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*Rachel Whiteread: Ether, 1990, plaster, 43 by 24 1/2 by 80 inches. Collection Jay Jopling, London. Courtesy Karsten Schubert, London.*

# All That Is Solid

**BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL**

**B**ased on the simplest of strategies—casting mostly domestic furnishings and architecture, sometimes as positives, more often as negatives—Rachel Whiteread's sculpture presents a vision of epidemic immobility. But for every door it closes and every window it seals, it opens a floodgate of response, both critical and popular. *House*, her 1993 concrete cast of the interior of an entire three-story London row house, was a monumental succès de scandale, with the public and mass media focusing on issues ranging from municipal housing to the community's control over its public identity. There has been almost an equal cascade of profes-



Untitled (Amber Double Bed), 1991, rubber and high-density foam, 47 by 54 by 41 inches. Courtesy Lühring Augustine, New York.

*Rachel Whiteread has made castings of domestic furnishings, rooms and even—most controversially—a whole London row house. In a traveling show, now in Boston, her work reveals its obstinate physicality.*

sional attention, most of it laudatory, to *House* and to Whiteread's other work as well.<sup>1</sup> To read this material is to take a bungee jump off the cliffs of contemporary critical theory. There is something funny in the image of Whiteread's work, shut tight as a bank vault, and this outpouring of text. (Minimalism, and equally the work of Robert Ryman, has, perhaps for similar reasons, provoked like effusions.)

So it is a welcome surprise to encounter, in the survey of her work that traveled from Basel to Philadelphia to Boston, a body of sculpture of engrossing physicality. Though the show as installed

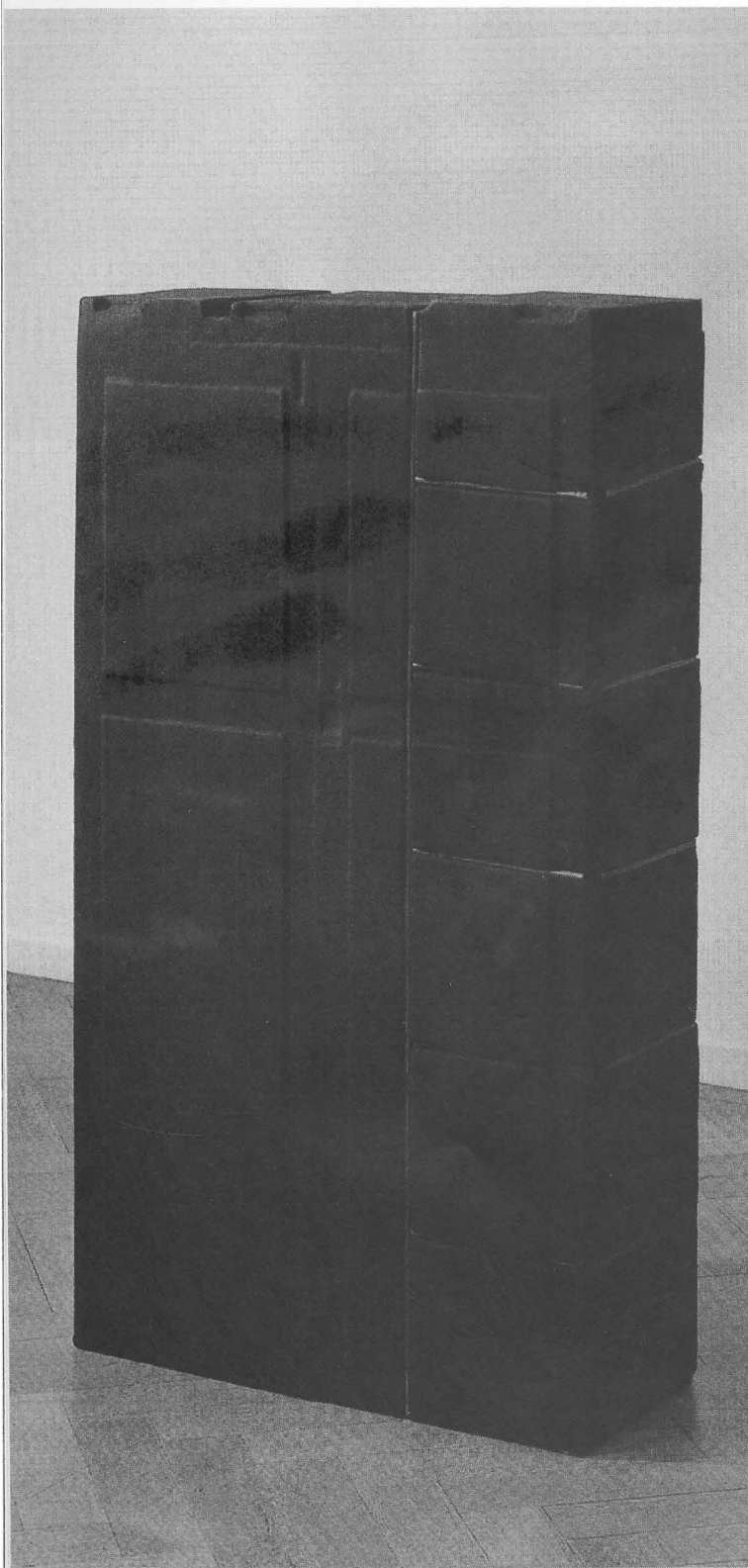
**Whiteread's *Closet* is a cast of the inside of a wooden wardrobe. An icon of confinement and concealment, it is also incipiently figurative.**

at Philadelphia contained only 11 sculptures, the range of materials is broad and nuanced enough that theorizing can be held in abeyance. Chronologically and conceptually, the more intimate, interior works come first. *Closet* (1988) is a black-felt-covered plaster cast of the inside of a wooden wardrobe. Just over 5 feet high, it is punctuated along one side with the original flimsy wooden shelves, none of them level; the blocky sculpture records, in reverse, the articulations of the door, its latch and various moldings.

An unmistakable icon of confinement and concealment, the wardrobe is also, as with much of Whiteread's sculpture, incipiently figurative. Her student work (not shown) involved body casts, to which *Closet* is close kin. *Ether* (1990), a plaster cast (in sections) of the space around and under a Victorian bathtub, takes the form of a coffinlike rectangular solid with a deep lengthwise indentation. It evokes the figure not by analogy but by absence. Its central cavity seemingly narrowed by the height and bulk of the plaster surround, *Ether* evokes a body mortally threatened by the structures of its own maintenance. The chalky, mottled surfaces seem to belong more to a mausoleum than a bathroom. The drain that marks *Ether*'s visual focus is—as in Robert Gober's sinks and drains—a chilling symbol of unstanchable loss, as primal as a child's fear of the bath.

The progression from *Ether* to the later beds and morgue slabs is direct, though not as simple as it seems. As if to recall Leo Steinberg's landmark essay on "flatbed" image making, in which the objectification of painting's previously illusion-bound surface is exemplified in Rauschenberg's momentous decision to lift a bed from the horizontal to the vertical, Whiteread's beds are presented in various postures. Cast from a full-sized mattress that bulged slightly when bent, *Untitled (Amber Bed)*, 1991, is a jaundiced, beer-bellied slab of orange rubber slouching insolently against the wall. Though its associations with the figure are manifold, mortality is not preeminent among them. The morgue slab casts are a different story. Two of the simple, snub-nosed forms are shown here, the first a floor-bound one in dense amber rubber. The second, cast in a pearly, translucent rubber, is propped against the wall and gently toes the floor with its rounded edge. These sculptures don't reveal much of their derivation from coroners' tables, apart from references to unspecified "slabs" in their titles and despite the often-remarked, but nearly invisible, knife marks in the surfaces that they record. If some of the beds—*Amber Bed* among them—come as close as any of Whiteread's sculptures to surrogates for the human figure, the slabs speak most eloquently of its disappearance. And they are the last of her works to convey overt emotional reference. The sculptures that followed are cast from objects that seem chosen for their resistance to narrative interpretation.

The newest sculptures, further excursions into radical vacancy, include a series of casts Whiteread has made, Nauman-like, of the space under chairs and desks. The operation produces boxy, beveled forms, spatially condensed with respect to the originals, so utility seems not prohibited but impeded: the writing surfaces are just a little low; there is no leg room nor back support. Two 1994



*Closet*, 1988, wood, felt and plaster, 63 by 34½ by 14¼ inches. Private collection. Courtesy Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia.



Untitled (Six Spaces), 1994, resin, dimensions variable. Courtesy Karsten Schubert.

examples are included, one cast in translucent gray resin and the other a murky green, both harboring odd recesses of lambent light—the effect is something like the North Atlantic in winter. As dense as they are aqueous, these sculptures also suggest richly optical three-dimensional shadows.

The casts of floors that Whiteread made just before the furniture pieces are less visually satisfying, though they occupy something of the same ontological territory. Whether a curling sheet of wood-grained rubber or a rigid expanse of plank-marked plaster, these “floors” neither negate the function of their template nor quite serve in its place. And like the desks and chairs, they evoke computer drafting programs (Sculp 4D, for instance) that, given the parameters of a volume and a source of light, can generate shadows with all the specificity, in shape, texture and density, of positive form. Obstinate yet maddeningly elusive, Whiteread’s sculpture lays waste to normal distinctions between solidity and its opposite.

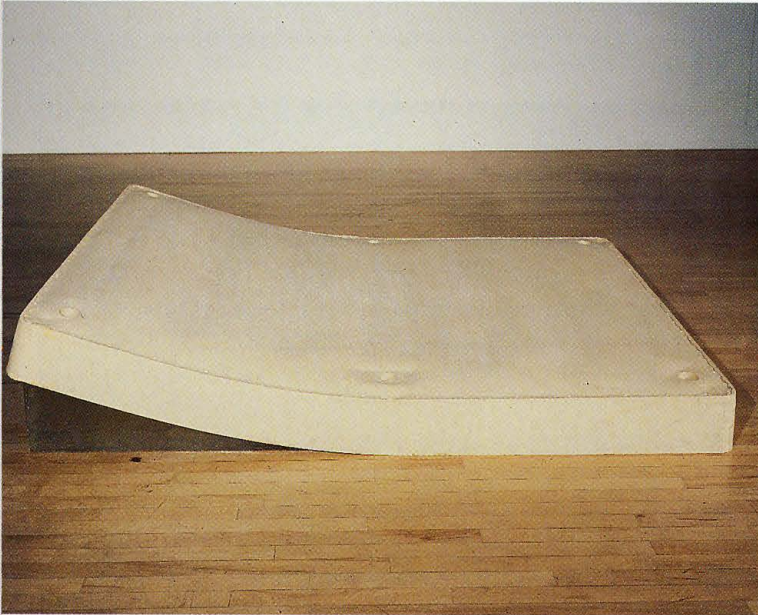
**A**s appealing and provocative as Whiteread’s body-scaled sculptures are, they have not gained the attention won by her

casts of entire rooms or the London row house. The latter, which stood from October 1993 to January 1994, is represented in this exhibition by black-and-white photographs and an engrossing videotape, a visual diary that documents the making of the work, starting with Whiteread’s first visit to the site.

But *Ghost* (1990) and *Room* (1993) are present in all their impassive bulk. *Ghost* was cast from an actual living room and bulges with sober architectural details (a simple fireplace, a plain windowsill, broad molding above and below). Last year at the Museum of Modern Art, *Ghost* was wedged into a small subterranean gallery, where it seemed the unexorcised phantasm of some modest late-Victorian childhood.

*Room*, a blank, massive cube of white plaster as big as a generous living room, is enlivened only by the impressions of a picture window’s sashes, a door, and its hardware and knob. Further gridlike divisions result from the sections in which the work was cast. It was made from a fabricated mold rather than a real room and is so reductive as to be difficult to associate with a time or place. At the ICA in Philadelphia, *Room* was deposited in a yawning, high-ceilinged space where it achieved a nearly

**Some of Whiteread's recent works seem intended to head off theoretical analysis—or to turn it back on itself. They speak most forcefully of silence.**



Untitled (White Sloping Bed), 1991, rubber and high density foam, 15 by 60 by 71 inches. Courtesy Luhring Augustine.

Right, Untitled (Marble Slab), 1991, 56 by 91½ by 4 inches. Courtesy Luhring Augustine.

absolute expression of spatial nullification and emotional withdrawal.

Several writers have applied Bachelard's poetics and Benjamin's aphorisms to Whiteread's work, and it also elicits comparisons with the work of other artists.<sup>2</sup> These would range from Jasper Johns (for his beer cans and body parts) to Allan McCollum (who has made castings from a mold of a dog produced by volcanic ash at Pompeii), Win Knowlton (whose recent work involves direct casts, in detritus-studded concrete, of the naked landscape) and Ann Messner (who has reproduced household objects and furniture as menacing steel and wax effigies). In addition, Whiteread's frosty representations of space eroded by mass offer a nearly perfect reversal of Giacometti's attenuated figures expressing his vision of mass eroded by space, or, more precisely, by the emotion-fired, flesh-scorching powers of spatial perception. But no precedent is as challenging as Bruce Nauman's. Thirty years ago, Nauman cast the space under a shelf and, even more relevantly, the space under a chair. The latter, a minimally articulated concrete cube, might seem the forebear of Whiteread's sculpture. Nauman's chair work, in turn, can be traced to advice he says he got from de Kooning on rendering a chair by painting the space between its rungs.

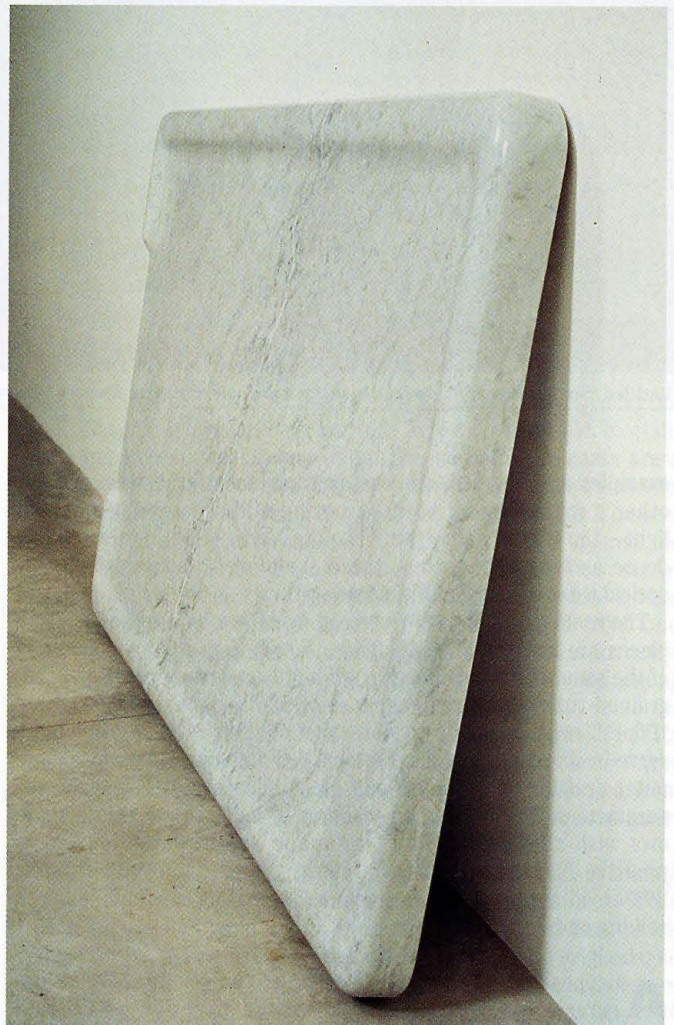
Whiteread's project of casting the everyday world both inside and out, front and back, is a crystallization of emptiness. Her

rejection of introspection, and of the narrative interpretation that attends it, seems resolute—hence her progress away from Victorian bathtubs and dourly detailed bedsitters to fabricated walls and vacant floors. But further, all her artistic decisions to date seem intended to head off theoretical analysis as well—or to turn it back on itself. Whiteread's work speaks most forcefully of silence. □

1. Whiteread was awarded Britain's prestigious Turner Prize in 1993.
2. In "Rachel Whiteread: Separation Anxiety and the Art of Release," Neville Wakefield quotes Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*: "To make inside concrete and outside vast is the first problem, it would seem, of an anthology of the imagination," (*Parkett* 42, 1994, p. 79). Christoph Grunenberg cites Bachelard's description of "wardrobes with their shelves" as "veritable organs of the secret psychological life" in his essay for the exhibition catalogue, *Rachel Whiteread*, Kunsthalle Basel and Institutes of Contemporary Art of Philadelphia and Boston, 1994, p. 14. Walter Benjamin's remark that "the work is the death mask of its conception" is quoted by Jean-Pierre Criqui in "Focus: Rachel Whiteread, Kunsthalle Basel," *Artforum*, November 1994, p. 83.

"Rachel Whiteread" opened at the Kunsthalle Basel [Aug. 21-Oct. 30, 1994] and traveled to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia [Feb. 9-Apr. 16]; it is presently on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston [May 9-July 9].

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*House, 1993 (now destroyed), concrete cast of the interior of a three-story row house on its original lot, Grove Street, London. Courtesy Karsten Schubert. Photo Sue Omerod.*