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**A CONVERSATION WITH RACHEL WHITEREAD AHEAD OF HER
TATE RETROSPECTIVE**

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*Rachel Whiteread, House, 1993, © Rachel Whiteread
Photo: Courtesy the artist*

Past the double doors that lead off from the Tate's Duveen galleries, I find myself dwarfed by hulking concrete casts, still clad in their wooden casing, which line the passage to the exhibition. The space itself is radically transformed. Free of any walls or partitions, a vast open expanse of white provides an extraordinary sense of scale to the works that are already assembled. The artist herself is in the midst of it all, plans laid out on the floor in front of her, as she deliberates the precise composition of her biggest ever show, and first retrospective.

Rachel Whiteread is an artist for whom space, particularly the internal, 'negative' space, is central. As a sculptor, she works almost exclusively with casting, using many different materials, to record not only the internal surface and mass of a space, but the emotion, memory and

experiences that are locked within it. 'House', for example, the piece for which she became the youngest artist and first woman to win the Turner Prize in 1993, was a concrete cast of the interior of an entire three-storey Victorian terraced house. From plug sockets to door handles, window frames to cracks in the wall, it maps the space and signs of habitation left by its owners. Her work has been highly acclaimed and celebrated the world over ever since, and she is no doubt one of the most important artists this country has produced. We join her to discuss her upcoming show...

FB: How does it feel to be back in London for your biggest ever show?

RW: Yeah good, I mean I call it a survey, some people call it a retrospective but I'm too young for a retrospective. It's really thirty years of work, thirty years of sculpture, which takes me through the time I did the Venice Biennial and documenta, and all of those big shows I did very early on in my career, which are now ancient history really. Then there's work going back from 1988 to 2017...almost thirty years.

FB: Is there something particularly special for you about it being in London? You've described the city as your sketchbook, is that something you still see?

RW: Very much so. I love the forgotten underbelly of London, and it's getting harder to find because it's moving further and further out. I've got a little place in Essex that's down through that part of what was the East End, during the time William Booth made his poverty map of London, this sort of dark end of the city, so yeah, I'm very much still interested in all of that. The Tate has a special place in my heart because it was a gallery that I always came to as a child, it's now my third big show here, and I've also shown lots of other pieces in between, so it's been really good to bring all that together.

FB: So many of the pieces you will be showing were first shown in small East London galleries, like the Chisenhale. Does it change your reading of the pieces to see them in this vast setting of the Tate?

RW: Not really, because I think over the years I've shown the work in so many different places, that it's very much part of their nature. They're also all objects that have come from both a domestic setting and a more industrial setting. Sometimes as you say, they've been shown in different environments, but they always respond to the environment around them, and a lot of them are very muted in colour, so they sort of take on the environment. There are a few very colourful pieces we'll have up, but generally they're quite quiet works.

FB: On the topic of colour, what prompts your use of it?

RW: It's a mixture between things that the materials can get from the colours, some of the bookcase pieces for example, there's a colour which comes from the casting of the books and actually pulling it off, so some of those are almost like watercolours. Then a lot of the door pieces, we're using a kind of muted, natural material with natural colour, but there's other things I've added, metal powders and pigments. A lot of the window pieces were to do with light and the way in which light comes through a window – a time of day or the weather – so my use of colour is prompted by all sorts of different things. Sometimes I just want to make a bright orange sculpture, or I just want to make something like a beehive that has a feel of honey to it, or a small

little building that has a sense of ghostliness. ‘Closet’ for example, was the first real sculpture I made, it was covered in black felt which was about absorbing light.

FB: ‘Closet’ left such an impression on me, it’s such a powerful, emotive piece. Could you tell me a bit more about it?

RW: Well my father had been very ill for a long time, he was dying. I was aware of that, and I was young – in my very early twenties, and I was processing grief. It was something I used to do as a kid, I would be quite secretive and hide in wardrobes, I liked the smell of my parents’ clothes. My mum used to make clothes and there would always be a box of material that I could fit snugly into inside this warm place. There’d be a chink of light, either coming through the keyhole, or the door would be slightly open. It wasn’t like I was spying on people, it wasn’t that there was anyone in the room, but it was just this place to hide.

FB: A place of refuge?

RW: Yeah, I mean I have two sisters who are a couple of years older than me, they could be a bit bully-ish so I’d sort of hide from them, it was a safe place to go, cosy, like a cat, wherever there’s a box in our house, a cat is in it, if it can be.

FB: Your relationship with childhood comes through so strongly in many of your works, not only ‘Closet’ but also your doll house pieces. Is it a celebration of those childhood years, or is it more melancholic?

RW: It’s a bit of both I think. I was an odd kid, and I wasn’t necessarily that celebratory all the time...in my life I’ve suffered from depression quite a lot, and I think that’s always been there since I was a child, so that’s a part of it I think – especially with the dolls house pieces. They are quite melancholic, you can’t get away from a dolls house without feeling melancholic, they’re weird things, especially ones that other people have played with. A lot of the dolls houses that I got off ebay were really a bit psychotic, the way they came wrapped up, I mean to a point that I photographed every parcel that came into the studio, I was quite obsessed by how they arrived.

FB: Your concrete shed pieces are often hidden in rural, fairly inaccessible areas, even in a desert – why are those sheds where they are?

RW: Well I call them ‘shy’ sculptures, the reason being because I think ‘House’ was essentially a shy sculpture that had an awful lot of attention, it was trying to hide but it just wasn’t working, and the shed pieces were really a reaction to that. The first one I made was in Norway, and I had no sense of wanting to do it in the centre of town, in Oslo, I wanted to do it somewhere that was quiet and remote. I found this boat house, that we just took back to London, re-built, cast from it, and then brought the cast back and put it back into the exact same position using a GPS measurement. It was opened by singing Vikings and with a reindeer stew...

FB: There is a sociopolitical element to your work, something that comes through not only in ‘House’, but also in your photo series, ‘Demolished’. Looking at that series I couldn’t help but see a comparison with Grenfell Tower – both were condemned to be unfit for living. How do you see that connection, if you see any connection at all?

RW: I was absolutely horrified by what happened at Grenfell Tower and I've always been horrified by these councils, especially the wealthy councils. Hackney made a very brave decision a number of years ago, there were three or four estates that were pulled down and became unified with some lower rise housing. Maybe one or two of the blocks were kept up, but the rest of them were demolished, and it just made for a more comfortable living environment. Hackney Council was aware of the massive social and economic problems that arose because of the way that those things were built, and they did something to recognise it. Somewhere like Kensington & Chelsea are more blasé about it. They've just tried to make them fit in with the new developments they've built by putting this cladding on. It's a wonderful city, but it needs to be managed, you can't just chuck everyone together and hope it's going to work, because it won't. There needs to be sensitive handling of the old parts of London, and the people that have been there for many, many years and are feeling overwhelmed. They can't just be told to shut up, it's not fair, they have to somehow be made a part of the conversation.

FB: With 'House', it felt as though you were speaking on behalf of those people whose voices have been drowned out, who had suffered as a result of gentrification and who continue to.

RW: Well I do try to, and that's exactly where my politics lie and always have done. I was fortunate enough to be brought up in a socially conscious family, my parents were both very aware of what was going on, and so I have an understanding of it, but I live in a very nice middle-class area and I'm wealthy – I'm very lucky, so it's hard to be critical of places that don't have that. I'm very happy to say that the survivors of Grenfell are being very vigilant about what they want, and I don't think anyone's yet agreed to be re-housed, I mean the places that they're being offered...

FB: A lot of your earlier works deal with death in a way, but in your more recent work you seem to have moved away from that?

RW: Um, yes – I think it's always there, I wouldn't call it death, I call it a sort of spiritual realisation. I was very unfortunate to lose both my parents at quite a young age, so I think that made me sort of wary, or sensitive to these things. A lot of people don't really think about that stuff, but I always have done, and it's not that I'm morbid, I think it's just more that it's been a necessary part of my make-up.

FB: I always thought there was an Englishness to your casts, the Victorian rooms and bathtub, the fireplaces. Recently you seem to have developed a more global feel?

RW: Yeah, I think some things have become more generic in terms of the architectural things I've been casting. I've tried to take a more modernist look at things that are to do with proportion and scale, so I've just made these two very large doors which came from a palazzo in Italy – but you wouldn't necessarily know that. I think I've allowed myself now to play with a language, as an artist you create an alphabet, with that alphabet you make words, and with those words you make sentences. That's sort of what I do now, I have this larger vocabulary that I can play with, and I enjoy playing with all the different aspects of it.