

# RACHEL WHITEREAD

March 10–April 22, 2023



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*FROM SUBJECT, REFUGE, LAND, AND MATERIAL  
INTO ADDRESSES OF SOULS, ABSENCES, AND POEMS*

*The Global Interactions in Rachel Whiteread's Work*

by Mohammed Sami, artist

During the past fifteen years many artists' names have fallen from my perception, but very few have resisted oblivion like Rachel Whiteread. Her works have been critical to my understanding of memory's subject matter: visibility and invisibility, among other things.

I was first introduced to Rachel's work when I immigrated to Sweden in 2007. Her name emerged from my search to find a reference associated with the theme of 'memory' as a philosophy. During this time, I noticed a radical contrast between the West and the East regarding the understanding of the interweaving of themes of visual culture, history, and memory. Rachel's name kept arising whenever I attempted to build a bridge between the personal and the collective, in subjects such as family values, home, and frozen time.

I couldn't deny that approaching autobiographical memory as a philosophy, rather than explicitly or immediately through imitation, took me more than a decade to digest. I asked myself, "What about the viewers who have no idea about art? How will they respond to a memory that reached the highest level of muteness and absence?". I dwelt in critical debate of how an ordinary 'single object' is remembered, and what it means to make it publicly 'extraordinary'.

I found that less consideration has been given to which social relations engender memory of the public, or to how we collectively grasp an artist's personal memory despite our varying origins.

Rachel's work answers many of these questions for me: her sculptures, as I describe them, are like finding the missing sentence in a foreign text; suddenly, the text becomes applicable and comprehensible to someone from any nation. The philosophy of Rachel's work can even reach those who have lived in a war zone and experienced conflict as first-hand witnesses, despite the differences of specific subject matter and imagery.



As I have grown older, my perception of Rachel's work has continued to change. Fifteen years ago, I understood one of her sculptures, *Untitled (Black Bed)*, 1991, as simply an ordinary bed. Then, the bed became a piece of foam about to melt. Then, the growth of conflict in our lives reconfigured the bed into a gravestone pinned in the ground. The works change as I change. Stripping the objects from their original context gives value to those who slept or died on the bed, to make their absence matter.

This means that the original object fades in value (it being found everywhere and anywhere), but the cast of it intensifies with meaning—the striking amount of brightness is equal to blindness.

The same concept applies to works like *Untitled (Silver Pallet)*, 2022, in which Rachel uses an ordinary material: a box for carrying cans. At first glance, you notice the traces of the cans, but the resemblance to the cardboard box turns against itself and makes the material immaterial. Rachel then casts it in silver: the cans' marks living in the silver surface, transforming the piece into a foil survival blanket.

By combining the appropriate medium with specific subject matter, Rachel intelligently and profoundly allows memory to be personal, particular, and universal. For this reason, Rachel's practice transcends national boundaries without negating the importance of a nation's individual qualities. The specific and the general meld into one moving and intense experience.

Throughout my ongoing research about this subject, I have learned from Rachel's practice undeniable elements associated with the theme of memory, such as giving the viewer the space, patience, and time to meaningfully understand a conceptual artwork. Our empathic response to Rachel's works is not necessarily a function of belonging to a nation; we respond differently and remember together. This may explain why this Iraqi-born artist is so deeply invested in Rachel's work.

Pictured: 1. *Untitled (Silver Pallet)*, detail, 2021, lacquered silver; 2. *Untitled (Rose Gold and Blue)*, detail, 2022, papier mache and silver leaf; 3. *Untitled (Lavender and Pink)*, detail, 2022, papier mache and silver leaf; 4. *Untitled (Blue and Black)*, detail, 2022, papier mache, silver leaf and gouache; 5. *Untitled (Clump)*, 2021–2022, bronze, steel, wood and paint; 6. *Untitled (Dusk Notes) I*, 2022, resin and steel; 7. *Untitled (Green)*, 2020–2022, copper and patina, (2 parts). Photos 1, 2, 4, 5, 7 by photo by Prudence Cuming Associates, 3 by Andrea Rossetti, 6 by Dawn Blackman

