

# An inverted truth

Jonathan A Anderson gets under the skin of the current retrospective of Rachel Whiteread at Tate Britain

For the past three decades, Rachel Whiteread has drawn our attention to the inconspicuous spaces within, between, and around the surfaces that shape our everyday lives. Using media with an obvious liquid-turned-solid materiality – plaster, resin, rubber, concrete, wax, metal – she casts interior moulds of the discreet spaces beneath beds, floorboards, tables, and chairs. She solidifies the inner cavities of cabinets, shipping parcels, even entire rooms, and makes conspicuous and impenetrable the passageways through which people normally move. In each case, fluid volumes of habitable air become uninhabitable solids.

On the one hand, there is something coolly conceptual about all of this, merging the formal and procedural simplicity of minimalism and postminimalism back into the traditions of representational sculpture – and doing so with brilliant concision. On the other hand, it is precisely this merger that gives Whiteread's works a lyrical and profoundly affecting quality, lacing her cool, anti-expressive forms with concerns about temporality, loss, and the urban 'enframing' of human life (to borrow Heidegger's term).

Whiteread's large retrospective at Tate Britain surveys three decades of her career, offering valuable insights into its intellectual and material underpinnings. The entryway to the exhibition is a kind of antechamber meant to establish a double framing for the rest of the show: a long glass case displays numerous found objects, notes, and sculptural studies from the artist's studio, emphasising the small-scale tactile investigations that energise her practice, whereas the walls attest to her large-scale public interventions, including documentary imagery of her famous *House*, 1993 in East London, *Watertower*, 1998 in New York, *Holocaust Memorial*, 2000 in Vienna, *Monument*, 2001 for Trafalgar Square, and so on.

Passing into the main body of the exhibition, the space opens into a vast 1,500m<sup>2</sup> gallery without almost any of its usual dividing walls, leaving it



Rachel Whiteread *House*, 1993

unprecedentedly open. This openness emphasises the extent to which Whiteread's sculptures are themselves exceedingly architectural: her full-room mould *Untitled (Room 101)*, 2003 stands in the center of the gallery alongside her massive, beautiful *Untitled (Stairs)*, 2001. But this open gallery format, wherein most of the works are visible from any location, also de-emphasises the vaguely chronological

construction of the show in favor of typological arrangement: interior moulds of cabinetry, beds, water bottles, bookshelves, parcels, doors, windows, and desks each occupy their own respective zones. The space is like a massive specimen display of the various spatial configurations in which modern lives have been lived.

Whiteread's early works reveal metaphorical orientations in her work



from the beginning. The plaster-cast interior of a fireplace, for example, is titled *Cell*, 1990; the solidified space surrounding a bathtub becomes *Ether*, 1990; the plaster interior of a hot water bottle is a headless, limbless *Torso*, 1988; the space beneath a twin bed is *Shallow Breath*, 1988. Indeed, the latter work was made after the death of the artist's father, establishing an early link between her sculptural procedures and allusions to death, which subtly pervade her work. Critics have often noted the correspondences between Whiteread's mould-making and traditional death masks, even entombment. In her own words, her method functions to 'mummify the air in the room',<sup>1</sup> preserving the volume of a space while eliminating all further life-potential within it. And, as powerfully presaged in *House*, these interior moulds usually imply the destruction of the structures themselves. In *Untitled (One Hundred Spaces)*, 1995, for example, a 5-by-20 grid of colourful resin blocks were cast from the spaces beneath 100 found chairs – each of which had to be dismantled to be removed from its mould. Each unique block marks the absence of an individual chair that no longer survives, and given the long-established use of

chairs as visual stand-ins for persons (survey Vincent van Gogh to Doris Salcedo), it is difficult not to see this as a memorial to anonymous lives. Whatever else they might be, almost all of Whiteread's sculptures are deadpan *memento mori* ('remember you must die').

In her catalogue essay, Linsey Young underscores the social and geographical particularity of Whiteread's works: 'They map a very specific life: one lived within London, or more accurately, East London, with its unruly mess of history, poverty, energy and creativity' and its particular 'collective experience of urban dwelling.'<sup>2</sup> Though often overlooked in Whiteread's work, this 'unruly mess' includes thick religious histories. One of her most important sites is the building she converted into her Bethnal Green studio in 1999: she cast massive sculptures from the stairwells in this building, from many of its rooms, from its dilapidated flooring (including the aluminium *Untitled Floor (Thirty-six)*, 2002, and so on. The artist was, in her own words, 'combing the [building's] surfaces for its history'.<sup>3</sup> And, importantly, this history includes religious communities that were grappling with the meanings of human living and

dying: originally a Baptist church, the building had, after the war, been converted into a Jewish synagogue and then into a textile warehouse.

Briony Fer argues that Whiteread's work 'sets sculpture very decisively on a temporal axis',<sup>4</sup> but this axis extends, not only in a retrospective direction, toward lost histories. The very logic of mould-making is also future-oriented in the sense that moulds are traditionally preparatory for casting further forms. Whiteread presents the moulds themselves for consideration, but presumably she does so (at least partially) for the sake of the ways the absent ordinary structures (and their histories) are reproduced – or 'recast' – in viewers' imaginations. This imaginative recasting raises profound questions about the contingency of the lives we're living: we glimpse particular pasts that could have been otherwise, futures that might be lived otherwise. These works thus urge us toward indeterminate futures: they are deadpan *memento vivere* ('remember you must live'), testing the hopes and/or dread by which we imagine our ongoing collective shaping and reshaping of life. Further, and with wilder abandon, one wonders if the temporal axis of Whiteread's work includes (faintly) an



Rachel Whiteread *Untitled (one hundred spaces)*, 1995

eschatological horizon. The inside-out specificity of her works holds open the wonderfully ludicrous notion that her source objects – this bed, that home, those chairs, these lives – might somehow be reconstituted around these moulds. Indeed, Whiteread’s ghostly, mummified spaces seem to haunt the outer limits of what might be hoped for: is it possible to imagine the ‘unruly mess of history’, of which these forms are artifacts, as not only memorialisable but as somehow redeemable?

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1. Charlotte Mullins, ‘Traces of Life’, in *Rachel Whiteread*, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2004), 23–24.
2. Linsey Young, ‘The Power of Things’, in *Rachel Whiteread*, ed. Ann Gallagher and Molly Donovan, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2017), 164.
3. Whiteread, quoted in Briony Fer, ‘Eyes Cast’, in *ibid.*, 135.
4. Fer, ‘Eyes Cast’, 137.

‘Rachel Whiteread’ is at Tate Britain 12 September 2017 – 21 January 2018, and tours to 21er Haus Vienna (March – July 2018), National Gallery of Art in Washington (September 2018 – January 2019), and Saint Louis Art Museum (March – June 2019).

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