

Researching the practice of Veronica Ryan

A talk by Maya Jagger with the Youth Collective

When you first walk into the White Gallery, in front of you, you will see a great wheel. Just to the right of that is a series of photographs. They appear to be the same, but there's something different about them. Both of these works that I've just pointed out to you, are about grief, but they explore it in very different ways. First, let's go to Veronica Ryan. Upon closer inspection, you can see there are two little girls in a garden. One is looking straight directly at us and the other is pondering something - she's looking away from the camera, lost in thought. My name is Maya Jagger, I volunteer with the Youth Collective at Leeds Art Gallery.

Lamentations in the Garden by Veronica Ryan is a series of photographs, or should I say it's a photograph that's been repeated nine times. Within each photograph, Veronica has circled around, first, her sister and herself. Primarily a sculptor, in this case she's worked with a found object that's in her possession as it's a family heirloom. We can see two girls stood in a garden. One little girl is looking at the viewer, and the other is contemplating something and she's looking into the distance and her head is turned away. Gradually she starts to paint both the twins out of the picture, very quickly. Sometimes obscuring both of the faces and other times it is a more perfect circle.

Born in 1956, she is a British artist, her family moving from capital of Plymouth, Montserrat in the Caribbean to the UK when she was an infant, now based in New York and the UK, she has surpassed the containment of her physical form and has achieved omnipresence in both cities, meaning she can work twice as hard - Just kidding - Her practice is based on previous generations, personal life and family. She was introduced to art and craft at a young age, making Christmas trees at school and finding so much joy from this activity and she still makes art to this day.

Montserrat is a tiny island just below 6,000 populace, a British Oversees territory in the Caribbean, North America. Volcanic eruptions in Plymouth between 1995-2000, left the Georgian era city in ruins. Travel, migration, diaspora, exportation, these are also themes that Veronica Ryan explores in her work. The journey of these fruits will have taken similar routes to her. The Windrush Generation. Destruction. Two-thirds of residents fleeing to the UK from the Soufrière Hills volcano, leaving 1200 people on the island by 1997.

It was during this catastrophic chain of events that Veronica was taking a residency at the Tate St Ives in Cornwall, this is where Barbara Hepworth once worked, until she tragically died. The residency gave her the space and opportunity to explore what she was feeling. I imagine she was thinking: If my parents hadn't have left and we hadn't grown up in the UK... My sister and I... What if that had been us? It can be very difficult to shake thoughts like this. They can repeat like a broken record inside your head and unless you speak to someone out loud, or you write them down or find some way of expressing how you're feeling, they can never end.

Tragically, Veronica's sister died to suicide and this left Veronica even more troubled. It was here Veronica began to reach back in time, to draw protective ring around her sister. In the documents she had left, *Lamentations in the Garden* (2000), almost as if to shield her baby sister in a cocoon from the cruel world, contain her in- side an unbreakable circle. In some religions, circles are seen as a sign of infinity, so that she could not die. Trying to change the past, grieving in the garden.

Suicide kills the ones we love and colours the way we look back on the time we shared with our loved ones. We often talk about the coronavirus crisis, but I think a lot of people are forgetting another crisis, the mental health crisis. Since the 1980s, twice as many Black men have committed suicide and that has become one of the major causes of death for Black men between the ages of 15 and 24. It's the third leading cause.

Though she graduated in the 1980s in a time of continued political upheaval between Black communities and the police - which coincided with the British Black Arts Movement - she contributed to a number of exhibitions during that time in the mid-1980s, such as *Black Women Time Now*, *The Thin Black Line* exhibition at London ICA - the title was in response to headlines in the previous decade "Black Tide Meets the Thin Blue Line" from the Daily Express and that whole chain of events that led up to it - and *From Two Worlds*, another exhibition, as she's from the Windrush Generation. Al- though she is anti-racist, she doesn't want her work to be solely defined by political la- bels.

There are many moments that have shifted and altered the practice and life of Veronica Ryan: Discovering the work of Eva Hesse, the German sculpting pioneer of Post-Minimalist art at Whitechapel Gallery, Louise Bourgeois and Alice Aycock at the Haywood Gallery and Yorkshire artists such as Barbara Hepworth have influenced her. Having a residency at The Art House in Wakefield and being exhibited at the Henry Moore Institute, shows that she keeps being brought back to Yorkshire, as we now see her exhibiting in the *Natural Encounters* exhibition at Leeds Art Gallery. She is able to connect disparate places to in a way no one else could quite do, using her experiences. She found that Cornwall made her think back to her life in Montserrat, she experienced a kind of Déjà vu.