

GAGOSIAN

**The
Guardian**

Me, an art icon? Rachel Whiteread on the award-winning career she sculpted
As the artist prepares to receive Whitechapel Gallery's award, she reflects on her work and why she prefers Tate Britain to Tate Modern

Charlotte Higgins



Rachel Whiteread: 'It took a long time for me to process what had happened with House.' Photograph: Graeme Robertson/Guardian

Rachel Whiteread seems a touch sheepish at being the recipient of her latest honour, the Whitechapel Gallery's Art Icon award, given to a figure deemed to have made a profound contribution to their chosen medium and who has exerted influence over their own and subsequent generations of artists.

Icon is, after all, quite a strong word. "Many things seem to be making me feel rather grown up at the moment, not least my actual age," the 55-year-old says.

The YBAs are definitely OBAs these days, she adds – old British artists.

Whiteread has found herself looking back at her career a lot over the past few years. In 2017, a retrospective of her work opened to rave reviews at Tate Britain, before travelling to Vienna, Washington and now – via a period of unscheduled closure at the US National Gallery of Art owing to the government shutdown – St Louis.

And recently she had a get-together – “nothing grand, just a few of us went out for supper” – to mark the 25th anniversary of *House*, the work that propelled her, at 30, into fame and controversy and, the following year, made her the first woman to win the Turner prize.

House was the cast of a terraced dwelling in Bow, in the East End of London. The building was the last of a terrace due for demolition. Whiteread pumped the building full of concrete, and then stripped away its exterior. The resulting sculpture sparked fury, hostility, admiration, adoration. It was passionately supported and passionately reviled. It changed the conversation about public sculpture and art in general. And it stood for a mere 80 days.

“It took a long time for me to process what had happened with *House* and the how and why of making it, and the enormous presence it had very briefly, and then what happened to art and its audience,” she says. “Art came into focus as a commanding artform in the 1990s and *House* had a lot to do with that. I am very proud of all that, but I was a bit like an injured bird at the end of it. I was a very young artist. I had no idea quite what I’d done till it was over.”



House (1993), by Rachel Whiteread Photograph: Edward Woodman/Rachel Whiteread

Part of this long period of processing has fed into the creation of an ongoing series of works she calls *Shy Sculptures*. They are casts of buildings – huts or shacks or sheds – that are hard to find and take effort to see. There are two in the Californian desert, one on Governor’s Island in New York, one in Norway and one in Norfolk. The most recent is a cast of a Nissen hut in Dalby Forest in Yorkshire, commissioned as part of the 14-18 Now first world war commemorations.

The point, she says, is not the number of people who will get to see them, which almost by definition is small, but their persistence in people’s memories, just as *House* exists only in the memory. “The most important thing about them is that they exist – it’s kind of the sound of one hand clapping.”

This need for quietness and focus is a preoccupation for Whiteread. Britain’s relationship with contemporary art remains, she says, “incredibly superficial. I think there are too many exhibitions, there is too much of everything. People flick through exhibitions like a magazine rather than actually going and really trying to understand something. I do the same thing. You see shows that people have spent five years putting together and walk through in five minutes. Yeah, it’s lazy.

“It’s all become very immediate, and people expect things to be immediate. Somewhere like Tate Modern is hoist by its petard. It’s just like a shopping mall. People go in, and they go up, and they go down, and they go along, and then they leave having bought a sandwich and been to the shop. It’s just very circumscribed.

“I actually prefer Tate Britain as a museum,” she says. “It’s quite traditional and you look at something slowly, rather than dashing through.”

She finds it amusing, though, that drawing and colouring-in are among arts-based activities recently recommended by the NHS to combat mental health problems. It works, she says. “Artists are all nuts and drawing is what we all do to calm ourselves down, and have done for hundreds of years. And now the NHS has found it to be a very cheap alternative to doling out antidepressants. We need more of that: more slow radio and more colouring-in.”

The label YBA was always a somewhat loose catch-all for a generation of artists that included Whiteread, Damien Hirst, Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin and others. The differences between them – rather than similarities – have become more apparent over the years. Whiteread’s work is rooted in a formal sculptural tradition, and the artists who have influenced her, she says, are the minimalists and post-minimalist giants of mainly American art, above all Bruce Nauman.

Unlike Nauman, though, she will not be moving into film-making, or taking sharply different directions in the second half of her career. Casting is her language, and she still has plenty to say in it – about the domestic and the monumental, about the spaces that surround us, but also about, in a more political sense, how we live. Her light-filled, orderly studio gives clues of what might be to come in her work: there are images pinned to the wall of flattened and destroyed buildings, ripped apart by tornadoes. “Probably something that is quite connected to the state of our planet at the moment,” she says, drily.

The cast mattresses she showed in her retrospective have a relationship with a long history of sculpture – from the carved couches of Etruscan tombs to Canova’s Pauline Bonaparte reclining on her dimpled cushions. But they were also inescapably reminiscent of the discarded mattresses and cardboard boxes that homeless people adapt into shelters.

“Cardboard, flimsy tents, mattresses: that’s the stuff that I was growing up with in Thatcher’s time,” she says. And it’s back, a part of the urban landscape once more. “There’s a bit of Kentish Town [in London] where I walk to work, where homeless people have been living – it’s just all been cleared. It is the most appalling way of having to live, or exist. I’m a socialist. It’s in my DNA and it’s in my work, and I hope that it’s pretty obvious.”