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Cabin Fever: Rachel Whiteread's haunting new sculptures *Rough replaces smooth in her spiky new technique*



All artworks © Rachel Whiteread. Photo: Prudence Cummings Associates. Courtesy Gagosian

People, and buildings, have come and gone in Mile End since it was first recorded as a settlement in 1288. Some of the Victorian terraces that survived the bombing raids on east London during the second world war were slated for demolition half a century later. A resident in Grove Road held out, and eventually his was among the only houses standing. When at last he left, a 30-year-old British sculptor called Rachel Whiteread obtained a temporary lease on the property and set to work.

She erected a steel skeleton inside and sprayed liquid concrete onto the walls and up three flights of stairs. Removing the exterior shell left a mould of the home's interior. The ghostly effect was offset by the living sense of switches flicked, fireplaces aglow, door handles turned. "House" drew crowds, some in wonder, others jeering. "Wot for" someone spray-painted on the side. "Why not!" came the enigmatic reply. The sculpture won Ms Whiteread the Turner prize in 1993, the first time it was awarded to a woman. On the same night, she won the "anti-Turner" prize for the worst example of British art.

Two months later "House" was demolished on the orders of the local council. The artist sat in her car and watched. Then she went back to her studio. Her output since has been prodigious.

Some works have been massive, others intimate. Some are made of concrete or plaster, others of coloured resin, but all are recognisably Ms Whiteread's, full of surprising ideas about mundane settings. Having once cast the inside of a cupboard and covered it in black felt—to represent the feelings of a child taking refuge in a parent's wardrobe—she reproduced the empty space under chairs and in toilet-paper rolls. The monumental “Nameless Library” (2000) in Vienna, with its walls of books—the spines of the casts turned inwards and illegible—was a tribute to the Austrian Jews killed in the Holocaust. As Ben Luke, a critic, noted, casting empty spaces became her way of creating something “mysterious and unique and uncanny”. Casts were her “sculptural language”.

That is why the new work she has produced, at nearly 60, is so surprising. In the past, Ms Whiteread says, “the nature of the final object has been to do with pouring material into a mould. So it's always about making a negative”, which “ends up being the final piece”. In a stark departure, her new sculptures are “completely invented. And what I've invented is a skin of an object” rather than an interior.

The smooth and the rough

Ms Whiteread has gathered all manner of scrap material and shaped it into two cabins, which she has painted in layer after layer of white emulsion. Superficially, these assembled structures might seem to be distinguished from her moulds only by the construction methods. But the impact of the works could not be more different. The smooth exteriors and solid shapes of her earlier pieces “bring to mind classical ideals of proportion, balance and symmetry”, Richard Calvocoressi, an art historian, writes adroitly in the catalogue for Ms Whiteread's new show (due to open at Gagosian in London on April 12th). By contrast the latest sculptures evoke “openness, disorder, the uncontrolled”.

Instead of a smooth finish, in the new cabins there is old lath, discarded wire netting, slats of wood with nails banged into them, corrugated iron so degraded and full of holes as to resemble lace. The one called “Poltergeist” has the appearance of an abandoned shelter. Something much more catastrophic is happening in “Doppelgänger” (pictured); it appears “ripped open, torn apart, smashed, collapsed”, as Mr Calvocoressi puts it. Pinned to the wall of Ms Whiteread's studio in London is a small reproduction of “Raft of the Medusa”, and you can see how Théodore Géricault's Romantic painting of shipwrecked sailors inspired the cabin's rickety floor and its huge diagonal gash. “I wanted to make the opposite of what I'd been making,” Ms Whiteread says. “But I couldn't envisage what that was. I just knew I wanted it to be ephemeral, to be like skin and bones.”

Three things account for the shift, she believes. A career retrospective that filled the galleries at Tate Britain in 2017 (before a worldwide tour) brought home how much work she had made over 30 years, freeing her to set off in a new direction. Then the pandemic meant her new exhibition was postponed; it also forced her to look again at what was essential. She and her family withdrew to their house in rural Wales.

But it was a diagnosis eight years ago of bipolar disorder that helped the artist understand the emotional turmoil and depression she has experienced since she was a teenager. Ms Whiteread hasn't spoken about her illness publicly before, and insists it is not severe: “It wasn't out of control. I wasn't running around with my clothes off, screaming and shouting.” But she has been hospitalised more than once in the past decade and must take medication for the rest of her life.

She has long described herself as an emotional sponge: “I just soak things up. I’m well generally, but sometimes things just pile on, and a valve goes.” Looking back, she realises that her illness has always been present in her work. But identifying it caused a shift. “Something happened that freed me to somehow make that more apparent than maybe it was before.”

The name of the new work—“Internal Objects”—is telling. “Yes, it has been affected by my diagnosis without a doubt,” Ms Whiteread says. “I think what I’ve done here is I’ve extended my vocabulary, which is a very nice feeling. It feels like there’s a whole new thing I can do.”