

“The Tree of Life” by Rachel Whiteread - a meditative review on accidental beauty in London.

There are few things more enjoyable than being shaken out of the visual effervescence of contemporary life, saturated with flickering images and glowing screens and being placed into a space of silence and reprieve; finding yourself into a moment that insidiously stretches out and elongates itself, by means of exposure to abrupt beauty.

Even to the most robust of cynics London is a beautiful city, with its stolid elegance and perennial exquisite angles, but in it there are places that are aesthetically sinful in their clamour. That is why I was surprised to find myself succumbing to one of those moments whilst walking on Whitechapel High Street, whilst trying to avert my gaze from its well known blend of grating visual din.

The catalyst for this subtle moment was my encounter with the new frieze that adorns the front facing wall of the Whitechapel Gallery, in East London, a piece entitled “Tree of Life” by the YBA sculptor Rachel Whiteread. The work consists of cluster of gilded bronze leaves that seem to fly away in a flurry on the upper part of the building itself and in resplendent gold, they appear to be carried off by the very nimbleness and flickering quality of the metal itself.

Aside from a sense of proportion, the most engaging of all its attributes is the minimalist approach that underpins the work, being a play of presence and absence, of space and object. Almost aware of its own virtues, the elegant arrangement of the leaves themselves allows for a subtle distance that the gaze thrills to surmount when making sense of the whole area it occupies. Not until much later I realised that the essential aspect of its beauty lies in the way it achieves balance in regards to the notion of time, by capturing a moment of motion and disturbance whilst at the same time being suffused with the idea of permanence that the notion of a frieze connotes.

The art historian Simon Schama wrote that all good art should disrupt the banal and that is precisely where the captivating power of the “Tree of Life” resides, because if anything it is an aesthetical stumble that fells us into a sort of submission and gives us respite from the white noise.