

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art review: 'Rachel Whiteread Drawings' at UCLA Hammer Museum

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As a sculptor, Rachel Whiteread has pretty much taken a single, elegant idea and turned it around and around in innumerable ways, both expected and not. Using plaster, resin, concrete and other materials, she mostly makes casts of domestic objects or, more provocatively, casts of the empty space around them.

In the first gallery at the UCLA Hammer Museum, where a retrospective exhibition of the British artist's drawings recently opened, two eccentrically shaped and interlocking blocks made of deep maroon rubber and polystyrene only slowly reveal themselves for what they are -- the vacant spaces beneath an ordinary table and chair. Their absent legs, seat, top and other features provide the limits of the 1994 sculpture's outer form.

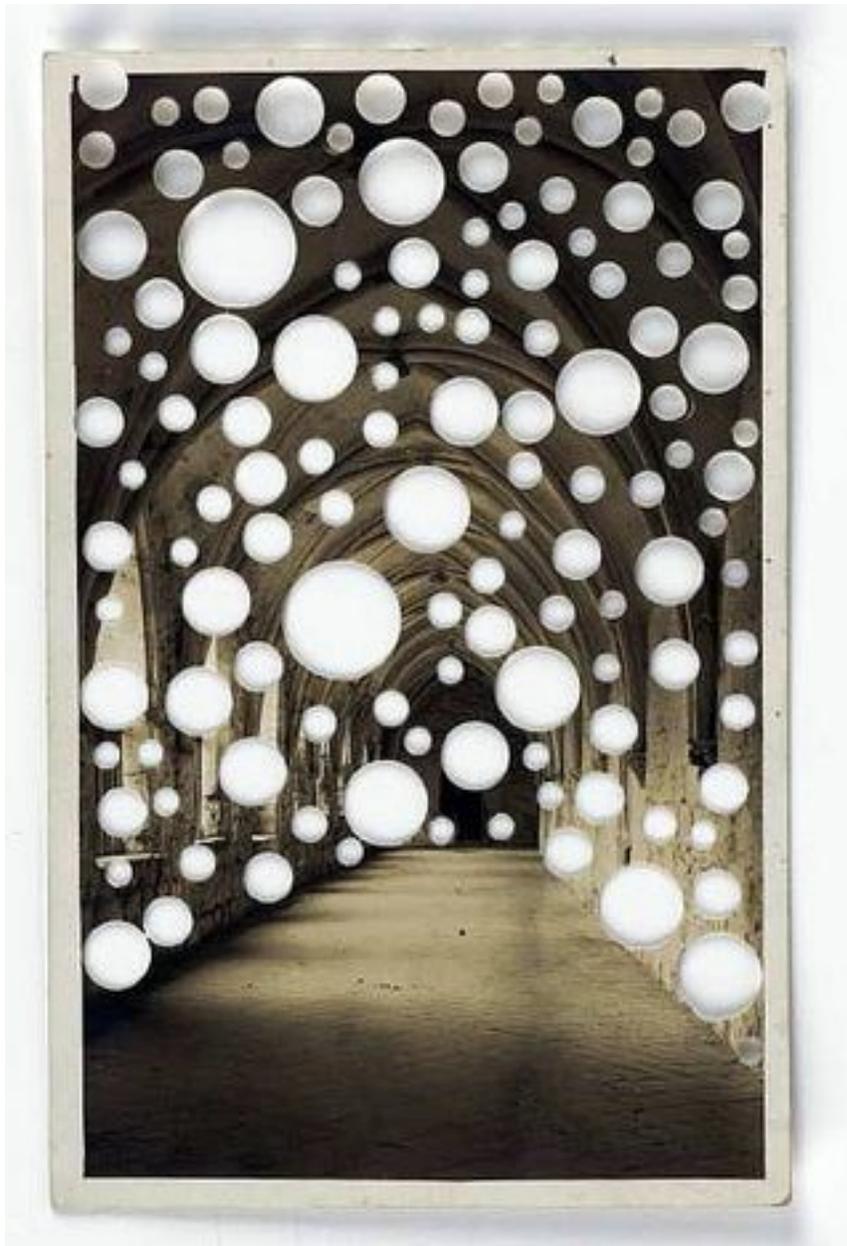
The way the "chair space" slides out from within the "table space," like some extruded machine-part, is vaguely unsettling. Rarely has "nothing" looked so obdurate and brooding.

Some have carped that the idea is not really Whiteread's but Bruce Nauman's. Yes and no. In 1965, when the British artist was a toddler, the über-Postminimalist made an iconic concrete "Cast of the Space Beneath My Chair." So, yes -- because artists (good ones, anyway) pick up ideas from other good artists as part of art's social conversation. And no -- because Whiteread has transformed the Nauman precedent into something distinctive.

That sense of mutability -- of inconstancy and inescapable, unremitting change -- is in fact a central feature of her best work. It's not easy to embody changeability in sculpture. But that's the quality that comes through loudest and clearest in Whiteread's assembled drawings from the last 20 years, drawings she has almost never shown before now.

Start with subject matter. Doors, windows, light switches, door knobs, keyholes, stairways -- domestic objects (or spaces) associated with transition are common. These are also static objects that await active use, at which point their form will change. Pointedly, a series evoking a fragment of kitchen table shows the old-fashioned folding kind, rather than something immovable and sturdy.

Other subjects are contemplative -- a bathtub for soaking, the decorative plaster ceiling-rose one is unlikely to stare at except while daydreaming on the couch (or in a work of art), or a bed where the shift from waking to sleeping occurs. One group focuses on bookshelves, with row upon row of tightly ordered volumes awaiting readers.



Whiteread often draws on graph paper, starting out with pencil and ink and filling space with varnish, watercolor or, paradoxically, white correction fluid -- the kind used to erase printing errors. The graph, mechanistic and businesslike, establishes a resolutely two-dimensional ground that Whiteread's style of drawing further accentuates. A drawn door simply follows the printed lines. A mattress is a rectangle with curved corners and little circles for quilting buttons. The zigzag planks of a wood parquet floor are a series of lines that connect the dots.

We're not talking Rembrandt here, merely notational rendering of contours. But neither are they dry mechanical diagrams.

Whiteread's graphic style is akin to that of other artists, such as Robert Gober and Robert Therrien. The addition of fluid color gives each work much of its interest -- puddled brown acrylic on a pale yellow mattress, for example, suggesting sweat or other body fluids, which ooze out onto the grid; or brown varnish washes that record the space around an old-fashioned bathtub, which adds an aura of rust, prolonged use and time's decay.

Other drawings are collages made with photographs. A picture of a cast-concrete double staircase, which seems to be turning itself inside-out, is further stressed by a dense network of pencil lines extending outward like the tensile construction rebar hidden inside the concrete.

These collages are related to a group of 72 postcards, some of which show the interior of a Gothic sacred space. Whiteread punched dozens of holes in the postcard; light filters into the actual object you're looking at, not unlike the way Gothic design allowed light into the heavy, masonry architecture pictured in the photograph.

The exhibition, organized by curator Allegra Pesenti at the Hammer's Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, is clearly laid out. Each room includes at least one sculpture or a maquette for a monumental work. (Don't miss the maquette for Vienna's remarkable Holocaust memorial, which casts the insides of bookshelves -- the part where the books' pages, not the spines, abut the shelves' rear wall -- to create a stunning, ghostly metaphor for thousands of anonymous but inhabited lives.) Drawings in the room are conceptually related to the nearby sculpture, which allows a visitor to witness different forms of similar artistic conceptions.



The exhibition's sole weakness is its size. With more than 120 drawings -- plus 10 sculptures and maquettes, five artist's notebooks, 72 altered postcards and more than 235 "inspirational" objects (twigs, shoes, twine, crystal knife rests, rocks, etc.) that Whiteread has accumulated in her studio -- it's way too big. Since the artist rarely allows her drawings to be displayed, the urge to show as many as possible was no doubt strong. But this is too much of a good thing, especially as Whiteread -- who is just 46 -- is an artist of narrow range. Given repetitiousness, the show would have gained focused power with judicious editing.

The drawings are not studies for the sculptures. Nor do they seem like fully resolved, independent works of art. Instead, they follow a ruminating mind moving parallel to the finished sculptures for which Whiteread is now so well known.

Some terrific sculptures are on view. The best include a mattress that slumps against a wall, cast from rubber and high-density foam in a deep, ruddy amber hue; and a glass-topped, six-part plaster cast of the space around an old bathtub. One is a discarded platform for eros, slumber and rejuvenation, a fossil salvaged from despair, while the other radiates the mysterious presence of an ancient sovereign's tomb.

■ Christopher Knight