

TRACES OF LIFE

With her table pieces Yellow Leaf and Fort, Whiteread had moved from casting bedroom furniture to objects from other areas of the home. Simultaneously, she had her mind set on an altogether bigger project: the casting of a whole room. The result was *Ghost* (fig.16), which was exhibited at the Chisenhale Gallery, Bethnal Green, in 1990, and was bought by Charles Saatchi. When she set out with the idea to cast a room, she was still relatively unknown as an artist, but this work would put her on the shortlist for the 1991 Turner Prize.

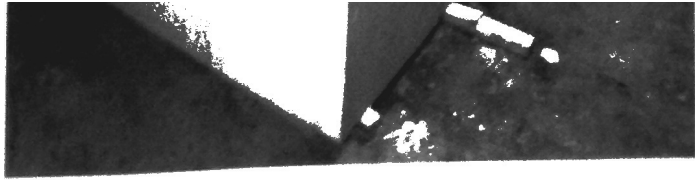
While Chisenhale's director Emma Dexter was supportive of Whiteread's proposal, she didn't have the money needed to commission it. Whiteread had to apply for funding, writing on her application forms that she wanted to 'mummify the air in a room'. She received money from both Greater London Arts and the Elephant Trust, and the project became a reality.

The living-room she found to cast from was in a house at 486 Archway Road, a Victorian property that was about to be renovated. Located not far from where she grew up in Muswell Hill, its rooms were on a similar scale to those in her childhood home. Whiteread spent a month visiting the room every day prior to casting, deciding how she was going to tackle it. In order to work out the optimum panel size she should use to cast each section of the room, so that when it was reassembled it would have a sense of balance, of wholeness, she looked at the paintings of Piero della Francesca, an artist whom she greatly admired for his sense of composition. Her largest previous work had been the cast of a wardrobe, where plaster was poured into a mould on the floor. Now, she had to work out how to take casts directly from the walls, and ensure that she could remove them through the living-room door once they were complete. She also had to make sure that she could lift

them. She completed most of the panels for *Ghost* on her own over a three-month period, smothering the walls with thick clods of wet plaster, at one point blocking herself in as she cast the door.

At the time, Whiteread envisaged that *Ghost* would be exhibited for a few weeks at the Chisenhale before, in all likelihood, ending up in a skip. She didn't even really understand the full effect of what she was making until she assembled all the panels on a metal armature in her studio and began to grasp the level of disorientation that the viewer would experience. *Ghost* recreates the living room at 486 Archway Road, each panel revealing the shape of the walls, fireplace, window, door, skirting and cornice. But everything appears in reverse, inside-out, the deep skirting now a recessed frieze, the grid of tiles around the bulging fireplace indented. Whiteread realised, as she looked at the reversed light switch, that she had become the wall, looking onto the space that had once been inside the room and was now solidified. She had succeeded in her aim of mummifying the air in the room, of entombing the social space in which lives were once lived out. Visual reminders of those lives remained – the soot in the fireplace, the chips in the skirting board, the fragments of paint that had been absorbed into the plaster as it dried. But life itself was absent. The work is a spectral negative, an after-image of a room that no longer exists, a record that had been bleached of colour like an old photograph left out in the light. In a sense cathartic, *Ghost* is a mausoleum to Whiteread's own past, yet it speaks of a shared sense of loss, of memories bricked in and entombed.

When she was a teenager, Whiteread worked at Highgate cemetery in north London as a volunteer, helping to repair broken headstones and pillaged crypts. She clearly remembers the sensation of terror coupled with fascination when approaching a tomb



VALLEY 1990 [17]
Plaster and glass
95.3 x 185.4 x 96.5 (37 1/2 x 73 x 38)
Private Collection

whose door was ajar, daring herself to look within, fearing to see the body she knew must be there. *Ghost* initially appears as if it has been hewn from solid rock, but as you walk around the sculpture, cracks appear in its solid armature and – rather uneasily – you are drawn to look between the panels, to see what lies inside. The flaky panels are like chalky white grave-stones, with chinks of light appearing between them, pulling you closer to look into the tomb.

Ghost is not a solid tomb but a facade, a skin peeled away from a dying room, a death mask capturing surface detail, not substance. The fact that there is no ceiling, and that one can see through the sculpture to the metal scaffold within, doubly denies your reading of the sculpture as a room. Nothing is as it seems: not only is everything in reverse, but the seeming solidity of the negative room is also challenged. *Ghost* questions what a room actually is – is it the four walls, the ceiling, the door, or is it the life that is lived out within it? Is the room purely a container for social space, a place to act out lives, or does it – did it – have a physical presence?

Ghost was exhibited on its own in the windowless, warehouse-like Chisenhale Gallery. Whitehead's first significant show could not have been more different from the early commercial success of many others of her generation – Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Fiona Rae, Ian Davenport. While they graduated more or less as a group from Goldsmiths College in the late 1980s, and exhibited together in an old Docklands building in the exhibition *Freeze* (a show often cited as the starting point for the Young British Artists), Whitehead was tenaciously following her own path. But she nevertheless joined Rae and Davenport on the Turner Prize shortlist in 1991.

In the accompanying Turner Prize exhibition she was represented by *Ether*, *Untitled (Amber Bed)*

(fig.26) and *Untitled (White Sloping Bed)*, new works in plaster and rubber. Contemplating these sculptures was an uncanny experience: while your mind told you that you were looking at a bathtub, a bed, you were in fact looking at everything that these things were not. You were looking at solidified air from under a bath or a bed rather than the object itself.

Ether was the first of three bath pieces that Whitehead produced in 1990. It was made using an old cast-iron bath stripped of its enamel coating. The tub was placed in a rectangular mould of shuttering ply (a cheap builder's material that Whitehead chose for its particular wood grain) and plaster was poured in. As it began to set, the rust from the bottom of the bath was drawn into the plaster like paint in a fresco. When Whitehead saw these dirty orange stains, which clung to the plaster like scum in a bath, she felt the need to drill a hole where the plug would have been. It was as if a body had dissolved into the plaster, or had melted down the plughole. She had watched a news item earlier in the year that had shown ancient lead coffins being carried out of a church in Spitalfields, near to where she now lived. The bodies had liquefied and could be heard sloshing around, and experts discussed whether the plague could be released if they were breached. In *Ether*, the corporeal is again implied if not present, an allusion heightened by the body-sized scale of the work.

Whitehead's baths have little to do with their original hygienic use. The box-like shape of the mould that she used to cast the tubs gives the finished sculptures the look of sarcophagi, their generous proportions resulting in a sculptural solidity that suggests ancient stone. The sculptures were removed from the moulds chipped and flaking, as if they wore their long history on their sheer sides. Not since the late paintings of Pierre Bonnard, who repeatedly painted his wife in