

## GAGOSIAN



### **There's A Ghost In My House: An Interview With Rachel Whiteread** *John Quin interviews the artist after the opening of her new show Internal Objects at Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London*

John Quin



RACHEL WHITEREAD, *Doppelgänger*, 2021 (detail) Corrugated iron, beech, pine, oak, household paint, and mixed media 280 x 445 x 450 cm © Rachel Whiteread Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Courtesy Gagosian

Rachel Whiteread was born in Essex in 1963. In 1993 she came to prominence with *House* when she cast a Victorian terraced house due for demolition in concrete. The work drew controversy and Tower Hamlets Borough Council had the work demolished at the beginning of 1994.

Whiteread heard of the decision to destroy *House* on the same night she became the first woman to win the Turner prize. Her works have been shown worldwide and some, like *Water Tower* in New York City, are now permanent installations.

In 2000 her *Holocaust Monument* was unveiled in central Vienna; many consider this one of the finest public works made in decades. She was made a Dame in 2019. The interview took place at the Gagosian gallery in Grosvenor Hill, London at the opening of her new exhibition, *Internal Objects*.

**When people talk to you about your sculptures like *House* or the *Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna do they ever ask if they can physically enter the work as if there were a secret space inside?**

Yeah, yeah... they do. Someone tried to break into *House* actually. They wanted to go and live inside it. I think more as a sort of intellectual exercise people wanted to go in and see how it's made, feel what the interior is like. You know, I think in a way maybe I wanted to go in which is why I've made these new pieces.

**These are open...**

Obviously you're not meant to go in them because they're extremely fragile but in terms of the way they were made I was definitely thinking of making them inside out rather than outside in, so it's the opposite of the older works. That was a very conscious process actually and even though I wasn't sure how I was going to do it, or what it was going to be, it felt very clear to me from really early on that I needed to do something that was very different to what I'd done before. And I think partly because I wanted to shake things up a bit and have a different kind of approach to the work.

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**I read some of your inspiration came from the Mojave and the work of John Steinbeck...**

I've always loved Steinbeck's writing and I'm drawn to American writers. The desert is somewhere I've really loved and have an affinity with. Places that are empty have a large elemental feel to them and I've been making, for a number of years now, these pieces called *Shy Sculptures* where I've wanted to create things in these very remote places so that the journey and the experiential part of it is as much of the process as just looking at something.

I feel that part of the work came out from some of the difficulty I've had in making some of the earlier sculptures like *Holocaust Memorial* (2000) or *House* (1993) where I just wanted to shy away from the hubbub around it. Making these *Shy Sculptures* – they're very quiet works, hardly

anyone sees them, and I'm really happy about that. For me it's about what lives there in my imagination and I can actually place those things from my imagination in a space and know that it is located somewhere on the planet.

As for the Steinbeck influence... there's a spareness to life and love [in his work] and how people have a home in these sorts of desolate places. All of those aspects touch me, I think because of the quietness of it, the closed-ness of it...

**Sticking with writers, have the new sculptures called *Doppelgänger* and *Poltergeist* anything to do with the Dennis Johnson 2018 story – ‘Doppelgänger, Poltergeist’?**

Oh, wow! I had no idea about that... but I have read it! I'd totally forgotten about that. Maybe it was in my mind somewhere or other. I actually knew him! We were on a bizarre art Caribbean trip. Where that volcano is currently erupting. He was there with his wife. Extraordinary time!

**Place is very important to you. Can we run through a few that are key in your life? Let's start with Berlin.**

Sure, I went to Berlin first in 1991, soon after the wall came down and the structure of the old East was very much still in place. Alexanderplatz was this huge empty space; the East and the West were still two separate places. Access to parts of Eastern Europe meant that I also spent a lot of time looking and going to concentration camps and trying to understand that history. If it hadn't been for that experience I would never have tried to have any kind of intellectual discourse with what had happened during the Holocaust.

So Berlin was a very important place for many reasons. And also we had this wonderful flat, an enormous nineteenth-century thing. Back home we were living in a one-bedroom council flat. I had a lovely room that I used as a drawing studio. I'd never been able to have that luxury before and that's actually been something that has transposed itself into my life as an artist now where I always have somewhere that I draw that is separate from my sculpture area.

**Essex. Tell us about your Essex. *The Quietus* digs the mysteries of Essex...**

My Essex! I'm not going to say where it is exactly. We have a beach house there we built. It's a very beautiful place. It's the closest place to the dark depths of California I've experienced, a really strange place. It's somewhere where you're really hit by the weather. You have this incredible tidal range that has flooded the house a couple of times. But it's fantastic. I love it there.

Where we are it feels like an incredible island in the summer. The sea isn't the cleanest but I love the wind farms. They're beautiful and mesmeric. A big sea installation with these lights going round and the old forts out at sea. It's a really interesting area with the nuclear power station [at Bradwell], big tankers going past...it's bizarre at times. In some ways it's a kind of dark place. The remoteness. People living on the edges...

**Is there a musical dimension to your life there? Do you listen to music in the studio?**

I do... all sorts of things. I go from Nirvana and PJ Harvey and Bowie, whatever, to Max Richter, Keith Jarrett and classical. I had a long period when I first left college of listening to Norwegian jazz and that has a very much 'on the edge', ephemeral feel.

I've got music as a constant companion. I moved studios a while back but I don't have a music system in my new studio so I have to rely on Spotify and I kind of hate it. It's like bad versions of things. We had Max Richter playing in the gallery recently and we got talking about Spotify and I said it was like buying those records from Woolworths as a kid when you got bad cover versions. Like the cheapest option.

### **And Brighton?**

I loved my time in Brighton. When I was there it was still quite edgy. I was there at the time of the bomb at the Grand. I'd been outside at the conference screaming and shouting and protesting the day before. It was incredibly shocking – I felt the explosion and turned the radio on and cycled down there – it was bizarre, surreal.

### **The works in the show called *Poltergeist* and *Doppelgänger*...do you believe in ghosts?**

No. But I believe in the mind and the tricks it can play. I've had hallucinations before: you think you've seen something. It's neurological. I've had out-of-body experiences through meditation. You can have very strange experiences that are not drug-induced or alcohol-induced but are real and neurological. I'm not opposed to experiencing those things, I'm not frightened by them, I'm interested in them. And it's always something that I've played with. As a kid we'd scare ourselves to death doing séances. Sort of teenage hysteria that would manifest itself into real physical things happening... through terror!

### **And doppelgängers...do you think you've got a doppelgänger out there?**

I don't know if I've got one but... I'll probably make one!