



Toy stories

Use the award-winning sculpture House to inspire your class to reinvent their unwanted toys as works of art

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Curriculum links:

Art and design 2a, 4a–b; Sc3 2a–b; History 3.

In 1993, sculptor, Rachel Whiteread, hit the headlines when she became the first woman to win the Turner Prize. However, on the day Whiteread was awarded her prize, it was announced that *House*, her concrete cast of a real house in London's East End that had attracted thousands of visitors, was to be demolished. Although *House* now exists only in photographs and videos, it is widely regarded as an iconic work of contemporary art.

While Whiteread has continued to make a series of striking public sculptures, much of her work is on a much smaller, intimate scale. Through making casts of domestic objects, such as hot water bottles, air beds and tables, she creates striking pieces that invite us to look more closely at



House by Rachel Whiteread (1993)

our everyday surroundings. A particularly fascinating example is her 1995 sculpture *Untitled (One hundred spaces)* that features casts of the spaces beneath 100 chairs. Images and details of more of Whiteread's work can be found by visiting www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/whiteread_rachel.html

Whiteread's thoughtful sculptures form the inspiration for the fifth article in our 'Eco-art' series. Your class' broken and unwanted toys will take on new lives as they are transformed into intricate sculptures by being cast in plaster. It's a simple process, one that children will enjoy, and it produces some striking results.

Activity

You will need:

Small, unwanted toys; cardboard boxes without any holes (shoeboxes are ideal); air-drying clay; modelling clay; plaster of Paris; water; containers for mixing and dust masks. **(Health and safety note:** Children find working with plaster exciting and fascinating and it reinforces scientific learning about changing materials. However, the temperature of the plaster can increase quickly as it sets, so supervise children closely and make sure that they do not put their hands in it. It's also important that children wear dust masks when mixing plaster – masks are available to buy online or from DIY stores.)

Getting started

This activity is easy to manage once you are confident with the process of mixing plaster – it won't take long to experiment with one or two objects before teaching the lesson.

Begin by looking at some plastic toys and ask the children to suggest how they have been made. Some children may be able to tell you that they have been produced from moulds, but many of them will realise that the question has never occurred to them before. Children's knowledge of 3D shapes should enable them to visualise the moulding process, and most should be able to understand the concept of negative space – the space created by removing an object. You could also show the children some examples of plaster casts at www.britishmuseum.org

Show the children some images of Whiteread's work with plaster casts (see www.artangel.org.uk/projects/1993/house). Describe the process of casting and explain that they will be making their own sculptures in a similar way. Encourage the children to begin by experimenting with modelling clay. They will enjoy moulding it into various forms and it will draw their attention to the way pushing objects into clay creates negative shapes that can be used as moulds. Explain to the children that they are now going to create some more permanent pieces, using clay and plaster.

Step 1

Ask the children to roll a slab of clay around 5cm thick and slightly larger than their box. With their box on top of the clay, they should cut the clay around the base of their box. The clay slab should then be placed inside their box.

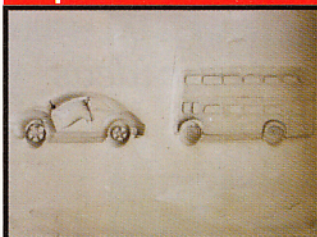
Step 2



Ask the children to choose a few of their toys and press them firmly into

their clay slab. Make sure that they place enough pressure to ensure that the clay is pressed into the toys' details, but they should take care not to push through the clay. If this happens they'll need to roll the clay flat and start again.

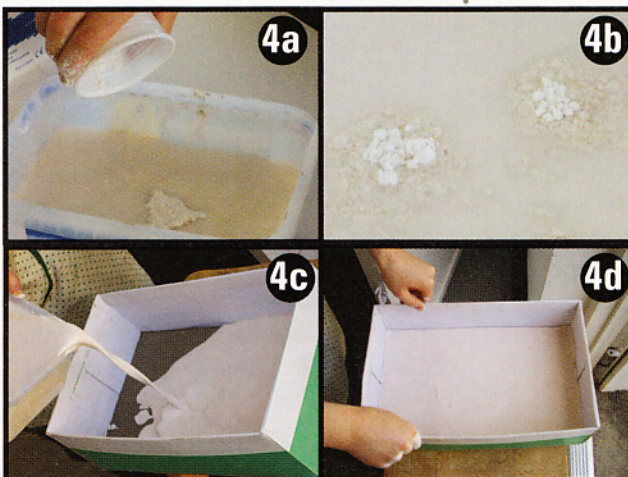
Step 3



Get the children to remove the toys carefully to reveal their imprints.

Step 4

Next, have the children mix the plaster by half filling a container with water, then sprinkling the plaster into it. Make sure that they allow each handful to settle into the water before adding the next. Explain that they'll know when they've got the right balance of water and plaster when little 'islands' of plaster appear (see 4b). Ask them to mix the plaster and water together with a fork to get rid of any lumps, then carefully pour it into their boxes, shaking the boxes very gently to ensure an even layer of plaster.

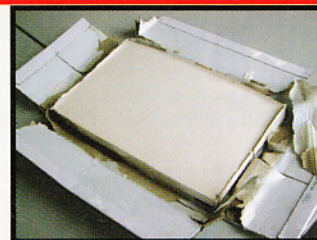


Thinking question

After experimenting with creating their own Whiteread-inspired sculptures, ask the children which of their possessions do they think will have meaning for them when they are older. ■

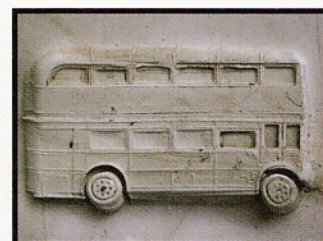
Step 5

Allow the plaster to set overnight.



Step 6

Tell the children to carefully remove their cardboard boxes by pulling down the side panels, and then peel away the clay from underneath to reveal their sculpture. This is the 'eureka' moment that children love as they discover details have been perfectly reproduced in the plaster. The sculptures will be instantly recognisable yet strangely unfamiliar, and children will look again at Whiteread's work with new understanding and appreciation.



Next month:
Sock
sculptures
inspired by
Susan Danis!