

Rachel Whiteread : demolished

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Date

1997

Publisher

The Museum of Modern Art, Department
of Prints and Illustrated Books

Exhibition URL

www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/248

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Rachel Whiteread

Demolished

Four from a portfolio of twelve screenprints

London: The Paragon Press, 1996

Each 19 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 29 $\frac{5}{16}$ " (48.8 x 74.4 cm)

Printer: Coriander Press

Edition: 35

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

I think my work is about recording.... I am trying to preserve something."¹

Rachel Whiteread, a young British sculptor, has gained international recognition for her eerie, often poignant castings of domestic objects and interiors. Her work centers around issues of memory and collective history as she fossilizes in plaster, wax, rubber, or synthetic materials not the objects themselves but the spaces that surround them. In an unusual process, Whiteread creates "negative" impressions by giving tangible form to the amorphous spaces under a mattress, around a bathtub, and inside a room. Often difficult to identify, her pieces suggest minimalist abstract structures.

Whiteread's work reads as cultural anthropology. The objects she chooses to cast for her ongoing examination of the daily rituals of London's working-class society are primarily used household items and furniture, often with obvious signs of wear to underscore their personal history. The scale of her sculptures has grown from object-sized to room-sized to the entire interior of a house. For her controversial public sculpture *House* (1993), she cast the interior of an abandoned Victorian row house situated in a typical East London neighborhood. This monumental piece was commissioned as a permanent outdoor sculpture. A vociferous public dispute over its merits ensued,



however, which resulted in the work's removal and concurrent destruction. Ironically, it now claims almost mythic stature.

Whiteread is also an ardent photographer, an activity she considers part of her working process. She has amassed a personal archive of images centered around architectural structures and artifacts of the everyday environment. Photography closely parallels Whiteread's use of casting in its documentary potential and reproductive nature, as well as its remove from the artistic touch. In exploring this photographic aspect of her work, printmaking provided an intriguing vehicle.

For her first print, a 1992 screenprint titled *Mausoleum under Construction*, Whiteread began with a photograph found in a book. She was fascinated by the act of transforming this documentary image into a



work of art, and it sparked her pursuit of printmaking. For her second project, the 1996 portfolio *Demolished*, she used her own color photographs as the groundwork. The construction and destruction of buildings seen in these prints have been of particular interest to her, and undoubtedly took on a deeper personal significance when *House* was razed. That experience informed this ambitious portfolio, for which she chose twelve slides documenting the demolition of three different residential blocks in London's East End district of Hackney.

To create these images, Whiteread enlarged her crude 35mm color slides and printed them as photo-screenprints in black and white. The extraordinary range of grays that resulted from this manipulation of the slides endows these prints with their bleak stillness, quasidocumentary character, and disturbing surrealistic quality. The stark, frontal viewpoint of each print intensifies the viewer's role as spectator/voyeur of the unfolding drama. Whiteread effectively engaged the portfolio format to register the passage of time, recreating a slow-motion narrative of the destruction of these architectural artifacts. In addition, the ominous lack of human presence in this series parallels the sense of cultural remains or leftovers evoked by many of her sculptures.

In her attempt to chronicle the collective history of this neighborhood, Whiteread has memorialized these undistinguished, generic buildings. As evidenced in this portfolio, the focus of her art has shifted to anonymous, public spaces, such as airports, shopping malls, and housing projects, and away from the private domain of her earlier work. A tauter, less nostalgic feeling is evident now, but this artist's underlying ambition to record and preserve the unremarkable surroundings of contemporary life remains constant.

Wendy Weitman
Associate Curator

1. Rachel Whiteread in "Rachel Whiteread in Conversation with Iwona Blazwick," *Rachel Whiteread* (exhibition catalogue) (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1993), pp. 11, 16.

This card is made possible through the generosity of the Eunice Fearer Fund.
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Produced in conjunction with the exhibition
More Than One: Twentieth-Century Print Portfolios
May 16–September 2, 1997

**The Museum
of Modern Art**
**Department of Prints
and Illustrated Books**