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## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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First impressions: Rachel Whiteread with one of the exhibits in her new show, Detached GETTY IMAGES

# A LESSON IN HOW TO THINK INSIDE THE BOX

Rachel Whiteread first won acclaim for her sculpture of a house's interior. Two decades on, a new exhibition shows she is still a formidable artist, albeit a rather unemotional one, says **Adrian Hamilton**

**R**achel Whiteread is an artist whose sculptures and installations always draw you in. At first you look at them because they look familiar yet disjuncted, then you peer closer to work out what it is that makes them different and finally you step back to formulate your own reactions. Indeed, the title of one of her latest works on show at the Gagosian Gallery is called *LOOK, LOOK, LOOK*. It's in the form of three window imprints, cast in resin and hung from the wall. They represent glass but are neither clear nor colourless. They are rigid but suggest mobility, abstract but also representational. The effect is classical in its lines yet modern in its material.

It is now 20 years since Whiteread astounded the art world, and the media,

with her plaster sculpture of the moulded interior of an entire terrace house about to be demolished in the East End of London. *House*, as it was simply called, was one of those rare works that changed the way people thought about three-dimensional artwork. By making empty space into something solid and by recording surfaces from the inside it did everything by implication. Air was made solid, "mummified" as she called it, and the human imprint reflected in its surface.

The subsequent demolition of the gigantic sculpture by the local council only made its impact the greater. Here was a YBA (Young British Artist) who was not just challenging but also significant. One of the few of her generation who committed herself to public art as well as private practice, she became almost overnight a figure on

the international stage. About to celebrate her 50th birthday on 20 April, Whiteread is still ploughing the furrow of inside-out sculpture. Her concerns with space, with the memory of habitation and with the illusions of three-dimensional form have evolved but not fundamentally altered. The Gagosian Gallery selection of recent works includes three concrete casts of the insides of sheds: *Detached 1*, *Detached 2* and *Detached 3*, one of them with a triangular roof, two with slightly sloping roofs. In a sense they're not much different from *Ghost*, her first major sculpture from 1990, which cast the inside of a whole room from North London in plaster.

The material this time is grey concrete. Where the earlier work recorded the marks of the inhabitants in traces of wallpaper, paint and wear, the sheds

offer up little of those who might have occupied them. Instead, other than the imprints of door, windows, locks and shelf posts, they stand as solid punctuation marks in the Gallery room as they could and have in landscape.

The effect is forceful, monumental even, but also ambiguous. The shed is the most ordinary of human structures, and also a solitary one, a place where a man or a woman might retreat to craft an object or prepare for gardening. They say something about work but also about isolation. Unlike with *Ghost* and *House* however, you are not involved in the life lived within, but remain an outsider. They are about form not spirit.

With her works in resin, Whiteread is both more subtle and more giving. A series of double-sided casts of doors, called after the time period in which

the original wooden doors were made, *circa 1610 (I)*, *circa 1760 (II)*, *circa 1858 (I)* and *circa 1860 (II)* have been made by taking impressions of both sides and then pouring the resin in between to make a solid slab, slightly coloured blue, green and amber. Leaning them against the wall deprives them of the

**"THAT'S WHAT GOOD ART IS. THE SAME PROCESS AND RESEARCH BUT ALWAYS REFINING YOUR STRATEGY"**

sense of partition, a gateway between spaces. Making them translucent on the other hand gives them a feeling of possibility and openness, while the imprint of cross bars and locks attests to their human origin. As studies in the conflicting resonance of sculpture they are quite captivating.

As indeed are a series of collages consisting of silver leaf, cardboard, celluloid and graphite stuck on geometrically lined paper, each containing differently coloured celluloid at the centre: blue, violet, green, yellow and amber. In a way they hark back to Whiteread's original student projects made of broken pipes, squashed cans and Sellotape. Materials and mundane objects have always fascinated her. But the compositions here are much more studied, using flattened boxes to give depth as well as shape to the material, a sense of the used object made abstract.

Least successful are the small mundane objects with the most self-conscious titles. *Some are abject objects (I)* and *(II)* are ordinary times, food cans, a piece of bone, an iron ring, given significance by being silver-leafed and placed in contradiction to each other.

It's a form of sculptural doodling magnified through coating that has become something of a cliché. It's a century since Duchamp set it all in motion and it has surely run its course.

Not that Whiteread would apologise for this. Of all artists, she is the least interested in making personal statements or novelty. Indeed she is quite open about the constancy of her formal concerns. "Since my career started," she told *The Independent* at the time of her Tate exhibition of drawings in 2010, "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." If that is the case, then the works on display at the Gagosian suggest a growing interest in light and in texture as a means of exploring the complexities of art.

Melancholic and introspective are the adjectives often used of her work. That is obviously true in the sense that, if you invert the relationship between space and solid matter, you surround the object with a space that emphasises its solitariness. But, unlike Giacometti who used space as a comment on humanity, it doesn't seem to me that Whitehead is much concerned with mood or atmosphere. Her real interests are with form and the possibilities of art itself.

It has made her into a formidable sculptor, one of Britain's best, but not an emotional one. "Detached" could be a title applied to the artist as much as her sheds.

*Rachel Whiteread: Detached, Gagosian Gallery, London WC1 (020 7841 9960, gagosian.com) to 25 May*