

First impressions

Artist Rachel Dein creates plaster cast tiles that capture the intricate details of the most delicate flowers

WORDS SORREL EVERTON PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY



Each of Rachel's moulds can only be used once, meaning that every piece she creates is unique.

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All the best sculptures you want to touch. There’s an inherent need to feel their texture, to trace the contours, understand their story. And so it is that you imagine that something made by Tactile Studios will be something that you want to ‘feel’ and sense. Artist Rachel Dein creates plaques of plant forms – and these incredibly simple objects are indeed imbued with curiosity and atmosphere. The plants tell a story of a fleeting moment of glory before they faded, their texture, pattern and delicacy rendered rich in the plaster casting.

“It’s not complicated,” says Rachel of her method but she clearly has an artist’s eye for form and detail. As a child Rachel was always outside – doing or making or noticing. “I had a real moment of realisation when one day the melon seeds that we’d washed down the sink sprouted back up through the overflow. It showed me how tough and tenacious nature was and I find that fascinating.” Likewise there was a fascination with Rodin and his sculptures and with the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum.

Rachel went on to study as an artist before working as a prop maker for the likes of English National Opera, the Royal Opera House and London Transport Museum. Here she honed her skills in sculpting and moulding. Later, as a busy mother of three, Rachel set up her own studio in the attic of her north London home and began experimenting with simple techniques of casting using clay and plaster. “When I was casting at college it was considered uncool to use plaster – it was too messy, not conceptual enough. But I got to the stage when I just needed to start making my own things again. Luckily for me the time for craft and making things is now.”

“You can achieve so much detail from the technique,” Rachel explains. “I’ve cast baby clothing, lace, items of memorabilia, but I love working with flowers and leaves.” Favourite flowers to cast include *Dicentra* with their bleeding heart blooms, the emerging fiddleheads of ferns and Japanese anemones. “I like plants that have that delicate, spiry, of-the-woods feel to them and I love to reflect the progress of the seasons.” Gathering plants often from her own garden, Rachel lays them on to a rolled-out slab of clay and presses them in to transfer all their details, then carefully removes them. A wooden frame is then placed over and the plaster poured in. Once set, the clay is peeled away to reveal the ‘plants’ in relief. Yet it feels almost as if the real plants are still there, the casting is so accurate.

Rachel may paint some of the tiles in watercolour. Others she leaves unpainted, which gives them the quality of an early black and white photograph with a layering of light and dark and clarity of detail. She’s now creating tiles in concrete that will sit happily outdoors, as well as those containing marble dust for bathroom panels.

Rachel’s plaques are much more than just pictures – they capture people’s emotions and sentimentalities by taking ephemeral objects around us and turning them into permanent recollections in the form of art. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Website tactilestudio.co.uk **Tel** 07986 821559. Rachel will undertake commissions including casting flowers from special occasions such as weddings. She will be exhibiting this year at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in May (Tactile Studio, stand number EA113).

