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**Rachel Whiteread interview: I wanted to do the opposite to what I've been doing for 30 years**

*The former Turner Prize-winner is ringing the changes*

Nancy Durrant



*Rachel Whiteread photographed with her new sculptures / Matt Wittle*

The world's turned upside down. Or is it inside out? Actually, it's probably closer to outside in. The artist Rachel Whiteread, who has hitherto been celebrated for revealing the spaces within things, casting, among other non-objects, the cavities of chairs, windows, a library and, most famously, an entire Victorian terraced house, has suddenly turned things on their heads. Her new exhibition, opening (in real life!) at Gagosian Grosvenor Hill next week, will come as a surprise, in that it represents a complete volte face.

"I wanted to almost do the opposite," Whiteread tells me as she shows me round the tardis of a studio in Camden that she shares with her artist husband Marcus Taylor. "It was like pulling teeth, trying to figure out what it was going to be. I wanted to make the skeleton and the skin of something rather than the insides of it."

What she's ended up with is just that, a curiously eerie pair of sculptures, *Poltergeist* and *Doppelgänger*, that will be shown alongside a couple of groups of drawings and some smaller, bronze cast works. The sculptures were inspired by years of photographing derelict buildings, as well as a visit last year to Joshua Tree and the Mojave desert with her family, and the short stories of John Steinbeck (one is reproduced in the exhibition catalogue). The sculptures do indeed have something wind-swept and sand-blasted about them, these strange shells of sheds that look long-since abandoned, but white - bright white, like bones picked clean by a combination of scavengers and the relentless elements.



*Detail from Doppelgänger, 2020-21 / Rachel Whiteread*

“It’s all made from found material,” Whiteread tells me as we circle them, weird, fragile constructions of stuff - corrugated iron, branches “and some incredibly old timber that I’ve got out of sheds in the countryside”. She treated it all, “and then painted it, painted it and painted it and painted it, to stop the decay,” before building the pieces with her own fair hands. “It’s been a really enjoyable process,” she says, with a slight smile.

Monochrome they might be, but minimalist they are not. Whiteread’s work has always been unapologetic in its evocation of narrative and emotion.

“The thing I kept in mind while I was making them was catastrophes,” she says. “Elemental catastrophes, human catastrophes - poverty, all of those things. Just trying to somehow work with that aspect of life and wanting to somehow bring it into this time.

“We were all feeling really worn down by Trump weren’t we, and then there was the pandemic, which has been awful; Black Lives Matter; Extinction Rebellion - all of those things that have been percolating and coming to a head. We’re heading for disasters aren’t we? I think the pandemic’s just a taster of it.”

God. She’s probably right. But despite her matter-of-fact gloominess, Whiteread’s actually had a pretty decent lockdown.

“We’ve got a place up in Wales that we’ve been going to for years. I’ve got a 15 year-old son, who was then 14, and a 19 year-old son, at the time, and we all went up there thinking it was going to be for about three weeks. And we stayed there for three months.”

She took some drawing materials, and enjoyed the weather (“it was just lovely to spend three months just watching nature, and see a proper season through”) and once it became clear they were in it for the long haul, she made an attempt at creating a studio. “We’ve got a barn and we made it a room, and kind of cleaned it up, and it was going to be my studio. Then I just thought, ‘what am I doing here?’. It didn’t have a corner and it didn’t have a proper wall and I thought, this just isn’t me. So I just worked on the kitchen table.”

Still, it was “a big shock”, she says, “the way everything just sort of shut down. Then there was that sort of glimmer of hope where we all came out of it and I remember ‘the day we went to see art’. Me, Marcus and a couple of friends, we went to spend a day going round galleries and it was great. And then that was it. That was my food for the entire year.”



*House, 1993 / Rachel Whiteread*

It’s been particularly gruelling for young people, she suggests. “My poor son has really suffered, he’s doing his GCSEs this year, and it’s just a nightmare. They’re not doing GCSEs as such, but they’re doing this constant testing thing. And, you know, he’s done three quarters of the year on zoom. He’s just not a kid that can work like that and he’s found it very, very difficult.”

Her older son has had a slightly easier time, though “it’s been hard, obviously, because of friendships and all that. He’s now working again, on a building site. He’s just at the University of Life,” she says, in precisely the positive-slash-trying-not-to-be-anxious tone you’d expect.

Whiteread herself was slightly surprised to find that she coped better than she expected. “I do suffer from depression, so I was worried that I would get really down but actually, I didn’t.” She thinks she coped well because as an artist “you spend so much time on your own anyway. It’s the practice, it’s a very lonely thing.”

Lonely it may be, but she’s been committed to it for more than 30 years. So it seems strange now to note that as a young person, Whiteread rebelled at the idea. Her mother, who died in 2003, was Patricia Whiteread, who started out as a landscape painter and later took part in a number of important feminist exhibitions in the Eighties. “I didn’t want to do what my mum did,”

Whiteread says. Even so, she was intrigued by what Pat (as she was known - Whiteread's father Thomas, who died in 1988, was a Geography teacher and an administrator) was up to.

“My mum was involved in some very interesting feminist exhibitions,” she says, “and when I was about 13, I'd go down and make coffee and tea for them and just watch all these mad, rabid, smoking feminists argue with each other.



*Detail from Poltergeist, 2020 / Rachel Whiteread*

“It was interesting, because I was really into politics, and it was the time of Spare Rib and all that,” she continues. “And I think [I was] relieved that my mum wasn't the only one - that there were other people out there that were like her! But yes, growing up, I was all over the place. I just mucked about at school. I wasn't until the sixth form that I thought, come on, let's just figure this out, because I was perfectly capable.”

That school was Creighton School in Muswell Hill, one of the earliest comprehensives - when Whiteread was there, Molly Hattersley (wife of Roy) was the head teacher. “It was an experiment and not a very successful one,” Whiteread says. “It's very successful now, it's now called Fortismere and it's a very good school. But at the time, there was a grammar school and a secondary modern and they were sort of shoved together. There were some very complex teachers from the grammar school, and there were some very left wing teachers from the secondary school. It was quite an interesting mix.”

‘Very complex teachers’ sounds like three words with a lot of information packed into them, I say.

“It was quite unbelievable, the amount of stuff that went on. No one took a blind bit of notice of it,” she says. But she sort of loved it. “It was when the Greek Cypriot war was happening and the school was full of immigrants. It was just wonderful, I had West Indian friends, Bangladeshi friends, Turkish friends, Romanian friends, it was just this incredible array of people that were

all thrown together. It was quite something actually. A terrible education in some ways, but it was really good education in others. I'm glad I went there."

It clearly stood her in reasonable stead. She went to art school - as did both her older sisters - first a degree at Brighton then, in 1985, the Slade, having eventually (after a period of being "bloody minded") transferred from painting to sculpture.



*Rachel Whiteread in her exhibition at Gagosian Gallery / Matt Writtle*

Like many artists, Whiteread used to teach, but became disillusioned with it - perhaps ironically - as a result of the influence of YBAs, a group of which Whiteread, due to her inclusion in the Royal Academy's Sensation exhibition in 1997, has always been considered part.

"The whole thing with art school is that you're teaching yourself how to become this sort of independent creative when you leave. I loved [teaching], but it got to a point - something happened after the YBAs; the whole nature of teaching changed," she says. "The students wanted to know how to become famous, rather than how to just get on with making the work. And it really annoyed me. I was like, just work. That's what you need to do. Head down, work. It was such a different thing."

Not that she doesn't have huge sympathy for students. "I think the pandemic has been very damaging for students, and I think it's been very, very hard for them to sustain [working]," she says. "I feel sorry for them, because you know, the whole point of being at college is being with your contemporaries, and getting pissed and being in the world, and experiencing things in a different way."

In the face of a wave of virtual exhibitions and virtual or digital artworks, Whiteread remains optimistic about the future of sculpture. After all, she's just returned to constructing things with her hands after 30-odd years of casting, why not others?

"If people use technology, virtual reality or any of those things, that's because it's just the next thing that's happened. So the way that people turned to filmmaking, historically - it's just another medium. But I think there will always be people that just make," she says. "I think there will always be a need to make things. There will always be makers."