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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art Review | Rachel Whiteread

Hidden Corners of the Neighborhood



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

"Place (Village)" (2006-8), by Rachel Whiteread.

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BOSTON — In signature works like "Ghost" and "House," the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread made plaster casts of the interiors of London homes. Monumental yet ethereal, these works addressed Minimalist sculpture with polite deference while striking up bold conversations about urban preservation. ("House," a public-art commission

made in a condemned East London terrace house and exhibited in situ, was controversial enough that a local council destroyed it after just a few months.)

Ms. Whiteread's latest project is not a single dwelling but an entire village: an installation of some 200 vintage dollhouses lighted from within and arranged on stepped pedestals in a darkened room. "Place (Village)," the centerpiece of a mini-survey devoted to the artist at the Museum of Fine Arts here, may strike the artist's admirers as a bizarre and kitschy departure. Viewers who have never seen one of her room-size casts won't really get a sense of her work from this piece, which is making its United States debut here.

Still, the exhibition, which includes drawings and a few smaller sculptures, reveals the more emotive side of an artist who can come off as somber and humorless. Standing in the midst of "Village," you have the sensation of floating over the rooftops of Chagall's Vitebsk.

This is odd, considering that Bruce Nauman is the name that usually comes to mind when one looks at Ms. Whiteread's art. Mr. Nauman's 1965 sculpture "Space Underneath My Chair" has been described as the inspiration for Ms. Whiteread's entire career. Her 1995 installation "Untitled (100 Spaces)," an inverted-Minimalist field of multicolored resin casts, acknowledged the debt directly.

Ms. Whiteread, who in 1993 became the first woman to receive the Turner Prize, has a strange relationship with the so-called Y.B.A. (Young British Artists) generation, which came to broad attention in that decade. In both her work and her persona she shies away from the confessional and confrontational manner of Tracy Emin and Sarah Lucas, to name two contemporaries.

It's instructive to compare Ms. Whiteread's "Cabinet XI," in this exhibition, with one of Damien Hirst's medicine cabinets. Mr. Hirst's sculptures are Pop wunderkammers, brimming with brand-name pharmaceuticals in glossy packaging. Ms. Whiteread's is

filled with plaster casts of boxes, all unlabeled, in the yellow-and-gray palette of a Morandi painting.

The appeal of her art is that it grounds Minimalism in the world of everyday things. A cube might look like one of Donald Judd's “specific objects,” but it represents the inside of an ordinary cardboard box.

The prosaic nature of her art assumed a quiet dignity in “The Nameless Library” (2000), her Holocaust memorial in the Judenplatz in Vienna. Only the edges, rather than the spines, of books are visible in this inside-out reading room.

In a sense Ms. Whiteread is up to her usual tricks in “Place (Village)” — reversing interior and exterior space through lighting instead of through plaster casting. The dollhouses are devoid of furniture, but many have wallpaper, carpets, trompe l’oeil curtains and even artwork, echoing the details sometimes found on the surfaces of Ms. Whiteread’s cast rooms.

The variety of architecture represented in the installation, a semi-credible English suburb, ranges from Georgian mansions to Tudor cottages to Modernist fortresses. Some of the houses are handmade, others manufactured. All were acquired secondhand in antique shops or at Web sites like eBay over the last two decades.

The installation, which has been exhibited at the Hayward museum in London, the Donnaregina Museo d’Arte Contemporanea in Naples and the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo in Málaga, Spain, has been uniquely configured for each location. (In Italy the houses were arranged in tidy rows.)

As an outgrowth of a personal collection, “Village” feels proprietary in a way that Ms. Whiteread’s cast sculptures do not. And it’s impossible to look at all those empty houses, however miniaturized, without thinking about the current epidemic of foreclosures. More than any other Whiteread sculpture since “House,” “Village” acknowledges class tension.

“Village” is also interesting in that it simultaneously encourages and thwarts voyeurism, inviting viewers to peer into one empty room after another. Eventually it turns the tables: the illuminated windows become hundreds of Lilliputian eyes.

In two adjacent galleries, six cast sculptures offer a fragmentary look at Ms. Whiteread’s better-known body of work. Some of these are extraordinarily subtle: plaster casts of doors propped against the wall briefly register as the real thing, until you notice that the paneling is raised and the hinges are hollowed out. More eye-catching is “Untitled (Amber Floor)” (1993), in which a rubber cast of a section of wood floor snakes its way from wall to ground like a Robert Morris felt piece.

Drawings from all stages of Ms. Whiteread’s career round out the show. The earliest are studies for sculptures, made on graph paper with felt-tip pen and, notably, correction fluid. The most recent, studies for “Village,” combine gouache, pencil and collaged images of different types of houses. These mostly forgettable works on paper confirm that Ms. Whiteread is not a draftsman by nature; she thinks in terms of volumes, not lines.

The scattering of drawings and sculptures does provide some context for the strangeness of “Village.” Walking from the sculpture galleries into this installation is like visiting the home of a friend with immaculate Modernist taste and stumbling on a hidden room filled with knickknacks.

“Rachel Whiteread” continues through Jan. 25 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 465 Huntington Avenue; (617) 267-9300, mfa.org.