

## V. RACHEL WHITEREAD

For Whiteread casting becomes a language that adapts its tradition to one that is “fast, loose, and fiendishly clever.”<sup>58</sup> Upon first viewing Whiteread’s work its retention of elements traditionally associated with casting stimulates the viewer’s experience. Her works are generally comprised of plaster forms which look like identifiable referents from the real world appearing as replicas of everyday things. It is not until one takes a closer, more extended look that an inversion becomes visible. For Whiteread, the history of the casting process and its height in the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries serve as an inspiration to her sculptural practice. In interviews, she has cited the excavation of Pompeii, the volatile states of volcanoes and their immobilizing force, and even the interior casts of the bodies in popular contemporary science exhibits as points from which she thinks about casting.<sup>59</sup> These entropic natural roots, ones that solidify or congeal a space/object, have led her to develop her own casting language and repertoire for material exploration. The nineteenth century process of bronze casting in Rodin’s work was deemed one of “life, death, and resurrection” wherein the object having been “destroyed through casting” lives again in bronze.<sup>60</sup> Whiteread’s domestic objects receive a similar resurrection albeit with some significant variations. While her method of casting involves single-use molds or waste molds wherein the possibility of replication is destroyed when removing the cast, it takes as its mold a found form instead of a constructed one like Rodin’s *Mask of Claudel*.

Whiteread lets her works emerge into their own respective “homes.” She refers to her way of making as “mapping, a process of making traces solid,” solidifying a form in its

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<sup>58</sup> Helen Anne Molesworth, ed. *Part Object Part Sculpture* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center For The Arts, The Ohio State University, 2005), 25.

<sup>59</sup> Ina Cole, “Mapping Traces: A Conversation with Rachel Whiteread,” *International Sculpture Center*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

particular moment.<sup>61</sup> The idea of the sculpture's form, one which maintains its connection to the body and the material are joined in the conceptual process from the very beginning, each one suiting the other.<sup>62</sup> Her curiosity about materials and continual research into casting methods are balanced in her approach to new works.

As with Bourgeois and Hesse, the body and casting maintain their intimate link in her series of *Torso* (1988-1999) sculptures despite not being physically present. Cast from rubber hot water bottles Whiteread explores a variety of materials in an intimate scale (fig. 9). All three use casting to emphasize the material properties best suited to the medium. Allowing for manipulation and disruption of one or many steps, the results are like a "sampler in a pattern book."<sup>63</sup> Each material is sampled, catalogued and chosen for its aesthetic addition to the overall conception of the sculpture. In the torsos, Whiteread used dental plaster, plaster, resin, concrete, silver leaf, and wax among others with their full range of materials explored in terms of their luminosity, density, transparency, and texture, varying from cast to cast. In her early exploration of the hot water bottle form, she played with the association of a rubber vessel as a symbolic part of the body. Whiteread describes these proto-torso works, produced during her time at Slade School of Fine Art, "filling them with water and sewing them inside pillowcases and things (fig. 10). They'd look like clothes, but also like pregnant women or vulnerable men with their genitals hanging out under their shirts. I always had that interest in filling something up and making it change its essence, but later on I figured out what kind of materials to use."<sup>64</sup>

Culturally specific, the hot water bottle is for Whiteread's audience a household item of interaction. It provides warmth for the user and is often placed under bed covers. The hot water

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ann Gallagher and Molly Donovan, *Rachel Whiteread* (Tate Publishing: 2017), 132.

<sup>64</sup> "Rachel Whiteread: 'I've Done the Same Thing over and over,'" *The Independent* (2 Sept. 2010).

bottle is also associated with the alleviation of mild ordinary pains through its direct application of heat to various parts of the body. The molds which supply Whiteread's forms are these mass consumer goods. Their domestic use resonates with everyday life throughout a Western context. This small scale keeps them connected to the consumer object, something that can be held, contained, used and even owned. Its malleable fleshiness is made most apparent when almost but not quite fully filled, a state which Whiteread's casts immortalize. Capturing this transitional state of an object is emblematic of the in-between forms made by Bourgeois and Hesse in the 1960s. For Whiteread, these are casts of items used in a setting open to vulnerability and as such the casts themselves despite their solid form have been made vulnerable to the exterior world. The sculptural forms produced emerge as utterly tactile bodily objects. The inherent shape of her real-world referent fills to a plump curved rectangular form with dimples and recessions. Just as Hesse and Bourgeois attempt to maintain a sensuous quality through industrial materials, Whiteread working in the wake of minimalism and post-minimalism wants to emphasize process and its sensory details to speak to the soul of the object within modernity.

The inaugural cast from the series is *Torso* (1988) made of white plaster and exhibited alongside *Shallow Breath*, (a cast of the underside of a bed) at her first solo show (fig. 11 and 12). These works speak to the domestic interior as an environment, a counter to the white cube gallery in which they were displayed. This sense of an intimate interior imbues these inanimate objects with the ephemerality of bodies. In subsequent casts, Whiteread drops the main descriptive title (*Torso*) in lieu of the equalizing non-referential *Untitled* as the primary identifier. By grouping the individual works as variations on a theme, Whiteread no longer needs to create the cognitive link between sculpture and body part. When displayed together as they recently were in her Tate Britain retrospective, each is individuated. The repetition in her work

makes the formal elements of a commodity object central capturing the essence of the form itself. They are not sterile casts mechanically churned from a singular source but instead a visible trace of the artist working through material concerns.

Looking more closely at a later iteration, *Untitled (Pink Torso)*, highlights the interior contours of the rubber vessel transmuted into the boundary lines of the sculpture (fig. 13). The identifiable shape confounds viewer expectations with its solidity. Hovering above the presentation plane, its cast form disconnects it from use. No longer a vehicle for warmth, *Pink Torso* is a solid mass made of specialized dental plaster giving it a gum like hue. Inconsistencies traditionally seen as imperfections in the casting process are here valued. The splotchy coloration, a result of the material's curing, allows for the appearance of depth with parts shadowed in white while others maintain a sharper pinkness. The sculpture's surface texture with visible air bubbles closest to one end highlight its curves and dips and remind one of the processes of casting. It becomes difficult to see it as anything other than a torso once the title is known, despite recognizing its original form of a water bottle. Viewed together some have dimples, others are full and plump as they rest inside a glass vitrine as if protected newborns in a nursery wing.

However, these healthy hopeful infants according to the artist are more akin to a "headless, limbless baby."<sup>65</sup> Despite its contemporary object reference and the more macabre dismembered infant body, the plaster cast roots itself within a historical lineage originating in antiquity. Etruscan, Greek and Roman sculptures attacked by time, only to be unearthed hundreds of years later during the Renaissance as semblances of what they once were, are displayed in their severed state throughout cultural institutions worldwide. Whiteread's torsos mimic the relics of the bodies past using a contemporary manufactured source. Limbs and heads

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<sup>65</sup> Ann Gallagher and Molly Donovan, *Rachel Whiteread* (Tate Publishing: 2017), 13.

long gone, the torso as the most compact section of the human body remains. It is the most resilient part of the body as well as the most contained. The outer flesh envelops the bodily fluids and organs within. Whiteread's solidification of the hot water bottle's interior space, its fluids and bodily stuff, disconnects it both from its use as an ordinary object and from the body as living organism. Her torsos are lifeless compact evocations that reference the body in an inert and static way. Both ephemeral and permanent, the torsos stand in for the universal body but remain susceptible to the fragility of the plaster, wax, and resin they are cast from. Fer's description of them as "stand-ins or bodies by proxy, intimately related to her other works that lean against a wall, like the plaster *Shallow Breath* (1988), or slump, like the rubber *Untitled (Amber Bed)* (1991)" focuses the viewer's attention on their placement and relationships to one another.<sup>66</sup> We as viewers are forced to come to terms with an object whose familiar form is no longer stable and encouraged to investigate its surface details. The familiarity is alienating and as such casts doubt on the viewer's senses of perception.

Whiteread's *Shallow Breath*, a plaster and polystyrene sculpture, is created from a found object-turned-mold as well. The sculpture subverts the object readymade by using it as the casting base. Unlike the torso series, this cast is not the interior of a form. Instead, its form is a solidification of the space between a wooden bedframe and the floor. The sculpture is propped leaning at a slight diagonal off the wall unlike the horizontality of its original found state further connecting it to the human inhabitant who once rested upon it. It is not replicated as a mere copy but instead inverted into a relative of the original.

In *Shallow Breath*, the means of production are made visible despite the form's deceptive cognitive signification. It exudes its materiality with its edges showing remnants of the casting process. Consciously left visible, the leftover plaster emerges out of the mold's rigid construct.

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<sup>66</sup> Gallagher and Donovan, *Rachel Whiteread*, 132.

Viewed frontally the sculpture has five parallel indentions which mark out a designated space within the outer edges of its rectangular form. The impression of two beam slats, which bisect the verticality of the form at both its top and bottom, frame the soft inner bulges. Formally the sculpture feels ordered and symmetrical through its logical division of space. It is the leftover bits, however, that break from the rationality and makes visible the unexpected elements of chance. The raised and imperfect surplus plaster frames the boundary line of the frontal plane. These subtle accumulations of plaster clumps reflect the pressure and pull of the once soft material. In it, gravity's transient touches are made permanent during the fabrication process. These elements allow the viewer to retrace the life of the sculpture and how it came to be made from the real-world object to the distortion of that very thing. The sculpture's human scale and its point of reference create tension within the work. While materiality reveals the thingness of the sculpture, its referent source layers on personal pasts and human emotions.

This doubling of space, or better yet, solidification of air results in an uncanny relationship to the perceived object. The solids of the object lose all sense of permanence and form while the invisible once open space is filled with matter thus making form physical. Unlike an indexical approach, *Shallow Breath* chooses to display this formerly intangible space. The gap is cast. Looking more like a mattress than the negative space from whence it came the four post holes act as clues to its origins; they function as a link to the now absent everyday object. The physical process of lifting, reorienting, framing and filling the underside cavity of the bed counters the rest implied in the form's original function.

The implications of choosing to utilize a bed, a domestic object rooted in the personal, creates an uncanny reference to the human body. A bed resonates not only with domestic furnishings but as a site of vulnerability, rest and death. Much like the earlier comments on

casting as a life cycle, this is an everyday object loaded with associations of rest and action. As an intimately interior furnishing, Whiteread's conscious implementation of its form and her subsequent re-orientation of it disturbs the notion of rest. This is no longer a bed which could provide comfort or reprieve but now stands in as an anthropomorphic manifestation. It is stiff, inert, and also dead in a sense.

Her manifestation of that generally unseen space brings the psychological fears hidden underneath out into view. What is hiding underneath the bed is now solid and further obscured, but instead of shadowy darkness, it assaults the viewer with its creamy bright plaster form. The most intimate fears of the interior are inverted, reoriented and made public for display. Whiteread wants us to experience the immaterial as an object through her process of making the negative a positive. Moving beyond relational qualities *Shallow Breath* absorbs them. By confronting the viewer through a literal reproduction of the invisible she forever contains that space. David Batchelor has described casting's process as the "memory of a lost moment" in a manner similar to Roland Barthes analysis of the photography's memento of death.<sup>67</sup> The sculpture's title, *Shallow Breath*, links it to a faltering bodily action and draws upon the ephemerality of selfhood. This marks a return to modernist concerns of the individual in relation to the external social world. Whiteread's insistence on making visible the poetics of casting, the material qualities it brings forth and the traces of the past combine with her contemporary cultural milieu to produce works that engage both the past and present.

There is a lightness and contemplative nature to the forms Whiteread produces which emerge through the opacity and luminosity of the materials themselves. In hopes of eschewing a reductive reading of her sculptures, I have been trying to address how she uses casting beyond

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<sup>67</sup> David Batchelor, "Rachel Whiteread. Liverpool and Madrid," *The Burlington Magazine* vol. 138, no. 1125 (1996): 838.

the traditional sense to allow the residual bits of life to enter into the forms. Shelley Hornstein has described Whiteread's doubling process as "best understood through the experience of the object, that is, the material object she makes for us to experience."<sup>68</sup> The disorienting familiarity of the thing she casts, however, invokes a sense of Freud's theory of the uncanny. *Heimlich* is defined as something that is concealed from the self, it is familiar but can also be intensely private. The uncanny/*unheimlich* is then the negation of canny/*heimlich*. It is Freud's name for the uncomfortable feeling which is inadvertently revealed: "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known and long familiar."<sup>69</sup> Hornstein notes that "therefore, Freud argues that *unheimlich* or the "uncanny" is that which is concealed, but also that which is known and familiar."<sup>70</sup> These two opposite interpretations overlap, double, acting as one.<sup>71</sup> The coming to light of this private/hidden space is precisely what Whiteread's negative casts evoke.

In addition to Whiteread's interest in making visible these social and psychological boundaries, much of her work maintains elements redolent of Minimalism. Its simplicity and material emphasis serve as a link, but it moves beyond the hard inertness of materiality praised in Minimalism and instead fuses those elements with lingering feelings and residues of process. *Shallow Breath* brings forth associations with the body through its texture, repose and death, going beyond mere objecthood. Whiteread's casts are not mere commodity replications but instead meditations on the "soul of the object."<sup>72</sup> A soul solidified but not closed off entirely to the world.

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<sup>68</sup> Shelley Hornstein, *The Art of Rachel Whiteread*, Edited by Chris Townsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 56.

<sup>69</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," 1925 translation in *The Collected Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17 (1917-1919), trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 220.

<sup>70</sup> Freud, "The Uncanny," 220.

<sup>71</sup> Hornstein, *The Art of Rachel Whiteread*, 56.

<sup>72</sup> Anne Wagner in conversation at *The Humanities Institute, UIC*, re. Tate Britain Show, 2018.



If Bourgeois and Hesse moved sculpture to the floor, to the horizontal position, Whiteread has reasserted its verticality for the contemporary viewer. But because it is both tactile and bodily, it is also a rejection of the traditional phallic association of sculpture. Casting facilitated a new language for artists, particularly in the 1960s context onwards. Whiteread, like her predecessors grabs hold of the material qualities and explores their limits. Taking from the manufactured world she makes sculptures that remain complex sites of meaning production. In dialogue with modernism, minimalism, and her contemporary peers her works mark a continual progression of casting's capacities. The historical moment of *Torso* and *Shallow Breath*, the late 1980s, are a moment in which the re-evaluation of philosophical approaches to the self and society have returned to the cultural dialogue.<sup>73</sup> Whiteread's works revive the formal concerns explored by Bourgeois and Hesse marking a continued expression of the complex state of bounded cast sculptures.

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self, The Making of Modern Identity* is published in 1989 marking a reflection and inquiry into contemporary life.