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Rachel Whiteread's Concrete Cabin Awaits Discovery in the Governors Island Hills

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Rachel Whiteread's "Cabin" at the Hills on Governors Island photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

British artist Rachel Whiteread and curator Tom Eccles discussed both the Unabomber and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* in considering the form and isolation of the American cabin. There is something simultaneously unsettling and inviting in Whiteread's "Cabin" perched on a slope in the Hills, the newest renovation of Governors Island opening on Tuesday, July 19. The site-specific piece with its impenetrable structure of concrete cast from a New England-style shed is part of the Trust for Governors Island's Art CommissionsGI, and is intended to be a permanent sculpture on the island, a place both detached from and a part of New York City.

"It's this idea of retreat and what does retreat mean in New York," Eccles told Hyperallergic. As the curator of Art CommissionsGI and executive director of CCS Bard, Eccles has spearheaded contemporary art that encourages visitor discovery. Last year's *Visitors* had art in a disused swimming pool and embedded in the Civil War-era cannons on Fort Jay. In a permanent installation, each evening at 6pm Susan Philipsz's "Day is Done" sounds the four notes from the bugle song "Taps" from speakers around the island. Like Philipsz, Whiteread is a Turner Prize winner. "Cabin" has a physical and visual weight similar to Whiteread's 1993 "House," cast

from a decrepit Victorian home in London, and her 1998 “Water Tower” that was installed on top of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The Hills is opening early, ahead of a planned 2017 unveiling, and follows the 2014 debut of Liggett Terrace, which is similarly lined with white curbs that emphasize the incredible movement of earth that resulted in this topography. The four mounds of the Hills are all human made, as is the land below. Governors Island was extended south in 1911 with the excavated fill from the Lexington Avenue subway tunnel. The Hills built on this artificial section of the island were shaped from clean fill and recycled debris from the demolition of deteriorated military buildings on the island, which was decommissioned in 1996.

“It’s a fiction and this hill is a fiction,” Eccles said of “Cabin” in this crafted environment. Although the plantings by it are now scrubby, eventually the flowering shrubs and trees will grow around “Cabin,” obscuring it further, making it even more of a serendipitous encounter. Whiteread created small cast bronzes of found objects, some from Governors Island, that are installed alongside and will also be hidden, small disruptions that remind you of the huge human engineering behind this natural vista.

And the views are incredible, with panoramas that take in the whole Lower Manhattan skyline and the New York Harbor’s swaying boats. Narrow views in the valleys frame the Statue of Liberty and the Brooklyn Bridge. Each hill is named for a different visitor interaction, with Grassy Hill, Slide Hill, Outlook Hill, and Discovery Hill, which is home to “Cabin.”

“The island was flat and you could only see the horizon,” said Adriaan Geuze a founder of West 8, the Dutch landscape architecture firm which oversaw the Hills as well as Liggett Terrace. By adding these walkable hills, each between 25 to 70 feet, new perspectives are offered along with new experiences, whether climbing up the “scramble” with its tiered granite stones salvaged from the reconstructed 1905 seawall, or riding down a 57-foot steel slide on Slide Hill. Paths are lined with different groupings of tree species, and plants like creeping pine crawl over the ground to stop erosion, flooding being a major concern for the project.

“The undulation allowed us to dramatize all the views on the island,” Geuze explained. “It makes you see in a very emotional way how beautiful the harbor is.”

Right now, the Hills might seem a little scrappy, with their newly planted foliage and Whiteread’s “Cabin” standing out against the patches of green. Look north to the lush and thriving landscape of Liggett Terrace and you can see the future of this new topography as it grows into its own, and opens more of the island to exploration, including an uncanny cabin to stumble upon in its woods.

The Hills and Rachel Whiteread’s “Cabin” open at Governors Island in the New York Harbor on July 19.