

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Rachel Whiteread: 'I've done the same thing over and over'

As an exhibition of drawings by the Turner Prize winner Rachel Whiteread opens at Tate Britain, John Walsh meets the artist in her studio and tries to get to the bottom of her methods and obsessions

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EPA

'Embankment' fills Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2005 as part of the Unilever series

The Turner Prize-winning Rachel Whiteread makes air solid. She takes empty interiors and gives them presence and heft. She gives the inside of things a life we never knew they possessed. Shakespeare said a poet "gives to airy nothingness/ A local habitation and a name". Ms Whiteread gives to airy nothingness a heap of pathos, weight and human significance.

Her best-known works are probably *Ghost* (1990) and *House* (1993). For the former, she made a plaster cast of a room in an old house, revealing its back-to-front contours, its inside-out fireplace and doorknob, its details of wallpaper and wainscoting. In the latter, she took a whole Victorian terrace house – 193 Grove Road in Mile End, east London – and cast its interior in plaster. The result was a physical monster that played mind-games with the public who came to see it: it was both a massive sculpture and a 3-D void, a cosy home denatured into a brutal plaster cliff. It won the Turner Prize.

The plaster queen went on to triumph in other cities and other media – the resin *Water Tower* on a rooftop in New York, the *Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna – before returning to London to fill the vast *Turbine Hall* of Tate Modern with a cityscape of 14,000 white cardboard boxes. "Generous and brave," cooed *The Guardian*. "Meritless gigantism," sneered Brian Sewell in the *Evening Standard*.

Ms Whiteread, born in 1963, was one of the "brat pack" of art-school mavericks known as the Young British Artists, or YBAs. Rachel proved a disappointment in some respects, failing to engage in picturesque misbehaviour like the others. She didn't show up drunk and tearful on BBC2 (like Tracey Emin), swear profusely (like Jake and Dinos Chapman), perform dubious physical tricks on her body at the Groucho Club (Damien Hirst) or combine canvases of saintly portraiture with lumps of raw elephant dung (Chris Ofili). She just got on with it. Her private life remained private (apparently it never occurred to her to embroider the names of her former boyfriends on to a tent) and her public pronouncements mostly stuck to art.

Some clues about her working methods can be found at a new exhibition, *Rachel Whiteread: Drawings*, which opens next week at Tate Britain. The 80-odd drawings from her "personal studio archive" are supplemented by sketchbooks and collages, and offer (says the Tate), "a fascinating and intimate insight into the creative processes behind Whiteread's practice, as well as existing as independent works in their own right". To the untrained eye, they resemble bits of artistic thinking aloud, try-outs, doodles, squiggles, tiny ideas elaborated to epic proportions. The sense that you're being invited

to inspect somebody's cork-board ephemera is compounded by the fact that the exhibition features found objects from her studio – stones, twigs, junkshop items. It sounds less like the revelation of an artistic soul than a collection of Stuff Rachel's Collected Over the Years.

I went to visit her at the studio in Bethnal Green. Anxious to make an impression, I bounded up the stairs to her lair, tripped over my new winklepickers and went flying. My briefcase described a perfect arc through the air and crashed into a drawing-board, while my 15 stone of flesh landed, with a sickening crack, on the outstretched fingers of my right hand.

"Goodness," said Whiteread coolly, "that was an entrance."

I shook her hand, gingerly (my ring finger stuck out sideways at an obscene angle) and took in her artfully straggled auburn hair, her working wardrobe of jeans and jumper, and her struggle to hide a smile at my discomfiture behind a mask of professionalism.

Ignoring my throbbing digit, I asked about the drawings. Don't they rather resemble doodles? "But that's what they are. I did a scholarship in Berlin just after the Wall came down, and had this enormous beautiful apartment with floors of interlocking wood. I used to draw them, starting one doodle on the left side of the page, starting another on the right-hand corner, and making them meet in the middle. I was playing with a single unit to see what happened with it."

What relation do the drawings bear to the finished sculptures? "They're part of the process. I use drawing to worry through the work. They're for teasing ideas out, for thinking about composition and colour, without actually making things. They're playful."

Choosing 80 exhibits from several hundreds of drawings over a 25-year career required a collaborator of tact and objectivity. "A friend of mine, Lorcan O'Neill, who runs a gallery in Rome, sat me at dinner next to Allegra Pesenti [curator at the Hammer Museum in LA] and we talked. At first I wasn't quite sure, because Allegra was trained in

Renaissance drawings and that didn't feel right. But we worked well together. It's an incredibly personal thing. For me, every drawing is a memory, connected to specific things in my life, and it's difficult to put them out there in the world. It's like going through your diary."

She draws inspiration from postcards, which she hunts down in backstreet shops during her travels. She likes to muck about with them. Among the images, one resembles a neo-classical cloister (Rome? Oxford?) into which Whiteread has introduced scores of circles, like balls bouncing between the pillars. "No, they're not balls," she says kindly, "They're punched holes. What I'm doing here is trying to make a space disappear."

Yes but why (one wants to shout) do you want to make space disappear? Why this compulsion to solidify the air between objects? I'd striven to identify what lay behind her curious obsession. I thought I'd found it when I read that, as a teenager, she worked at Highgate cemetery, putting the lids back on damaged coffins. Coffins! Of course! Because what's inside a coffin but the presence of death which is therefore also an absence...

"This story about Highgate has been blown out of all proportion," she says calmly. "Yes, I went there when I was young. All the kids were fascinated by Highgate cemetery. We'd go in at night and terrify ourselves. It was a very interesting and spooky place. And I tried to clear up the graveyard so people could use it. I chopped down trees, I helped stand things up but I wasn't literally getting inside graves."

Didn't she (I persist) derive any creative impulse from being surrounded by plaster saints? "I wouldn't say I was morbid," she says, pleasantly. "Just interested in the place and the history."

Her own history began in Muswell Hill, London, where she was born in 1963, the youngest of three sisters (the other two were twins). It was "a nice place to grow up, with parks at the top and bottom of the hill," but, after leaving for college, she never returned. Her father, a geography teacher, died in 1989 while she was at art school, and

her mother moved to Stoke Newington. An artist herself, she was a big influence on Rachel. "She had a studio, she was always making works – began as a painter and was working with computers when she died." Both parents were abruptly reactive to natural beauty. "My father was very interested in man's effect on the landscape. Whenever we went for drives when I was a child, somebody'd shout, 'Stop!' and jump out to take photographs."

She began her artistic experiments early. "When I was at the Slade, I made pieces with hot-water bottles, filling them with water and sewing them inside pillowcases and things. They'd look like clothes, but also like pregnant women or vulnerable men with their genitals hanging out under their shirts. I always had that interest in filling something up and making it change its essence, but later on I figured out what kind of materials to use."

Discovering plaster was a revelation. "I've used plaster for 20-odd years, often dental plaster, for casting large pieces. It's delicate – more like stone when it's hardened. Some plaster will take on colours – if you're casting the underside of a table, it'll take colour from the table and make a kind of fresco on its surface."

Had she ever been a conventional sculptor, in marble and wood and bronze? "No – when I was at Brighton, I made paintings at first, but got frustrated with the edge of the canvas. For my degree show I cast bits of old drainpipe and squashed cans. At the Slade, I tried making sculptures that you could sit in a room, but I always preferred things which leant against walls or went behind a door – things that had some connection with a room, rather than being free-standing."

Her first exhibition was at the Carlyle Gallery in 1987. "There was a cast of a wardrobe interior, the cast of a dressing-table, the cast of the space under a bed and the cast of a hot-water bottle. Four kinds of elements." A smile. "Since my career started, I've basically done the same thing over and over again. I mean that in a positive way. I think that's what good art is – the same process and research, but refining your strategy."

The first thing she cast was a spoon. "When I was at Brighton [Polytechnic College of Art], the artist Richard Wilson came down and brought this casting workshop with him. It was like a mini-foundry, in which you could melt metal. I pressed a spoon into the sand, then poured metal into it. The spoon was no longer a spoon, because the spoon part was filled up. It had lost its spooniness. I wouldn't say it was my 'Eureka!' moment, but I definitely thought, 'That's interesting – if I do something as slight as that, it changes its essence'..."

Given your fascination with interiors, I venture, it's surprising you never explored the human body. "I do all the time, with everything I do – with chairs, beds, everything." I meant, I said, body cavities. Wouldn't it be interesting to cast the interior of a stomach, an oesophagus or a vagina? A wrinkle of the nose. "I think these ideas are explored through my collection of objects. But it's just not my thing to cast vaginas. I'm interested in the human body and how it is in the world."

As if to illustrate her interest, she glanced at my traumatised finger. It wasn't doing too well. It had swollen to the size of a zucchini. "Maybe you should get that ring off," she said. "Would you like some soap?" I refused. I didn't want to give her my signet ring. In five minutes, the hole would be solid.

Ghost, her breakthrough piece in 1990, wasn't achieved (as many people assume) by pouring liquid plaster down a chimney and letting it set. "It took three months, and was done by hand, by getting a bowl of plaster and flicking it on to the wall, gradually building it up. It's not solid, it's just a skin, a plaster-cast of the surface. It doesn't even have a ceiling." How did she present the idea to potential sponsors? "When I was trying to raise money to make it, I used to say I was 'mummifying the air inside the room'. I still think that's a good description."

House was more complex. "In House, we took a mould of the interior, cast it and then removed the house, brick by brick." It sat by the side of the road, an unprecedented expression of inside-out reality ("a strange and fantastical object," The Independent called it) until it was demolished by Tower Hamlets Borough Council on 11 January

1994. "One particular councillor," she recalls, "said it was made for the chattering classes, and had no place in Tower Hamlets. The guy was ridiculous. It was his 15 minutes of fame. He wanted to stand on a soapbox and shout."

Along with winning the Turner Prize, Whiteread also won the K Foundation's lucrative award for the Worst British Artist. "They threatened to burn the £40,000 if I didn't accept it. I spent two months working out how to give it away, then went out for a slap-up dinner and got very drunk."

This century, her work has moved on from plaster to resin (Inverted Plinth in Trafalgar Square, a ghostly upside-down version of the plinth it's balanced on) and concrete (for the Holocaust Monument in Vienna's Judenplatz, commissioned in remembrance of the Austrian Jews killed in the Holocaust and, according to Whiteread, "a minefield"). Her Turbine Hall installation, Embankment, reminded the public of her eye for a vivid installation.

It's touching to hear that the 14,000 polyethylene casts of white cardboard boxes that crammed the hall were a memory of a box in her mother's house. "The one I'm talking about was a small box of Sellotapes, one I remember seeing as a kid. It had TOYS written on it and crossed out, and BOOKS crossed out underneath, and XMAS DECORATIONS crossed out. I wouldn't say the box itself made me do the Turbine Hall, but it was in my mind." The result was stunning: a bizarre, alien landscape of solid boxy shapes. It's unsurprising to hear that she was inspired by the conflagration of one man's belongings at the end of Citizen Kane, and by a trip to the Arctic wastes.

She travels a lot these days, in search of inspiration. "I'm fascinated by volcanos, fantastic landscapes, weird and wonderful elemental places." And her imagination is getting wilder. Asked to suggest a design for an "Angel of the South", she proposed "a mountain made from recycled spoils from the area, and a house, cast from one of the surrounding buildings, on the top. I wanted to make it like a journey with a fairy-tale castle. But it wasn't a goer. They wanted more of a one-liner..."

It's difficult to connect the modest, commonsensical, dryly amusing Ms Whiteread with the heavy lifting, plaster-casting, air-solidifying, essence-changing, mass-producing and memorial-building that fills her creative life, and makes her perhaps the most continually successful (and well-received) of all the YBAs. But what her works share is a direct appeal to the viewer's emotions. "The reason my work has affected people over the years," she says, "is because it draws people's attention to their lives and the things in their lives. There's a certain amount of humility that goes with that."

We got up to say goodbye. She glanced at my broken finger. "That looks terrible, John," she said. "Can I get you something for it?" How about a plaster, I thought. You could make a cast round the outside. My right hand would be an original Whiteread. It'd be worth a fortune in a few years' time...

'Drawings' is at Tate Britain, London from 8 September to 16 January (020 7887 8888; Tate.org.uk/britain). 'Rachel Whiteread: Drawings' by Allegra Pesenti is published by Prestel, £29.99 (Prestel.com)