

GAGOSIAN

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

‘Rachel Whiteread’ Review: Poetic Sculptor of Emptiness *Absence becomes presence in her poignant casts.*

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Rachel Whiteread's 'Chicken Shed' PHOTO: TATE

On the lawn in front of Tate Britain’s facade, a new concrete sculpture called “Chicken Shed” shows just how defiant Rachel Whiteread can be. Compared with the ornamental Victorian architecture behind it, the structural simplicity of “Chicken Shed” seems extraordinary. Ms. Whiteread describes it as one of her “shy sculptures,” like the “Cabin” she perched on a hill on Governors Island, N.Y. But “Chicken Shed,” ominously boarded up and formidable, ends up making us think about the prison that once occupied the land where Tate Britain now stands.

Ms. Whiteread’s reputation rests on her commitment to casting, and as we enter the Duveen Galleries inside Tate Britain no less than 100 multicolored resin casts stretch away from us across the floor. Arranged in a grid, they were taken from the undersides of chairs. So absence becomes presence, and after a while these resin blocks evoke the ruins of an ancient building. When sunlight falls on them through the Duveen windows, the entire sculpture glints and glows.

This major sculpture, “Untitled (One Hundred Spaces),” was made in 1995, two years after Ms. Whiteread created “House” in the East End of London. Although it made her reputation, so that she became the first woman to win the Turner Prize, “House” survived for only a few months. Cast in concrete from the interior of a terraced house, it looked like a pale ghost memorializing

its former inhabitants—as well as all the East End streets destroyed by Nazi bombers in World War II.

Ms. Whiteread was herself born in London in 1963, and she once told me that her work aimed at “embalming lives, embalming the air, mummifying the space inside the room.” But “House” itself was brutally swept away by a local council that refused to acknowledge its significance as an outstanding public sculpture. And just before we enter the main space devoted to Tate Britain’s survey of Ms. Whiteread’s career, a poignant and fascinating film shows us the creation of “House” as well as its disastrous demolition.

Inside the immense, open-plan space containing the rest of her exhibition, Ms. Whiteread’s involvement with so many aspects of everyday human life becomes clear. The earliest object is a small “Torso” (1988), cast in plaster from a hot-water bottle. Lying isolated on its side, it might have been abandoned but still seems capable of offering warmth. Ultimately, though, Ms. Whiteread’s surprising decision to call it “Torso” makes us see this lonely cast as a poignant fragment of a human figure.

Although she is fascinated by even the most ordinary objects, her sculpture transforms them. Mattresses are an obsession, beginning with “Shallow Breath” in 1988—a blanched plaster and polystyrene form propped against a wall. Its pallor enhances the sense of strangeness. And yet suddenly, in 1991, Ms. Whiteread uses rubber to produce a cast of a mattress called “Untitled (Amber Bed).” This time, she infuses the form with a deep, resonant redness. Because so many works here are blanched, the strength of this warm color seems astonishing. But the longer we look at her sculpture, the more it feeds our imagination. Although “Untitled (Amber Bed)” could be seen as a celebration of the mattress’s comfort and warmth, its redness might also evoke blood spilled there by a murderous act.

As for “Table and Chair (Clear),” from 1994, Ms. Whiteread here uses resin to turn the sculpture into an ominous work. It looks like the props used in some strange ritual, where people are invited to kneel on the block-like chair and pray for forgiveness at the table. Ms. Whiteread certainly does not shy away from the bleakest and most disturbing aspects of life. In a large 1997-98 plaster and steel sculpture called “Untitled (Book Corridors),” everything looks frozen. Although plenty of books are visible on its shelves, they appear to have been robbed of their original identity and turned into ice. This chilling work was made soon after Ms. Whiteread produced the maquette for her “Holocaust Memorial.” It was commissioned as a monument in Vienna’s Judenplatz, dedicated to the city’s Jewish citizens murdered during World War II. And in 2000 the “Holocaust Memorial” itself was finally unveiled there, confronting everyone with the book-lined shelves of a library based on the dimensions of the architecture around the Judenplatz itself.

The result is very poignant, and it prompted Ms. Whiteread to become involved once again with the structure of buildings. The most dramatic work in the Tate exhibition is “Untitled (Stairs),” created in 2001 from staircases she found inside her London studio. They shoot up and down in a dizzying, almost dangerous way, and nearby we find the bulky oppressiveness of “Untitled (Room 101),” an enormous sculpture cast in 2003 from the room in the BBC’s headquarters believed to have been described by George Orwell in his profoundly disturbing novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four.”

Architecture reappears in Ms. Whiteread's most recent work, too. "Roof (Beams I)" (2017) turns out to be made of papier-mâché, and when viewed close up it is alive with tiny, dancing fragments of color. But the whole sculpture also makes us think about all those houses destroyed by the recent hurricanes, and in Ms. Whiteread's work monumental bulk can never be divorced from a fundamental awareness of alarming fragility.