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‘Rachel Whiteread’ Review: Where Memories Dwell

The British sculptor draws on her formative experiences to create often-monumental works.

Eric Gibson



Rachel Whiteread's 'Ghost' (1990) PHOTO: GLENSTONE FOUNDATION

“Greatest living British artist” is among the most abused accolades in art criticism. The one person who deserves it is sculptor Rachel Whiteread, now the subject of a retrospective at the National Gallery of Art.

“Rachel Whiteread,” which travels to the Saint Louis Art Museum after Washington, was jointly organized by the Gallery’s Molly Donovan and Ann Gallagher of Tate Britain, where it began its international tour last fall. It features some 100 sculptures and drawings. The list includes “Closet” (1988), a plaster cast of the interior space of a wardrobe wrapped in black felt to evoke the artist’s childhood habit of hiding in closets, and the 1995 model for her acclaimed “Holocaust Memorial” (2000) in Vienna’s Judenplatz.

Generationally, Ms. Whiteread (b. 1963) is one of the Young British Artists, seen here in the notorious “Sensation” exhibition in 1999. Temperamentally, however, she couldn’t be more different from that group, lacking for example the drive-by irony of a Damien Hirst. Ms. Whiteread is old school: Her art expresses something personal and deeply felt.



Rachel Whiteread's 'Untitled (Domestic)' (2002) PHOTO: RACHEL WHITEREAD/GAGOSIAN, LONDON/LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK/GALLERIA LORCAN O'NEILL

Ms. Whiteread came to three dimensions via two, after learning the casting process while a painting student at Brighton Polytechnic in the 1980s. She then studied sculpture at the Slade School of Art in London. The painter's eye endures, however, in her fondness for color in some of her sculptures.

Another formative experience surely came earlier. As a child she helped her father lay the concrete floor when he converted the basement of the family home into a studio for Ms. Whiteread's artist mother. This likely would have opened her eyes to interior spaces and the way surfaces define them. That, at any rate, became her direction—articulating a vision of the world as so many containers rather than, as sculptors generally have, space-displacing solids. (She has spoken of wanting to “mummify the air in the room.”)



Rachel Whiteread's 'Closet' (1988) PHOTO: RACHEL WHITEREAD

Ms. Whiteread's breakout work, included here, was "Ghost" (1990), a plaster cast of the living room in a North London house of the kind she grew up in. A roughly 8-by-11-by-10-foot monolith, its most distinctive feature is a floor-level protrusion on one side—the hollow of the fireplace. Her next major work was "House" (1993), a concrete cast of the inside of an entire London house, subsequently torn down, that she exhibited at the original site. It, too, was later demolished. (A video in the exhibition documents its creation and destruction.)

Perhaps because, like "Closet," "Ghost" and "House," so much of her private work is rooted in memory, Ms. Whiteread is about the only contemporary artist I can think of who is up to the challenge of creating meaningful public monuments and memorials.



Rachel Whiteread's 'Table and Chair (Green)' (1994) PHOTO: RACHEL WHITEREAD/GAGOSIAN, LONDON/LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK/GALLERIA LORCAN O'NEILL

Much has been made—too much, in my view—of Ms. Whiteread's allegiances to the Minimalist and Post-Minimalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s: primarily in the abstract, geometric nature of her vocabulary. Overlooked in all this is the way she uses her materials—the white of the plaster and translucence of the resin—to impart a ghostly, otherworldly character to her sculptures, a mood that traces its roots to the dream world of the Surrealists.

In front of a work of Ms. Whiteread's the initial impulse is to reverse-engineer it in one's mind, to trace its shapes back to the original space from which the sculpture was cast. But it's impossible; you quickly hit a dead end. Mirror writing is one thing, three-dimensional form quite another. That's good though, since it allows the sculpture to move beyond the status of mere replica as other meanings and associations emerge.



Rachel Whiteread's 'Due Porte' (2016) PHOTO: RACHEL WHITEREAD

Take “Untitled (Domestic)” (2002). This enormous work, some 22 feet tall and resembling an asymmetrical V on a base, is a cast of the negative space of a fire escape staircase. (Kudos to Ms. Donovan, who has wittily installed it near an actual flight of steps.) But little is parsable beyond that, so other aspects come into view. It quickly asserts itself as a stunning abstract sculpture, its authoritative presence and audacious forms, one of them boldly cantilevered out and up, ensuring that it commands every cubic inch of the surrounding space. At the same time its monumentality, truncated appearance and pattern of notchings and surface striations combine to suggest an ancient architectural fragment recovered from some desert ruin.



Rachel Whiteread's 'Untitled (House)' (1993) PHOTO: RACHEL WHITEREAD/LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK, LORCAN O'NEILL, ROME/GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Ms. Whiteread's work would seem to require a certain minimum scale to be effective; some of her smaller efforts here fail to carry. An exception is her series of doors, placed on the floor leaning against the wall. Some take their titles from the dates of their source dwellings, making the sculptures the record of specific places. Yet through her choice of material, resin, she elevates them into metaphors of passage. They become at once barriers and portals: the former because of their manifest physicality; the latter because the resin's translucence makes them penetrable by our vision. Of such modest processes and premises is poetry made.