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Rachel Whiteread: ‘It’s my mission to make things more complicated’
The eminent artist has placed a cast of a shed on New York’s Governors Island, evoking both Thoreau and Trump – a blow for art that takes the viewer by stealth

Charlotte Burns



Cabin with a view of the Statue of Liberty. Photograph: Timothy Schenck

America is a country of imagination and big dreams, some inspired, some twisted. It is the land of liberty, the open and optimistic birthplace of such diverse heroes as Amelia Earhart, Walt Whitman and Muhammad Ali. It is also home to the Unabomber, Donald Trump and Orlando killer Omar Mateen, sometimes a violent and vengeful country.

The artist Rachel Whiteread alludes to these extremes in *Cabin*, a concrete reverse cast of a wooden shed that will be unveiled to the public on 19 July on Governors Island in New York. “I was really thinking about Thoreau and the American Romantics, as well as the opposite of that – the grimmer, darker underbelly of America and the idea that some lonely person might live in a different way,” she says.

Cabin is the British artist’s first major permanent commission in the US and has been organised by the Trust for Governors Island and its public art program, Art CommissionsGI. It is a site-specific work created for Discovery Hill, one of “The Hills” – a 10-acre addition to Governors Island Park and part of a massive renovation effort to turn this once-military land into a pastoral resource for New Yorkers.

Whiteread initially visited the site around four years ago on a “very bleak, cold day” and was immediately “blown away by the place in terms of its location and the possibilities of what could be made there”. Two-thirds of the ice cream cone-shaped island was built using construction

waste in 1911 and the Hills carry on this tradition, created from landfill to heights rising 20 to 70 feet. Conceived by the Dutch landscape architects West 8, they afford sweeping panoramas of lower Manhattan, of the Statue of Liberty (“in all her silent emotional presence – I think she needed to be bowed to,” Whiteread says) and a skyline that forever lacks the Twin Towers.

“What an extraordinary site, and what an honor to be asked to put something there,” Whiteread says. “I tried to imagine what one could sit there with some kind of dignity, to create a place of remembrance.” She wanted “to make a piece that was evocative without wanting to make a memorial to the World Trade Center”.

She had been asked to make a work for that site shortly after 9/11, but “just didn’t want to. The site was far too powerful and needed time to settle. It was a reactive thing to try and place a sculpture there then”, she says. But Cabin is “my version of that. In a funny kind of way, it’s connected.”

Cabin, a cast version of a New England-style shed surrounded by bronze sculptures of detritus, is a humble structure that stands in contrast to the bombast of lower Manhattan. “I worked very hard to make something that wasn’t screaming for attention, but something that would hopefully draw emotions,” Whiteread says.

Tom Eccles, the curator for Art CommissionsGI, says “there is something quite beautiful about this rather uneasy, uncanny thing sitting here with objects strewn around it”. Cabin might inspire thoughts of “Walden’s cabin in the woods, but there is something weird about it, too”, says Eccles. “It’s the kind of thing you might not want to get too close to if you encountered it in real life.”

Though the work photographs beautifully, it was made to be experienced in person. “You need to see it and be with it: the air, the weather, the sky, the ground, the piece and its relationships to all these other things,” Whiteread says. “It’s really quite something.”

It requires a bit of effort – Governors Island is only accessible by ferry, and only open to the public in the summer. This is deliberate: it is Whiteread’s reaction to the speed with which art is devoured nowadays. “There’s something fantastic about the way in which art has become so popular now. But I also find it a little overwhelming,” she says. “People take art in as popular culture, so it’s all very quick. Some very contemplative work can be seen in a split second – the person moves on and they’re not really giving the work time to accumulate for them to understand what it is. I do think that is a great shame.

“It is partly my mission to make things more complicated to look at, more of an effort and more of an experience,” she continues. “You get on a boat and go across the water. You’ll see the Staten Island ferry, see Lady Liberty, get a little bus or walk across the island and then you’ll come across Cabin. It’s not a quick thing and it’s to do with expectation. The whole thing will take a few hours and will hopefully remain with you for a few hours. I hope people try to get some sense of what I am trying to make happen. It’s a slow burn.”

Cabin echoes other works Whiteread has made, including the Holocaust Memorial she made in Vienna in 2000, a harrowing, stark library cast in concrete with the spines of books turned to the inside. It is also one in a series she is calling the “shy sculptures”. The first was a boathouse in a fjord in Norway, followed by a shed in Houghton Hall in England with a third in the California

desert near Joshua Tree where a fourth will join it soon. “They are pieces made in situ from an original building. Getting to see them, finding them, is part of the journey,” says Whiteread who intends, at some stage, to compile them in a map and book. “It’s too early yet, I want to make more. I am talking about them now, which I didn’t really before. I wanted to let them just exist, and now I am bringing them into the world a bit.” Whiteread’s art is characterised by a keen sense of place. “With my earlier works, I was really thinking about how one interpreted something from its place and spatial surrounding. In a way, Cabin has got its own rather extraordinary plinth that it’s sitting on, this island,” she says.

The artist has been famous since her breakthrough piece, *Ghost* (1990), a plaster cast of the negative space in the parlor of an abandoned Victorian house in north London. The collector Charles Saatchi included it in the 1992 exhibition *Young British Art*, a show that propelled Whiteread and contemporaries such as Damien Hirst.

It was just a taster of the media scrum to come. In 1993 Whiteread made *House*, a full-scale replica of the interior of a condemned terraced house in London’s East End. The piece became a lightning conductor for a rancorous national debate about contemporary art. *House* was received with opprobrium by some critics, heaped with praise by others and ultimately destroyed by the council after 80 days.

The decision to demolish the work came on the same day that Whiteread was awarded the Turner prize for being the best British artist of the year – making her the first woman in its history – as well as the particularly mean-spirited K Foundation prize for the worst artist of the year. The latter was a publicity stunt in which Whiteread was told that, if she failed to appear in person to collect a £40,000 prize, the money would be burned. So she accepted, giving the cash away to charities.

Did the experience put Whiteread off the press? “Yes!” she exclaims, with a gusty laugh. “It certainly did. It was a lot to deal with – for a young artist it was overwhelming.” But looking back, she is “very proud” of her younger self’s composure. “I could easily have been swayed to behave a certain way and I really wasn’t. I just stuck to my guns and didn’t take any prisoners, and I am proud of myself for doing that.

“That time, the heady days of YBA, there was a lot going on and a lot to process. To try to continually make work at the same time was hard, but it was worth it. A lot of good things came out of it,” she says. One regret, perhaps, is that “*House* had a very busy, loud life and it was a very quiet work that needed to have some humility, which it didn’t really have the chance to have.”

Unlike some of her YBA peers, Whiteread’s name is not associated with market speculation. “Obviously when things sell and when prices go up and your market is buoyant and all of that stuff, it’s heartening. And it’s depressing when things don’t work out like that,” she says. “But I am not a big high flier in all of this. I have a quiet steady market and people buy work generally because they want to keep it and not because they want to sell it on in six months at a vast price.” This, she says, is “where things get very tricky for artists, when they start playing the market. I am not in that position. Damien [Hirst] genuinely likes it. It has always been part of what he does because he finds it interesting. For me, it’s not interesting at all to think about how much something is worth.”

Whitread, who was awarded a CBE in 2006, is preparing for a retrospective scheduled to open at Tate Britain next year and then at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. She is enjoying the process of looking back at old work and what she calls her “dogged plodding” in investigating the same things in her art. She has, she says, “always been quite clear” about what she wants her art to achieve. “My work is almost like trying to write a succinct poem. There is this visual aspect to my work but also cerebral or maybe literate aspects – there are other things going on,” she says. “I hope it works with your senses and gives you a moment of pause and quiet. I hope it gives you a moment of reverie – just standing, dreaming and thinking.”