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A Pair of ‘Ghost’ Cabins in Joshua Tree

Thanks to the vision of artist Rachel Whiteread, two forgotten huts in a private sculpture park have transcended their humble origins to become subtle new masterpieces

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LASTING IMPRESSIONS | One of two concrete casts of mid-century cabins made under the direction of artist Rachel Whiteread on art connoisseur Jerry Sohn's land near Joshua Tree National Park. PHOTO: IWAN BAAN FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

From an adjacent dirt road near California's Joshua Tree National Park, the two concrete buildings seem both ominous and ordinary. Some people might not even notice them. "There are so many peculiar things in the desert," observes their creator, Rachel Whiteread, the London-based conceptual artist. "These would just be two more peculiar things." Other passersby might recognize the structures—casts of the interiors of two small cabins from the 1950s—as part of Whiteread's distinctive body of work, more than 30 years in the making and the subject of a survey that opens at London's Tate Britain on September 12.

These concrete sculptures sit on land owned by Jerry Sohn, a Los Angeles-based publisher of artists' books, who has been building a collection of site-specific art since he bought his first desert parcel in 1993. In recent years, he has installed pieces by Lawrence Weiner and Richard Long as well as the architect Arata Isozaki. The Whiteread works, which the artist herself has seen only in photos, are the newest additions. Casting the interiors of the two shacks took workers employed by Sohn nearly five years, with Whiteread relaying detailed instructions via email and phone. Everything on the buildings' interior surfaces, from light switches to door hinges, was captured in concrete. Projections became indentations and vice versa. The original

exteriors were then stripped away, leaving the “ghost” cabins exposed. “They have a double-edged feel,” says Whiteread, 54. “There’s something sinister about them, which is fine.”

Sohn, 61, met Whiteread in 2010, when she had a drawing show at the Hammer Museum, near his L.A. home. He was moved, he says, by the directness and simplicity of her work, and he imagined adding a Whiteread or two to his remote property. Sohn, his wife, Eba, and their 7-year-old twins, Ayea and Mikey, visit the desert most weekends. The family owns a rudimentary home there, but when weather permits, they sleep outside on Isozaki’s concrete platforms.

Around the time of the 2010 show, Sohn drove Whiteread out to the desert. She was smitten with a landscape of sculptures that preceded them by millions of years—giant piles of rocks and twisty Joshua trees. Not surprisingly, the area has long attracted artists, including Sohn’s neighbor Ed Ruscha. Installations by Doug Aitken and Andrea Zittel are area attractions.

When Sohn showed Whiteread the larger of the two cabins, he recalls, “She said, ‘Would you mind if I destroyed it?’ and I answered, ‘That’s what I was hoping for.’ ”

The cabins were far from the first buildings the artist has deconstructed. In 1993, Whiteread, a member of the Young British Artists generation, was awarded Britain’s prestigious Turner Prize for *House*, a concrete cast of a Victorian home in London’s East End. (It was the last property standing in an urban-renewal area, and Whiteread’s cast, which was meant to be temporary, was also torn down, a few months after it was built.) In New York, Whiteread became known in the late ’90s for a resin water tower, commissioned by the Public Art Fund, that appeared on a SoHo roof and later atop the Museum of Modern Art.

Molly Donovan, a curator at Washington, D.C.’s National Gallery of Art, where the Tate Britain show will travel next year, admires Whiteread’s devotion to casting familiar objects, some small enough to fit on a tabletop, others large enough to anchor multi-acre sites. “She’s continued to go deeper and deeper into her own vision,” Donovan says. “There’s something rewarding and frankly remarkable about an artist doing that today.”

Whiteread agreed to supervise the casting of the two structures without remuneration. Even so, Sohn spent a not-small fortune on them. (He declined to say how much, only that the cabins were “unbelievably expensive to produce.”) Builder Jason Sarch and his crew devoted almost five years to the project, including a year searching for the right kind of concrete and another year looking for a company that could spray it with the required precision. Each cabin “looks so simple, but its making belies that,” says Donovan.

Before casting could begin, breakable glass windows had to be refitted with plastic, cracks in the exterior walls had to be filled and projections such as doorknobs and light switches had to be replaced with rubber replicas that could be removed once the concrete hardened around them.

But that was just the little stuff. For each cabin, Sarch had to build a new foundation, incorporating tunnels to allow workers to enter the structure from underground. Inside he added new steel frameworks so that the finished concrete casts, really just hollow shells, would stand up to the elements (and to the inevitable climbers, who have already included both Sohn children).

The spraying itself, within the sealed cabins, was harrowing. “When you turn on the machines,” Scharch recalls, “you can’t hear anything; you can hardly see anything. It was rather surreal.” Scharch devised a series of hand signals that were conveyed by what he called a “daisy chain” of up to seven workers, leading from outside the cabins, via the underground tunnels, to the interiors, where “nozzlemen” in full protective suits and masks maneuvered 4-inch hoses. Complex ventilation and lighting systems were required, in a part of the desert where there is no easy way to get water, electricity or even a cellphone signal. The spraying was followed by months of painstaking work removing the molds—the original cabins—without cracking the concrete casts. Sohn says he loves the finished pieces, which he sees as “both found objects and careful constructions.”

Whiteread likes the fact that the cabins are hard to get to—she compares them to a similar piece of hers on Governors Island, in New York Harbor, that can be seen only five months a year, when the island is open to the public via ferry. “The slowness of the journey is about the slowness of seeing the piece,” she explains. Someday, she says, she may authorize a book about Sohn’s cabins, with a map directing people to the site. Meanwhile, Sohn shares them with his large circle of friends.

Whiteread and Sohn have agreed that the pieces will neither be sold nor moved. As for working without a fee, Whiteread says that she won’t “make a habit of this; they were very particular circumstances.” Though Sohn is persuasive, the cabins aren’t gifts to him. As Whiteread puts it, “They are gifts to the place.”