Rachel Whiteread's meteoric rise to prominence in the 1990s cemented her reputation as one of Britain's most important sculptors. Her work involves casting the space within and around objects, using materials such as resin, plaster, concrete, and rubber, to create negative impressions of her chosen object. She made her first architecturally scaled work in 1990 with *Ghost*, the cast of an entire room. In 1993 she was commissioned to make *House*, the cast of the inside of a terraced house in East London. Her commissions have come under much public scrutiny—none more so than *Holocaust Memorial* for the Judenplatz in Vienna (2000), which marks the genocide of the Austrian Jews in World War II.

*Room 101*, recently unveiled at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, is a cast of the actual room that inspired George Orwell's nightmarish vision of the future in his novel *1984*. Whiteread's current projects include the realization of a number of experiments using new materials.

Ina Cole: You have achieved an enormous amount over the last decade and your reputation is assured, yet you've said that you now feel you have arrived at a pause. How do you intend to use your period of respite in the planning of future projects?

Rachel Whiteread: I'm at a stage where I worked incredibly hard for 10 years and simply need time to take stock of things and start thinking about how other projects will happen. In the last couple of years we've moved house, moved studio, and had a child. It's been a lot to deal with, and it's now time to very quietly get back to work. There's an exhibition called "The Snow Show" that I decided to get involved with in Finland (through April 2004). I'm making a large work in snow and ice, which I think will be an interesting way of moving forward and may lead to something else.

The BBC recently asked me to make a casting of a room at Broadcasting House, which George Orwell had apparently used as his office—*Room 101* from *1984*. I couldn't say no: the room was about to be demolished, and this was a way of making an imprint of it. I made an enormous sculpture, which is now on show at the V&A in the Cast Courts (through June 27, 2004). So, things like that have been going on over the past nine months or so. Now I really want to get back to the intimate process in the studio that sometimes gets taken over when you're making large pieces and end up producing your work, rather than physically creating it.

*Monument*, 2001. Resin and granite, 9 x 5.1 x 2.4 meters.
IC: You recently turned a former synagogue in East London into your home and studio. Why did you take on this project?
RW: We were originally looking for a site to build a studio and house, but we realized that it was just impossible; developers know what every square centimeter is worth, and there's no way we could have afforded it. So we found this building, which was in a very disheveled state. It had been used as a textile warehouse for a long time and we weren't sure what to do with it, but we knew that we wanted to try and live and work in the same place. I've lived in this part of London ever since I came back from Brighton 15 years ago. It's really changing now, with a lot of construction going on. It could be a problem to live next door to this; however, I'm optimistic with things like that. There are a lot of artists living around here and a varied community, which is what I particularly like about it.

IC: A recent work, Untitled (Stairs), consists of casts taken from your new home. They are poised at an incomprehensible angle, exaggerated by the fact that you're looking at the space where the stairs were, not the stairs themselves. How did your fascination with staircases come about?
RW: It really started a long time ago when I made House. I work in a linear way, and when I made Ghost, I thought it would be interesting to explore the possibility of casting an entire house; House came from Ghost. When I made House, I thought there was something missing; I was slightly irritated by the fact that I'd left the walls in and that the staircase hadn't actually been taken out. It was like the mold hadn't been completely taken apart. About eight years later, I finally worked out how I could do it. I'd been trying to cast stairs before that, but I didn't have the right materials or the expertise. I also didn't have the staircases. There was a possibility of doing it with certain buildings that had been demolished, but it just didn't feel right.

When we purchased this building there were three staircases in it, which was fantastic, and I just worked with those. We made the first one, and I was so excited by it that we ended up casting all of them. It's very difficult to turn a space into an object in your mind, so we made models and played around with them, trying to work out which way they would go and how they might sit. When the actual object was cast and put in the studio, it did something I hadn't felt for a long time with a sculpture—psychological and physiological things where you felt upside down and things felt upside down or turned on their heads. It really excited me as a very simple act of making something, rotating it, and finding the right way up for it. I enjoyed mapping this building, and I also made some casts of the floors and the two apartments, which felt like a way of getting to know the building and understanding it.

IC: You have been working in London for a long time, yet the spaces you cast are often private spaces where one might hide. Do you feel that the faster city life becomes, the greater becomes the need to hide or to create impenetrable barriers?
RW: Maybe, but I think I need London. I lived in Berlin for 18 months and that was a much quieter city. I made more work there in that time than I've ever done anywhere, because I was on my own and really able to concentrate. I definitely need quiet times when we go to the country and take a deep breath, but I do need the hubbub of city life around me. I use it as my sketch book. I don't know if that will change, who knows; you get older, you change, life changes. When I made Monument, for example, I was trying to create a pause in the city and place something that felt very quiet in Trafalgar Square.

IC: Could you imagine living and working in more tranquil surroundings, or is it the contradictory need to create a private space within the urban environment that gives your work such potency?
RW: I get as much from the hubbub as I can from anywhere else, but I am essentially a private person...
and need time to stare at a white wall—I don’t mean literally, but meditatively. When you become more successful, it’s much harder to find that time and to plan ahead. I’m trying to work out a way of changing, of going backwards and remembering when I was working in the depths of the East End and cycling to the studio. The freshness of that time was easier, and I’m trying to find that place again.

I’ve done a lot of traveling over the past five years. I recently went to Brazil for an exhibition of my work organized by the British Council [currently at MAM Sao Paulo through May 3, 2004]. When I’m traveling I take photographs, walk around markets and back streets, and drive out into deserts. That time really is research—you know it’s going to feed back into your work. I’ve also been walking in Wales over the past couple of years, and there are a lot of reservoirs there. I’ve become fascinated with these great cast bits of water, these manmade, rather dreadful but necessary things, which are essentially incredibly poetic forms. I just wanted to go and look at places and think about making sculpture. I’m still absorbing all of that. It definitely feels like a thoughtful time at the moment.

I: Do you feel that you’re standing on the outside looking in, taking time to observe aspects of life that often otherwise go unnoticed?

RW: Yes, but I think a lot of artists do that; it’s part of being an artist. You seek out things that are hidden, draw them out of the environment. I do that, but I also scratch around with the residue of cities. What’s odd about living around here now is that a lot of the second-hand shops and resource places where I used to get things have all changed and moved further out. We’re living right on the edge of Brick Lane market, which is a very established market, and sometimes you can’t even get out of the door for people selling their wares. We’ve actually designed this building so that we’re living on the roof, looking straight onto this ever-changing East End environment.

I: Your work has been compared to that of Donald Judd, Bruce Nauman, Carl Andre, and Gordon Matta-Clark. However, you pushed the boundaries in making the invisible visible, which was remarkable, particularly in monumental projects such as House and Holocaust Memorial. The demolition of House caused a public outcry. Were you saddened by its destruction, or did you feel that ephemerality was important to its meaning?

RW: I don’t think I would have liked to see House as a permanent piece because it wasn’t made with that in mind. I would have liked it to stay up for a year, and it only stayed up for about four months. The main reason I was sad when House was demolished was because I felt I never really had a chance to see it properly, because making work in the street is very different from making work in the studio. I was actually quite ill by the time I’d finished. It was all just crazy: I used to go to the site virtually in disguise and sit in the car around the corner, and every time it would be mobbed by people. There was an unfortunate set of circumstances, mainly because of one particular council member who wanted it demolished. He thought that the middle classes were lobbying for it, and it wasn’t a middle class neighborhood. We ended up renting the ground that House was on from the council, so it could stay up for an extra month or so. I suggested we make a children’s park there, and they said no, they didn’t want any memory of the piece. However, people continue to tell me their memories of seeing House and I’m very proud to have made it, but I am sad. I don’t think it completely lost its dignity, but its dignity was rather hijacked.

I: Holocaust Memorial was a difficult and emotive commission. There has been much speculation about
the problems of this sculpture, involving politicians, local residents, and factions within the Jewish community. Why did the piece become so contentious?

RW: Mainly because there was a political struggle in the city, and the ministers involved were always changing. Some of them were desperate for it to happen, others didn’t care, and it just went on and on. Austria is a strange and complex place politically. I got absolutely frustrated in the end when I was just used as a political pawn, and I refused to go over there. We worked like that for four years. Without the guidance and support of the architects, Jabor-negg & Palfy, and of Andrea Schlieker as liaison, I wouldn’t have managed to complete the project. However, I’m happy to have made it, and I’m proud that it’s there. It hasn’t been graffitied, extraordinarily, and I think it’s well received in the city, but I haven’t been back since it opened and there would have to be a very good reason for me to return.

IC: How important is the historical casting of space to the development of your work? I’m referring to feats such as the excavation of Pompeii, Egyptian sarcophagi, and the making of death masks in the 15th century. Are these issues you think about?

RW: In the past, yes. Casting has now become the language I make work in, but when I was looking for that language I was definitely looking at sarcophagi. I’ve never been to Pompeii, quite intentionally, because I don’t want to be disappointed. The image I have in my mind is probably stronger. I had a period when I went to look at volcanoes for example, which for me was as interesting as going to look at a pyramid. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a manmade thing; it can be completely elemental and unpredictable. I recently saw an exhibition called “Body Worlds,” which was extraordinary. The work was dreadful, but there was something fascinating about it as well. There were casts of blood vessels and a whole artery system in the body, which looked like fantastic sea plants. It was the casting of the body’s interior that really interested me, rather than the fact that it was a macabre 21st-century circus.

IC: Nineteenth-century sculptors referred to the stages of casting in bronze as life, death, and resurrection; the object is destroyed through casting, only to live again in bronze. Your objects remain in the stage where they have shed life yet retain the potential for transformation. Do you feel that you always maintain control of how a work is developing, or can things happen in the process that sometimes surprise you?

RW: Yes, definitely. If I’m in the studio and an accident happens, I’m very happy to embrace it and make decisions based on it. If accidents happen in the foundry, it has to be destroyed and done again. You go from
I think that in those stages there are already enough changes. I have to be very clear as to what the end result is going to be, and it’s really satisfying when you’ve made something in the studio, send it off, and later it comes back and it’s exactly as you wanted. When I made some of the early rubber sculptures, I wasn’t sure of how they were going to work. They were cast flat, and I was literally wrestling around with them in the studio. Then they would slump against the wall and that would be perfect—they found their own home. Those things become part of your language, and in order to work with a full deck of cards I had to spend 15 years developing the language. I’m now working with all those different elements, and by taking a pause I hope to start playing again. It’s a linear but organic process: I’m always thinking in a straight line, but these little things happen along the way. The casting process has to be structured because you can’t make a seven-ton sculpture and think, well that hasn’t worked. But the language will always change and develop.

IC: Are there any materials or methods you haven’t tried yet that you intend to use in future projects?

RW: I just want to start on a whole bunch of new material samples that I’ve got laid out in the studio. I’ve done a lot of research in the past, and I’m sure I will continue with it because I’m always curious about materials. I don’t think of a piece and then try to find the material; they’re equally balanced, and I’m playing with the two things all the time. For “The Snow Show,” various artists and architects were paired to make ice and snow sculptures, which will be dotted over two areas. It’s going to be very bizarre, I have no doubt. The show will be up for a couple of months before it becomes too dangerous for people because of the weather. I’m going to spend time with the architect in the studio. We’re working on an idea that involves an inside-out, upside-down architectonic structure. I’m currently working with models and drawings, but it’s all in the early stages so I can’t be too specific about a description of the work.

IC: Your idea of casting space began when you cast the inside of a wardrobe where you used to hide as a child. By making a void solid you are effectively shutting viewers out, you are sealing off the space they would normally enter. Is this just part of the process, or is there also a psychological intention?

RW: My very first show consisted of casts from a wardrobe, a dressing table, a hot water bottle, and the bed, Shallow Breath. These four elements sat in a gallery as though it were a bedsit. I’m not from a wealthy background, and it was simply a memory of my childhood, of my grandparents and my parents. Some of those early works were autobiographical and very much to do with my childhood and my father dying. Over the years it still comes from there, but it comes from all sorts of other places too. I think the staircase pieces are as psychologically loaded as Closet or Shallow Breath. I always use the word “physiologically” because I think it’s something psychological, but also something to do with the body—how you use space, how space is connected, how you sit on a chair and put your legs under a table. It’s something I use all the time and will continue to use, whether it’s about absence or presence.

IC: You have said that you need to make the sculptures. Where does this urgency come from?

RW: I think if you’re creative and have an idea you know will work, it’s almost like an addiction and you have to make it.

IC: You have called what you do “mapping, a process of making traces solid.” You are in a sense immortalizing the spaces that you, and all those before you, have entered. Do you actually think of your casts as tombs, containing the ghosts of previous inhabitants, as well as traces of yourself?

RW: Yes, that’s a very rounded way of looking at it. With Room 101, all six sides are cast—the floor, the ceiling, and the walls. It’s the first time, other than with the staircases, that I’ve made a room that’s not solid: there’s an interior to it, yet it’s completely sealed and does feel tomb-like. Ghost, for instance, didn’t feel very tomb-like because it didn’t have a ceiling. I never try to make something look like a tomb: I make it as I want the object to be and then it will have these other associations and connotations. When I saw Room 101, it was a plant room full of all the gubbins that kept this big building breathing—all metal work and pipes. Everything was ripped out, and I was left with a blown-up, pockmarked room. It was at the beginning of the Iraq war, so it felt like a response to that—it actually felt like a room that had been bombarded with shrapnel. When you look around London and inspect the outsides of buildings, they often still have pockmarks all over them. So, it looks very much like that, which felt quite Orwellian.

Ina Cole is based in Warwickshire, England.
COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Mapping Traces: A Conversation with Rachel Whiteread
PAGE(S): 36-41
WN: 0409400727013

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher: http://www.sculpture.org

Copyright 1982-2004 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.