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Touching the Void – Empty Spaces are Artist's Blank Slate

By Kenneth Baker

Rachel Whiteread's art has had an impact far out of proportion to its quantity.

Trained in painting at Brighton Polytechnic and in sculpture at the Slade School in London, Whiteread, 40, said she suffered the common art school graduate's fate of not knowing what to make after leaving school.

"I had a studio," she told San Francisco Art Institute students at a private event last week, "but I couldn't spend any time there because I had to work so many hours to pay the rent."

Even today, she said, "Financially I can't afford mistakes, so I spend weeks planning what I'm going to do. As a result I make perhaps four or five pieces a year."

Whiteread found a path between conceptual art and sculptural tradition that almost no one had noticed before. Bruce Nauman was the exception, as Whiteread acknowledged. Twentieth century sculptors talked a lot about solids and voids. Whiteread did something about them: She turned voids into solids, casting them in materials that range from plaster and concrete to rubber and acrylic resin.

In the mid '60s, Nauman had cast in cement the space under a studio chair. When asked about this by an Art Institute listener, she said, "Nauman had a show in London in the late '80s and that piece was in it. So I know that I saw it, but I have no conscious memory of seeing it. Or maybe I'm just in denial."

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's current show, "Supernova: Art of the 1990s from the Logan Collection," includes a representative Whiteread piece. "Untitled (Fiction)" (1997) has three wall-mounted horizontal tiers, 6 feet long, cast in plaster. In each element, a smooth upper edge overhangs a sort of notched, uneven frieze of pallidly multicolored relief.

It takes a moment -- and the title helps -- to recognize that Whiteread has solidified the spaces above and behind three jam-packed shelves of books.

Whiteread explained at the SFAI lecture that she molded the piece around pulp-fiction paperbacks, expecting the color on their pages' edges to tint the plaster. It did. In her work, she prefers color rooted in materials and processes.

Also at the lecture, which she repeated two days later at SFMOMA, Whiteread traced a personal history of her work. To both audiences she admitted some reluctance.

"I've been very open here but usually I'm very private. I don't let people in on my work," she said. "If you give everything away, it spoils the experience" for viewers.

Whiteread recalled how in the late '80s just sitting and thinking in her studio hour after hour led her to want to "mummify the air in a room." She set about planning "Ghost" (1990), the plaster cast of an entire room's interior surface. Its exhibition in London in 1990 made her an instant celebrity in the art world.

She showed a slide of the room in an abandoned house that she chose to cast, noting her requirements that it had to have a door and windows, fireplace and wall mouldings. She laboriously cast sections of walls and ceiling, including doors and windows, and painstakingly assembled them to produce an articulated block the exact size of the room's interior, with woodwork and hardware details incised in it.

Cast sculpture has always played with relations of inside and outside, but never so dramatically or profoundly.

Whiteread's notoriety mushroomed after Artangel Trust, a sponsor of London public art projects, asked her for a proposal. She suggested casting the entire interior space of a three-story house in London's East End, where she had grown up.

After running a maze of bureaucratic and construction difficulties, Whiteread succeeded in building a cast concrete sculpture -- a sort of rigid, freestanding lining -- of an entire house interior, using the house as a mold. She and a crew finally pulled away the original derelict structure to reveal a tall, tombstone-like gray solid, its surface impressed with interior details, including windows and stairs.

Public reaction -- both positive and negative -- built slowly but reached an intensity unprecedented in Britain for a work of contemporary art.

On the very day that a singularly hostile London borough councilor succeeded in having "House" (1993) condemned -- after only a few weeks' existence -- Whiteread won the Turner Prize, Britain's most prestigious art award.

"House" had clinched it.

"I think there were 21 media crews there from all over the world on the day 'House' was demolished," Whiteread said.

She bemoaned the fact that "House," which sat behind a locked fence, became a blank slate for graffiti and other vandalism. "People even tried to break into it a couple of times," she noted.

When a listener at her SFMOMA lecture suggested a contradiction between her democratic impulses and her concern about having her work touched, Whiteread replied gruffly that "there's a difference between touching and destruction. I didn't like the level of participation, shall we say, that 'House' brought forth. I really felt quite injured by the whole thing."

Another public project, more than five years in the making, put a capstone on the international esteem Whiteread now enjoys: her Holocaust memorial for the square known as the Judenplatz in Vienna.

The city of Vienna accepted her 1995 proposal to make a concrete mold of a fictive private library, a room lined floor to ceiling with books, for the site of a Medieval synagogue. But again bureaucratic hassles snowballed. "It's a work I'm very proud of," Whiteread said, "but making it was really a horrible struggle."

As a Holocaust memorial, her piece mutely rephrases in elegiac sculptural terms Heine's prophetic thought that where books are burned, the burning of people will follow. Whiteread expressed surprise and pleasure that to date no graffiti has sullied her Holocaust memorial.

"I don't want to be known as memorial maker," Whiteread told her SFMOMA audience. "But it wasn't 24 hours after Sept. 11 that I got a fax from the New York Times asking what I would put there."

She never replied.