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Ghosts of the Past, Embalmed in White Plaster

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Rachel Whiteread's 2002 work "Untitled (Domestic)." By casting the negative space inside or surrounding her subjects, the artist creates a ghostly impression — in this case, she cast the area around a fire escape staircase at a gallery in London, originally the home of Admiral Lord Nelson. Without context, the artwork evokes both recollection and loss. © Justin Gellerson

WASHINGTON — Some artists have careers that take juddering turns, with early works giving no hint of later, sudden shifts in style: El Greco or Turner, Frank Stella or Philip Guston. Then there are artists — and it's no vice — who stay the course. They find a style or principle early on, and, like Voltaire's Candide, they cultivate their garden, over decades. They devote themselves to a single color, like Robert Ryman and white, or a single subject, like On Kawara and dates, and in the studio each day they make artworks that are always in concert but never the same.

Since the late 1980s, the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread has held firm to one of the clearest and most poetic techniques in contemporary art: taking an everyday item, an architectural volume, even an entire house, and casting the spaces they occupy rather than the objects themselves.

In the traditional lost-wax casting process, a sculptor makes a form of plaster or clay, shapes a mold around it, then fills the mold with liquefied metal, once or multiple times. For Ms. Whiteread, objects and spaces are themselves the molds — and are often destroyed in the

creation of her ghostly negatives. The air around a large Victorian tub becomes a coffin of vermilion rubber; the voids beneath chairs cohere into colored resin, which the artist arrays like large gummi candies. A bath, a cardboard box, the books of a lost library: These are the molds for Ms. Whiteread's sculptures, mute and mummified.



Bottom right, "Untitled (Yellow Bath)." Middle: "Untitled (double amber bed)." For "Untitled (Paperbacks)," in the background, the artist cast the negative space of library shelves. © Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

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For “Ghost” (1990), the artist slathered the walls, doors and fireplace of a Victorian rowhouse with plaster, then reassembled the panels —facing out — into a full-scale death mask of a room and its inhabitants, “a mausoleum for a certain social class, a certain way of life, expunged in Thatcher’s Britain.”© Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

She did not invent the technique (Bruce Nauman, the subject of a massive retrospective opening this month at the Museum of Modern Art, cast the underside of a chair in 1965), and she has modified and rejigged it at times. But year after year, with plaster or concrete or resin, she has stuck to her impressions of interior spaces and household objects, resulting in weighty, silent sculptures evoking absent bodies and past lives.

More than 100 works by Ms. Whiteread are on view now in her hushed first American retrospective, at the National Gallery of Art here. (It was first seen at Tate Britain in London, which organized the show with the National Gallery.) It includes sculptures as small as a hot water bottle and as large as a living room, as well as beguiling preparatory drawings and domestic ephemera from her London studio, laid out like relics.



“Untitled (Twenty-Five Spaces)” in the entrance gallery of the Rachel Whiteread exhibit.© Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

The show is cool, measured and a little too unshowy for its own good. Some of her pale casts get lost in the largest of the triangular galleries of the museum’s I.M. Pei-designed East Wing. (Walls painted any color but white might have helped.) The retrospective, perhaps by necessity, shortchanges her large-scale sculpture, too large to travel, and can only evoke her public art in part. Yet I found the National Gallery’s show poignant, not only in the traces of memories on her most successful sculptures — but in aggregate, as a model of unshaken artistic commitment over half a lifetime.

Ms. Whiteread was born in 1963 in Essex, east of London, and studied first in Brighton (under the sculptor Richard Wilson, who taught her the fundamentals of casting) and later at the Slade School of Art in the capital. At the Slade she began to experiment with alternative casting techniques, and in 1988 she presented a first show with only four works: reticent, Pompeian plasters that employed the humble, abstract forms of postminimal sculpture but left the residue of domestic life just visible. This show reunites the four sculptures from that show, including “Mantle,” which hardens the drawers of a dressing table; “Shallow Breath,” which appears to be a mattress but is in fact the solidified space beneath a bed; and “Closet,” whose plaster volumes are flocked with black felt. (She would soon let her surfaces reveal their striations and

pockmarks.) The smallest and most aching work, “Torso,” is a plaster cast of the volume of a hot water bottle that suggests, with wrenching economy, an embalmed infant corpse.



Detail from “Untitled (Domestic).” © Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Though she drew inspiration from postwar American sculpture, Ms. Whiteread’s solidifications reintroduced human emotions into abstract art and subtly engaged with love, fear, illness and death. Her early casts also had a social orientation that, it seems to me, gets far too little attention. The daughter of Labour Party activists, Ms. Whiteread came of age as Margaret Thatcher’s government was undertaking a wholesale transformation of British society — breaking down its welfare state and privatizing swathes of public housing.

Locating politics in the home was one of the achievements of “Ghost” (1990), Ms. Whiteread’s first large-scale sculpture, which dominates a gallery here: a painstaking cast of the living room of a nondescript Victorian rowhouse in north London. She slathered the walls, the doors and the sooty fireplace with plaster of paris, then reassembled the dozens of resultant panels — facing out, not in — into a hulking box. If “Ghost” is a full-scale death mask of a room and its inhabitants, the sculpture is also a mausoleum for a certain social class, a certain way of life, expunged in Thatcher’s Britain. A similarly bereaved gaze on housing can be found in Ms. Whiteread’s work beyond sculpture, such as her photo series “Demolished” (1996), which depicts the slow destruction of East London’s public housing blocks.



From left, "Ghost, Ghost II" and "LOOK, LOOK, LOOK." © Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Seen together, her objects lose some of their strangeness, and the installation of a dozen or more sculptures in some galleries here has a reductive effect. So be sure to look closely at her resin impressions of windows, whose panes bulge out and mullions cave in, or her delicate drawings of the undersides of stairwells, and the individuality of her sculptures emerges. The drawings, especially, reveal how sculpting absence is no rote process for Ms. Whiteread, but a trial-and-error enterprise in which memory and politics fuse in ways she cannot fully predetermine.

Ms. Whiteread has often worked at monumental scale, in projects that this show can only evoke through video, photographs and maquettes. A grainy video and a series of black-and-white images relate the story of "House," a solidification of an entire condemned home in a Blitz-scarred area of East London, completed and quickly destroyed in 1993. She and her crew sprayed the interiors with concrete, then ripped off the outer walls to reveal the form within. Other large commissions in London, for the cavernous Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern or the empty fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square, get just a small look in. (New Yorkers may know her "Water Tower," perched on a Midtown roof and visible from the MoMA garden, which transmutes that signature of the Manhattan skyline into a solid of spectral white resin.)



Ms. Whiteread's Holocaust memorial in Vienna, completed in 2000. She created a library, scaled like an apartment on the Judenplatz. Books face outward, "as inaccessible records of crime, or else as last possessions of the murdered readers," our critic writes. © Luhring Augustine, New York, Lorcan O'Neill, Rome, and Gagosian Gallery

Her greatest work remains her Vienna Holocaust memorial, which she completed in 2000, after years of bureaucratic delays, and which this show represents through a maquette. Ms. Whiteread created a room from scratch: a library, scaled like the bourgeois salons of the apartments in the Austrian capital's Judenplatz ("Jews' Square"). The library's walls are cast as negatives and face outward, as in "Ghost." But its books are cast traditionally, so that the books' edges protrude from the walls — as inaccessible records of crime, or else as last possessions of the murdered readers themselves. In a way all of Ms. Whiteread's sculptures are memorials, but this one is the most powerful artwork I know to use minimal form in the commemoration of the unspeakable. (It is a far more dignified memorial than its counterpart in Berlin, Peter Eisenman's massive grid of concrete stelae, which has lately become merely a selfie backdrop.)

Earlier this year, I stood in front of the Vienna memorial, not another soul on the Judenplatz in the dead of midwinter. The sky was gray, the windows around the square pulled shut. I ran my hand across the corrugated white surfaces of Ms. Whiteread's silent, stern room, and I held back my tears in front of its doors — or, precisely, its negative casts of absent doors, offering no admission and no escape. There were bouquets of flowers left at the threshold; soon they would wither and later be replaced. What would not wither was Ms. Whiteread's bereavement, the size of one family's living room but weighing as much as six million.