

POLYMATH TALES

PHOTOGRAPHER | SHINGI RICE

Photographer, filmmaker, art curator, fashion designer, writer. Being a sought-after innovator in so many arts hasn't come without its fair share of personal challenges, as well as professional milestones, for **Ronan McKenzie**. In the midst of new films, new collections and new realities for her gallery space HOME, **Sebastian Cabrices** joins her at the centre of the Venn diagram to see where she's looking to next.



lacked vision or foresight for their children at any point. There was always a pen and paper available, and frequent exhibitions and museums to expand young minds.

It's January, and McKenzie already has a busy schedule. She's preparing for her next curatorial project, Friday Late at the V&A Museum, where she presented her new film. Simultaneously, she's working on a gallery exhibition and the latest collection of her fashion brand, Selasi, amongst various other ongoing photography projects. During the maelstrom of a turbulent time for HOME, her self-founded multifunctional artistic space, the creative polymath took time to catch her breath and get personal with THE FALL.

Sebastian: Hi Ronan, how are you? How has your year been going so far?

Ronan: It's been getting busier and busier. I was having a slow entry, but now things are getting a bit hectic. But it's good. I feel good.

I'm having a bit of a transitional period; focusing my time away from my gallery space and working on different projects. I'm working on a layout for the V&A and I have a show opening that I'm curating. As well as that, I'm producing a collection for the brand I have for a few stores. Then I'm also a photographer, so I have that work to do too. So, yeah, it's kind of getting busy [laughs].

Sebastian: Tell us about the transitional period you mentioned? What happened with HOME?

Ronan: I had the gallery for two years and opened it intending to create an accessible art space that would encourage people to engage in art practice. The space

With particular relish, Ronan McKenzie remembers all the languages she used to hear in a day while growing up in Walthamstow. There were many of them.

She enjoyed celebrating religious holidays; not only her own, but those of her friends as well. It always involved trying new foods and learning about different, fascinating traditions. This appeal to other cultures, and the many faces that represented them, followed McKenzie all the way through to her adult working life. It's why she loves her London hometown so much – and what initially drew her to photography. The spirit at the heart of the photographic work that started her creative journey is “documenting different people and different faces,” she says. And so, we followed.

As her journey continued, photography became just the epicentre of her creative output. She wears many hats, but not any hat. They're of the Stephen Jones kind – unique, artful, personal and beautiful. Photographer, artist/curator, fashion designer, writer, filmmaker, sometimes model and her own full-time muse. This multitude of diverse talents is rooted in her diverse upbringing in a British Caribbean home. Often, that diversity of being led to McKenzie feeling her identity was sometimes amorphous. But it was this same early search for reference points that fuelled her celebrated work in later life. Art, in all its forms, made sense of her world.

The need for artistic expansion is inherited she says. Her mother made her clothes and inspired her with her writing. Little Ronan grew up with that kind of freedom of thought as an omnipresent in her life. It taught her early on that creativity is an attitude; it's “wanting to figure things out.” Growing up without money made ‘figuring things out’ a skill unto itself, but the McKenzies never



Still Image From WATA, 2020. Film by Ronan McKenzie and Joy Yamsangile.



Photographer | Shingi Rice



opened without any funding. I put money from my commercial photography into it and, to be honest, that's what kept it running for the two years. We had some great relief moments when we collaborated with Gucci and a project with other brands last year.

But the overheads of running a physical space without any consistent income became quite crippling. I was probably pouring all the money I made into it. Towards the end of last year, I realised that it wasn't sustainable. Because of COVID and Brexit, my photo practice suffered massively. Like many others, I was doing a third of the number of jobs. Putting all my money into it was starting to impact me personally. I was putting myself in a precarious position to keep the space open and I just couldn't afford it anymore. That's why I decided to close and transition into more flexible ways of achieving the goals.

Sebastian: Really sorry to hear about the gallery. But it highlights the creative drive you've always had. Where does that come from? Take us back to growing up in Walthamstow.

Ronan: It's always difficult to explain because I grew up in London and have nothing else to compare it to, but it was good. There were great parts, and there were challenging parts. But, on the whole, I loved living in an area that was super diverse and multicultural, having friends from all over, and going to a primary school that celebrated all religious holidays. It was an environment with different languages and food from many cultures.

I had a childhood that allowed me to be myself and explore the things I was interested in. I grew up doing tap-dancing and ballet, athletics – I tried ice skating and even tried horse riding for a moment. My parents wanted to take us places and engage us in lots of activities. Not like we had lots of money when I was little, but my parents were proactive in our personal development so we always had things to do.

Sebastian: Your mother is originally from Barbados, right? I've seen a lot about your relationship with her and the projects you've included her in. How has your own personal background influenced your work?

Ronan: My mum's a really specific character. She's someone who's always giving people advice; great advice. She's really spiritual and very supportive. She believes that everything's possible if you want to make it happen. That attitude is something that's really ingrained in me – not necessarily just working hard, but not letting anyone else's limitations limit me.

My dad was born in London, but he's Jamaican and Dominican. I grew up in a British Caribbean household, which means that, for me, my identity was always kind of ambiguous, and I definitely felt I wanted to explore my own heritage more and more as I got older. Last year, I did a project in Barbados for ACNE Studios, where we did a beautiful book and a collection of my mum's writing. We were in Barbados again towards the end of last year and screened the film I shot there at the V&A at the end of February.



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if it's going to flop or not. I'll just give it a go



Still Image From WATA, Film by Roman McKenzie and Joy Yamsangie, 2020.



Photographer | Shingi Rice

Sebastian: Do your family have a creative background?

Ronan: Not particularly. They do in the sense that my parents are both very imaginative, and they both encouraged creativity a lot. But neither of them did necessarily creative jobs. They always encouraged it without necessarily doing it. We always went to things like exhibitions and galleries. In my very early life we really had no money; like, we were on benefits. So, my parents always tried to find free things to do in London. Just having that attitude and mentality, you need to be quite creative to think about what you can do with four children all under 10 for free.

Sebastian: With all of these activities, was there something specific that you were attracted to?

Ronan: I started painting when I was like 13 or 14. But, to be honest, until I was maybe 19 or 20 I wasn't fixated on any one creative pursuit. I used to love writing, and it's something I've gotten more into in the last couple of years again.

It's not like I grew up wanting to be a photographer. I was flexible, and that's probably why, at this stage, I find myself again feeling quite flexible between creative pursuits. I

love photography, but when it became commercial it stopped being fun. So, then I had to think about something else that I wanted to do. Now, with a balance of different types of creative pursuits, I feel happiest.

I've always been someone who's done lots of different things. I'm not sure necessarily where that comes from. It's not, like, a chaotic thing. It's more that if I want to try something, I'll try it without worrying if it's going to flop or not. I'll just give it a go.

Sebastian: When the work isn't commercial and you're creating for you, what does your photography tell us about how you see the world?

Ronan: I like capturing an image and, as my career and style have progressed, I understand and I'm able to better articulate what I enjoy about photos. I enjoy being able to capture a moment that's never going to happen again. I enjoy being able to bring out an energy that you can't just see because I see it through my eyes. With photography, my soul took to it, and I continued to really enjoy it.

Sebastian: As a photography enthusiast myself, and as a fashion editor, movement is an element I'm always very attentive to – the way bodies and garments work

Still Image From WATA, Film by Ronan Mckenzie and Joy Yamusangie, 2020.



together. In your images and now your films, I see a very strong emphasis on physicality and movement. Tell us about that.

Ronan: I've always loved dance. It's a really visceral expression of oneself. I think the body can say so much more than words can. And so I've always been interested in storytelling through dance and through movement. Being a photographer moving into film, I've spent a lot of time thinking about still images and split-second movements. And dancers are a really easy way to make a still image move.

It's also a really accessible way to transition from working with stills to working with movement. But the next film that I work on, I don't want to include dance because I want to challenge myself. I'm next going to work through micro-movements and body language without using dance as the ticket.

Sebastian: Of course, another way the body can tell stories is through clothing, and you're also creative director at your own fashion label, Selasi. Who did you create the label for?



Photographer: Ronan Mckenzie
 Title: Our Place
 Year: 2019

Ronan: For me. Selasi is my completely selfish project. Everything is about me [laughs]. My story, my body, my existence, how I want to dress, what I want to talk about. It's a space for me to just play.

Naturally, my photo practice is collaborative and HOME is not for me because, as much as it's me creating the space, I've created it to be accessible to others. I needed something in my life that was purely, completely, only for me and about what I liked. Anyone who engages with it understands it and wants to be part of it. But Selasi really is for me.

Sebastian: For your first collection's campaign, you chose Nadine Ijewere to shoot it and not yourself. Why?

Ronan: Because I also wanted the opportunity to be a different character on set, and I love Nadine's work. Even though our worlds are so far apart, there was something about the movement in her work and the way she collected people that I really liked. And, as a photographer, you never get to collaborate with other photographers because it's either you or them doing the job.

Sebastian: If you had to choose one amongst the many disciplines you practice – filmmaking, fashion design, photography, curating – would you be able to?

Ronan: They all serve different purposes, so I don't think I would be happy if I had to do one thing for the rest of my life! If I did have to do one thing, I would probably drop all of the others and start learning something else, like maybe cooking.

Sebastian: Do all of these disciplines inform each other? Is that why you're so comfortable in each space?

Ronan: Yeah, definitely. I think that even in my curatorial work for exhibitions. Even though it's a completely different medium, you can still see a specific perspective. One of the reasons I'm so comfortable being multidisciplinary is that I know that I'm at the base of everything. So, it doesn't matter if I suddenly decide I want to open a café, or if I decide I want to, I don't know, do something totally outside of what I've already done. I'll still be at the base of it. I don't think I would ever feel comfortable closing myself in because I'm naturally someone who just needs to be free.

Sebastian: With that kind of freedom, are you now seeing a shift in representation in the creative industries for black and non-white culture – especially in the mainstream media?



Ronan: I think so, yes. Since 2020 we've seen an opening, but a lot of the infrastructure that was gatekeeping everything is still very much there and in play – even if it's disguised with a couple of people of colour at the forefront. HOME not being able to find support is a good example of that. Yes, people are willing to throw money for a second, but was there really any long-term, sustainable support? Institutionally, things are changing slowly; and in fashion things are happening. At Browns, they have Browns Focus for example, where they include newer designers, and many of them are BIPOC. Even the career that I've had as a photographer, if this had been 20 years ago being a woman photographer, I don't know if I would have been able to have the same career.

So, things are moving forwards quite rapidly. It's just that a lot more needs to be done for it to exist in 20 years. It's great people support artists and designers, but the industry loves to talk about how amazing that is. Nobody loves talking about how difficult it is and how we can actually sustain these things. I guess I want to make sure that the infrastructure is in place to have lasting change so my children don't have to deal with some of the things I do.

Sebastian: Given the difficulties you've faced, where do you want to get to in the future, professionally and personally?

Ronan: To be honest, this is the first time in my life I haven't had a very clear goal of where I want to go. I've learned so much in my career, and I've gained loads of valuable skills. I'm learning daily which parts of my practice and my life bring me the most joy. This year, to be honest, I really want to explore and experiment. There's so much I haven't done yet, and there are so many things I think I might find enjoyable. What drives me is finding more space to play, both within my practice and outside of it. And, I have a gut feeling I'm going to do just that. So, let's see.

Sebastian: In your past explorations, what are some of the things you discovered about yourself that you would want people to know about Ronan, the person?

Ronan: I would love people to remember that I'm really just a normal person trying to do my best. That I'm out here trying and learning as I go along, and I really don't have all the answers. I don't know what

What drives me is finding more space to play, both within my practice and outside of it. And, I have a gut feeling I'm going to do just that. So, let's see.

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I'm doing most of the time, but I'm trying. I've never been shy to say that I'm just trying, but it's something people often forget. I would also like people to know that I enjoy fish fingers at home just much as going to really fancy places. And that whenever I feel nervous I call my mum, you know?

Sebastian: We do know, yes. Thank you, Ronan. Before we let you go, tell us what you have coming up on your plate.

Ronan: I have two exhibitions on until the end of June: Close to HOME at the Royal Academy of Arts and To be Held at the Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate, where I'll be showing my new film and a chair I designed with Jobe Burns. Also, my partner and I have this huge list of films that we want to watch. So, I want to fill my plate with all that right now. The rest, I'm open.

@ronanksm

This page, left: Photographer: Ronan Mckenzie
Title: Ebony Horse Club
Publication/Project: More Or Less Magazine
Year: 2022

This page, right: Photographer: Ronan Mckenzie
Title: Akuac
Publication/Project: WSJ Magazine
Year: 2020

Opposite page: Photographer: Ronan Mckenzie
Publication/Project: Vogue US
Year: 2020

