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Visual art review: Rachel Whiteread at Tate Britain

Discombobulated in an inside-out world, the visitor to this show will be mesmerised

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★★★★☆

In the 1960s the American artist Bruce Nauman became interested in looking at negative space. It was just one of a plethora of concepts that this amazingly fertile pioneer of postmodernism played with. He cast the empty space under his chair. Then he moved on.

Twenty years later Rachel Whiteread picked up on Nauman's long-since sidelined idea. And that was it for the sculptor who came to success alongside the brat pack of British mavericks who became known as the YBAs (Young British Artists). Over the past three decades Whiteread has cast anything from the tiny hollow of a teaspoon to the entire terraced house that — although now demolished — brought her widespread recognition as the first woman to win the Turner prize.

Yet although the scale and the subject matter and to an extent the materials may be varied — she uses plaster, concrete or metal, coloured rubber or translucent resin — the premise remains unaltered. It feels very repetitive. I have to admit that I felt somewhat weary at the prospect of Tate Britain's latest show.

How wrong I was. To step into the single huge space of the gallery in which a significant new Whiteread survey is being shown is an eerie experience. It's like entering some strange scrapyards. Fireplaces and library shelves, baths, basins and boxes, old doors and abandoned mattresses are scattered about. Yet whether you are looking at a row of hot water bottles or perambulating an entire room translated into a block of grey plaster, the experience is oddly disconcerting. And the stark architecture of the Tate galleries, with their strange geometric ceilings, only adds to the effect.

The visitor stands discombobulated in an inside-out world. It is a realm of spaces that will never feel like places. It feels like a land of lost memories, a loss that you become alert to, like noticing anew the night's blackness after the light of a firework has burnt out. Sometimes this absence feels like an impermeable blankness. Sometimes subtle surface effects capture the fading imprints of memories. Translucent resins appear particularly poetic, notably in her cast of a doll's house. Yet the most mundanely domestic object — the cardboard core of a loo roll, for instance — can equally be transmuted into something rare and strange.

This exhibition is mesmerising. Whiteread is an obsessive. She appears far less interested in development than in trying to gaze ever farther into the depths. That is what this survey shows

us. Where artists more ordinarily conjure up the inner life of an object, Whiteread is more interested in exploring its inner death.