

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Telegraph

### Rachel Whiteread, Gagosian Gallery, London, review

**Turner Prize-winning artist Rachel Whiteread's new show at the Gagosian Gallery highlights how she transforms building structures we wouldn't look at twice into minimalist sculptures, says Richard Dorment**

Richard Dorment



Rachel Whiteread turned 50 last week. Is that young or old? It sounds ancient if you associate her with the YBAs (Young British Artists), but makes her a mere sprout if you think of her as the youngest member of that extraordinary generation of sculptors who blazed across the 1980s like Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, and Anish Kapoor. Either way, she is high on any list of the most important artists to emerge in Britain in the 1990s.

That Whiteread is detached from both developments in recent British art is central to my understanding of what she does. On the one hand her work has a strong formal dimension – a concern for materials, process, texture, shape, scale and colour that you don't find in the work of artists who make their own lives and personalities the subject of their art. But on the other hand, her casts of architectural spaces or ordinary objects of domestic use are anything but abstract and often come freighted with meaning.

Which is one of several reasons why the title of her show of new work at Gagosian – Detached – is so apt. As Marcel Duchamp first showed with his readymades, to detach an ordinary object from its utilitarian purpose is to reveal its formal abstract qualities. This is exactly what Whiteread does when she removes doors, windows, bathtubs and sinks from their original context and primary function, casts them in concrete, plaster or resin, and exhibits them in an art gallery.

When Whiteread casts an ordinary garden shed in concrete she transforms a structure we wouldn't look at twice in our back garden into a minimalist sculpture. Because the casting process turns recesses into protrusions and vice versa, it allows us to see the underlying geometric patterns on the shed's exterior. The three windows are easy to see as three blank rectangles while clapboard slats separated by regular intervals read as vertical and diagonal bands within a satisfying formal composition.

But in fundamental ways Whiteread's work has little to do with the minimalist aesthetic of Donald Judd or Richard Serra. Her plaster casts of ordinary bathtubs and sinks, for example, are somehow imbued with traces of the people who once used them. The superb memorial she created in Vienna in memory of Jews who died in the Holocaust takes the form of a library that symbolises the irreparable loss to the world not just of Jewish lives, but of Jewish culture and learning. One of the reasons it is so compelling is that its blank, lifeless surface seems to suck light from the atmosphere around it.

And there is no more joyless work of art I know than House, the now-demolished cast of an ordinary terraced house that she made in London's East End in 1993. Though monumental in scale and an object of staggering visual complexity, its huge emotional resonance had less to do with its abstract qualities than with where and when it was made. For the house from which Whiteread made the cast was one of many in the area then being destroyed in the name of urban renewal. Rightly or wrongly, residents of the East End accused the Conservative government of marginalising the working class and eroding its traditional way of life. House was fiercely and blatantly political in a way that minimalist art isn't supposed to be.

For me, the most successful works in her new show are the casts in resin Whiteread makes of doors and windows. As in her series of garden sheds, the first things we notice are the geometric grids in which squares and rectangles are framed within larger rectangles, creating a play between positive and negative space. But unlike any of the concrete pieces, these works almost quiver as you stand in front of them. Resin is a translucent material that catches and imprisons light, dematerialising form and creating the illusion that we can see through the door or the window, when what we are really seeing is the fathomless, depthless space between the front of the sculpture and the wall it is propped up against.

I'd have said that Whiteread comes closer in these works to pure abstraction, except for one thing. In order to maintain the balance between form and content, she provides us with the information that a door was made in 1760 or 1860. Like people, buildings and objects have a past. The way they look is inseparable from the particular place and period when they were made. It was only then that I paid attention to the way she uses touches of the palest possible rose and light green to colour each of these new works.

Somehow the delicacy of the colour and the translucency of the material contribute to a wave of sadness I feel in front of them. It's as if an undertaker had skilfully applied cosmetics to a corpse, or like looking at sepia photographs of people you never knew.