if they were resting atop countless tiny mattresses. Each lightweight sculpture was placed idiosyncratically, whether pinned to the wall; positioned in a corner; suspended from long neon-colored crocheted cords in netted pouches; or set on shelves, circular jute mats, or directly on the floor. Rather than formally installed, the artworks felt methodically scattered, like seeds, diasporic people, or ashes—such as those from the volcanic eruption that in 1997 buried half of the Caribbean island of Montserrat, where the artist, who divides her time between the US and the UK, was born in 1956. Putting in hours of stitching, casting, or crocheting, Ryan frequently seems to protect her sculptures in handcrafted shells. Her often tabletop-size objects resolutely reject the monumental, yet they never appear disposable or frail.

The soft landings and protection Ryan provides for her artworks might tempt viewers into anthropomorphizing them, imagining the carefully positioned gathering of forty-eight

sculptures in this recent show, for instance, as a family or community. Her nonhierarchical arrangement could seem an allegory of a classless utopia composed of thriving individuals, each flourishing in its own uncrowded spot. Ryan's inclusion of body-related materials such as hairnets and bandages—the latter, in *Collective Moments I*, 2000–22, holding in place numerous square paper cards, which together form an intricate cube that is wrapped in bright-orange fabric and pink crochet—reinforces the impression of many tiny beloved bodies.

The risk of taking so symbolic an approach is that it might lead one to lose sight of the exquisite intelligence of Ryan's process. Each element—whether one of the long, dark, cast-bronze seedpods lovingly wrapped in silver thread in *Flamboyant Yam & the Cho Cho Choke*, 2022, or a cast bean gently pushed into a soft spiral of wound upholstery tape in *Collective Moments XII*, 2022—reveals an attentive eye trained over a lifetime to respond generously and imaginatively to discarded or overlooked materials. Ryan invests each sculpture with a sequence of caring acts, first turning her attention to humble natural or domestic materials (fruits and seeds, plastic bottles, packaging, fishing line), then envisioning their transformation, after which she devotes her handiwork (winding, needleworking, casting) to reinventing them. Finally, she locates for each newborn sculpture its unique place in the gallery. Among the wonders here was that artworks so replete with care and effort never felt belabored, but rather unassuming and poised.

The artist's thoughtful treatment of materials again could turn metaphorical, pointing to a way of treating people: each to be singularly respected, kept safe, and observed in their best possible light. Ryan's sculptures often harbor secrets—beans sewn into fabric, a nested cardboard box to be peered into—that, once discovered, invite viewers to lean in and be more curious. Wasteless and resourceful, her artmaking joins ecology with empathy in a shared ethics where nothing and nobody is ever carelessly discarded. Ryan's is a lap-based world-building that is patient and possible, laid down without fanfare stitch by stitch, seed by seed.

— Gilda Williams