

LONDON

Rachel Kneebone

White Cube Mason's Yard

Old Master paintings and classical sculptures frequently serve as the starting point for Rachel Kneebone's breathtakingly intricate porcelain works featuring entangled limbs set within monumental architectural frameworks. For example, *399 Days* (2012–13), her 15-foot-tall sculpture installed at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park through April 24, 2022, evokes Trajan's Column with its elaborate friezes winding up the form. Other works draw on Ovid and Dante, encapsulating the cycle of human experience

in its ceaseless evolution from birth to death.

For "Raft," her recent exhibition of sculpture and drawings, Kneebone drew inspiration from Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19). Based on the aftermath of an 1816 shipwreck in which survivors trapped aboard a raft turned to cannibalism, Géricault's iconic painting brilliantly captures the drama through vigorous compositional movement: mountainous seas, turbulent skies, and a billowing sail form the backdrop to a tangle of desperate men and sprawled corpses that

crecendoes toward arms reaching for the horizon. Kneebone's works focus on this expression of bodily turmoil.

In *Raft of the Medusa* (2015), a suite of eight plinth-based, porcelain sculptures, tiny, finely formed human limbs writhe out from inchoate elemental masses. Set against brooding blue walls not unlike the sea in Géricault's painting, these thrusting, asymmetrical sculptures resembled miniature rafts laden with twisted bodies and conjured the perilous migrant crossings of recent years.



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: STEPHEN WHITE. © WHITE CUBE. © RACHEL KNEEBONE

RACHEL KNEEBONE

OPPOSITE:

Shell,
2020.

Porcelain, steel,
and adhesive,
268 x 90 x 80 cm.

THIS PAGE:
Installation view
of "Raft," 2021.



REVIEWS

Bleached white, almost bone-like, and brittle-fragile in texture, they offered a reminder that the seabed is also a gigantic graveyard. In each sculpture, a perfect sphere nestles incongruously among the organic disorder. Its presence is ambiguous, its purpose unclear: it could be pinned in place by the limbs or tethering the whole. The distinction seems irrelevant.

Pencil drawings echoed the sense of motion. In these works, muscular limbs seem to dive, pirouette, and merge—an impression enhanced by Kneebone's practice of rotating the page as she draws, adding and erasing elements to create multiple, shifting perspectives. She has said that her work is "concerned with our visceral life, with movement and the experience of inhabiting the body." Her



(seaweed perhaps or the straps of a life vest), all drawn downward as if pulled by the force of water. In an upstairs gallery, *Shell* (2020) combined all of these elements— orbs, tendrils, flowers—in a single suspended form. Nearly life-size, this eerie, skeletal presence suggests flotsam floating underwater whose momentary coalescence might break apart at any minute. All flowing and twirling forms, *Shell* is anything but static; whether one imagined a mass of debris or a drowning body, it felt as if the sculpture was on the verge of dissolution, much like Kneebone's drawings of melting limbs.

Kneebone only began working in porcelain in 2002, and her mastery of the medium is staggering. Given the meticulousness of these sculptures, it is perhaps surprising that chance is allowed a core role in her process. Kneebone welcomes the fissures and collapses that happen in the process. The raw energy of her work derives from this unpredictability, which reminds us of the fragility and ephemeral nature of human existence.

—ELIZABETH FULLERTON

RACHEL KNEEBONE

FROM TOP:

Shell,
2020.

Porcelain, steel,
and adhesive,
268 x 90 x 80 cm.

Raft of the Medusa II,
2015.

Porcelain, Corian,
and adhesive,
43 x 71 x 49.5 cm.

drawings evolve in tandem with the porcelain works; Kneebone does not follow sketches or models. Seen in conjunction with the drawings, the sculptures became balletic, taking an unexpected turn away from the tragedy that inspired them. The overspilling, extended limbs, now recalling the stylized grace of synchronized swimmers, created an uncanny tension—as in Géricault's painting—between the sublime and the monstrous, hope and despair, order and chaos.

Two sculptures mounted on the end walls of the gallery, *Rib* (2019) and *Quill* (2021), evoked shredded garments entwined with cascading flowers and delicate dangling ribbons

