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**Rachel Whiteread, 52: ‘In my 50s, I’m clearer about what I’m trying to do’**  
*The YBA sculptor who became the first woman to win the Turner prize feels lucky to have been able to live off her art*

Kate Kellaway



*‘I’m more concise. I don’t ramble on for days trying to sort something out’: Rachel Whiteread in her London studio. Photograph: Antonio Olmos for the Observer*

I was born in Ilford, Essex. When I was seven, we moved to London’s Muswell Hill which in those days was rough and ready. I went to Creighton comprehensive school – it was terrible, an experiment. But the art department, with Eileen Rapley and Lesley Burgess, was fantastic. I plonked my way through school doing as little as possible. I thought I was most interested in science. I didn’t want to do art because my mum was an artist. But once I got involved in art in the sixth form, I was there.

I did a foundation course at Middlesex, painting at Brighton, sculpture at the Slade, and have not stopped since. I have cast baths, beds, hot-water bottles, the underside of chairs, staircases, windows, doors and underneath floorboards, silver spoons – a house.

It didn’t occur to me that there was any significance to my being the first woman to win the Turner prize [in 1993]. I just felt I was making my work and that House was a strong piece. But I was extremely fortunate to have a mother who was a real kick-ass feminist. Her generation saw the injustices of things and in what had happened during two world wars. A lot of stuff happened to those women and my generation were lucky enough to benefit from their experience.

My father died when he was 59 and my mother at 72. I was an orphan quite young. I felt very sad at the loss of both parents. People in their 50s describe to me how when their parents die they feel they have lost their foundations. It is true: you become more aware of your existence, your mortality.

Does my age matter? In my 50s, I'm not a slower thinker, I'm more concise. I don't ramble on for days on end mentally trying to sort something out. I'm clearer about what I am trying to do. You get attuned to your own language, don't you? One thing has changed: my studio is very clean and tidy. I like to work in a more domestic way. There is none of the smelly stuff I used, really irresponsibly, to use. I used to work with horrible smelly resins that I would hang around in all day while smoking roll-ups and mixing five bags of plaster. Recently, I had a brief breathing crisis and thought: oh God, I've given myself some terrible lung disease but I then found out that I have the lungs of a 42-year-old. I was extremely happy about that.

It's the age of my children that matters more to me – I have boys of 14 and 10 – and what we are leaving them to deal with. This is a time at which our brains are changing. Children are learning through electronic media. I'm not a luddite but I don't use technology a great deal – I prefer to work with a pencil and paper and materials. I don't have the mind for sitting in front of a computer screen doing mental gymnastics. I prefer to stare into the void. When the children were young, we lived and worked at home but as they got older, it became more disruptive and we made a decision a couple of years ago to split the living and the working. We decided to leave Shoreditch because it had become insufferably trendy. My husband is an artist too but has been more involved in design and architecture for the past decade and we found this place – initially a furniture warehouse – on one of those strange little plots between surrounding houses.

We also have a place in Wales. It's 45 minutes to get a pint of milk so it really is in the middle of nowhere. We also go to Essex where we have a tiny beach house and can sometimes escape just for a 24-hour sniff of the sea. I am extremely lucky to be making a living from my work. There would have been very few people a few decades ago who could have lived off sculpture let alone a young woman artist straight from college. My mother taught and did all sorts of things but never made a penny from her work.

I think it was helpful to be seen as part of a movement when I was young [Young British Artists] but I have always been a little bit of an outsider – I'm quite a loner – even if we all ended up going to the same private views and getting drunk together and having fun and critical time together. Some people have fared better than others. It was an interesting time. I'm lucky to have been born and worked within that time.

Recently, I went to a Barbara Hepworth opening at the Tate and a group of 15 or so artists walked through... all so young... and I just looked at them and thought: that used to be us.