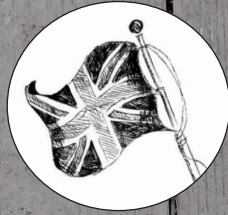




*This image:* Freshly picked spring garden flowers, artistically arranged and pressed into clay, already resemble a beautiful still life  
*Opposite:* Rachel's delicately decorative relief tiles come in a range of sizes, which are dictated by their natural muses

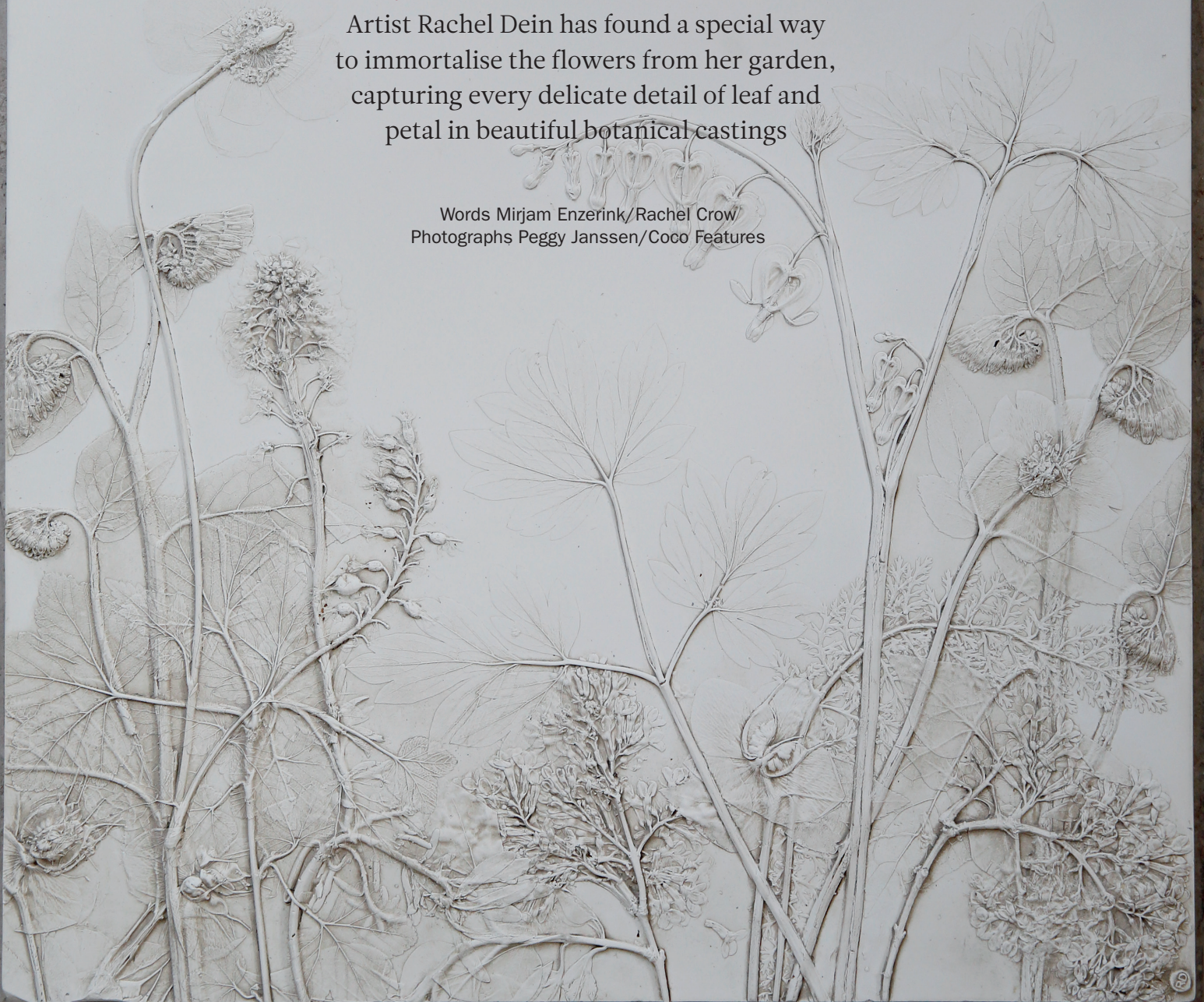
Made in Britain



# Perfect *impression*

Artist Rachel Dein has found a special way to immortalise the flowers from her garden, capturing every delicate detail of leaf and petal in beautiful botanical castings

Words Mirjam Enzerink/Rachel Crow  
Photographs Peggy Janssen/Coco Features





ACHEL DEIN'S

sunny attic studio is a hive of activity as she busily prepares her botanical 'still lifes' ahead of Chelsea Flower Show. Freshly picked spring garden flowers fill vases, awaiting their turn to be gently placed and pressed into a slab of grey pottery clay to capture every leaf vein and petal fold of their delicate, organic beauty. 'The plants will dictate the size of a piece,' Rachel explains, as she painstakingly removes each tiny, curving stem, leaving an imprint into which liquid plaster will be poured and left to set. 'Every season has its flower combinations that I like best – flowering blackcurrant, hellebores, daffodils... The smaller flower forms cast better.'

Rachel heads out to pick more flowers from the lush garden borders of her charming corner house in north London, which she shares with her three children and husband Alan, a BBC radio journalist. Hidden in a romantic courtyard, the 1920s property is hardly visible from the road, set in a neighbourhood that was inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement. Rachel spots a blossoming Solomon's seal under a large magnolia tree. 'These are very decorative,' she says, 'like the bleeding heart flowers of dicentra – they have such a beautiful straight-from-the-forest atmosphere. I prefer more of a natural, woodland look.' A leaf of a garden fern follows into her wooden collecting box, then the flower of a heuchera. 'It's not yet blossoming, but look how beautiful those buds are,' she says.

The garden borders are planted with her favourite flowers, most of which are selected by shape: from tall Japanese anemones and *Sanguisorba officinalis*; plants with beautifully heart-shaped, feathered and serrated leaves; to the decorative lace flowers of dill and cow parsley next to delicate spring muscari and daffodils, or wild flowers, such as buttercups, nettles and sorrel. 'I'm interested in using those flowers and plants that many people think of as weeds,' Rachel explains. 'In my work, it's all about shape, not value or status. The beautiful, round cloverleaf is so pretty next to a tall stem. People are often very surprised when they hear which flowers I've used for a piece.'

Suddenly they discover the beauty in what they had always thought of as worthless plants.'

Having studied Fine Art at Middlesex University, Rachel started her career as a prop maker for English National Opera, and over the course of 15 years worked for various theatres and operas. She had dabbled with casting while at college, a process she found fascinating, and experimented at home with shapes in clay, from dolls' clothes to a wedding bouquet, thereby discovering the ephemeral beauty of flowers caught in plaster. It was not until she moved to her home, 13 years ago, that Rachel finally had the studio space and garden to grow the subject of her artworks.

'I've always grown plants with whatever tiny space I've had, but moving here really allowed me to develop what I did,' explains Rachel, who adds more flowers to her plot by dividing, spreading and natural propagation. 'It's a wonderful way to tackle the impermanence of flowers; to preserve nature, like a fossil,' she adds, referring to her unique form of botanical artwork. 'I make true-to-nature prints; not drawings on paper, but in plaster relief.'

Alongside the smaller cast tiles in concrete and plaster that she sells via Etsy and her website, varied commissions have included a set of six 1.5-metre panels for the new P&O Iona cruise ship, launching in May. While most of her casts are left plain and natural, she is experimenting with more colourful work.

In the attic studio, the floorboards are decorated with the white footprints of Rachel's sturdy work shoes, their black leather also whitewashed under the flakes of dried plaster. As the casting process progresses, more and more sweeping whites ➤

*'It's a wonderful way to tackle the impermanence of flowers, to preserve nature, like a fossil'*

*Top left:* Rachel picks the flowers she works with mostly from her own garden. They have to be fresh for the perfect result. 'Roses don't cast well, or peonies; the smaller forms rather than blousy blooms cast better,' she explains

*Top right:* A wooden frame is fitted around the still life in clay for the casting process, before the plaster mixture is poured gently into the mould, which will take a few hours to cure. A technician now assists her one day a week with casting

*Right:* Rachel has used the same piece of clay for pressing the flowers for years. 'Sometimes a seed is left behind in the clay, and I'll suddenly discover a baby plant growing out of it,' she says  
*Far right:* She uses a small tool to remove the flowers before casting



appear in Rachel's hair and face. She laughs apologetically. 'It's all about precision, but also about speed with this technique: I cannot wash my hands in between, because plaster has to be poured as soon as possible after mixing.'

Rachel takes the newly picked flowers out of the box one by one, and sensitively arranges them next to each other on the plaque of clay; delicate flowers of the purple henbit resting by a round petalled yellow poppy, or the bell-shaped blooms of the common comfrey nestling alongside a curved fern leaf and nearly transparent dill. 'It's all about contrasts, in size, fineness and structure. In this way the different shapes reinforce each other. But I do not like it too stylised; it has to look natural, as if they are standing next to each other in the forest,' Rachel explains.

When the composition is right, Rachel pushes the flowers into the clay very carefully with the tips of her fingers, from top to bottom, petal by petal, gradually pressing them

deeper into the clay to capture every detail, before skilfully picking them out again to leave behind their fine imprint.

This forms the mould for the casting process. Once the plaster is sufficiently cured, Rachel cautiously separates the clay layer from the plaster whereupon flower for flower, the spring scene sees the light. The fragile reliefs of the gracefully curved fern, poppy petals and leaf veins in the heuchera look so real you feel compelled to touch them and trace the organic contours with your fingertips.

'I like to work with the seasons, to really catch spring or summer in a cast,' Rachel explains. 'When I see all these flowers next to each other on a cast, I can immediately recall: this was made on a beautiful day in May. That feeling and the fleeting beauty of those spring flowers are now permanent memories in plaster.'

To see more of Rachel's work visit [racheldein.com](http://racheldein.com)



Above and right: Available in plaster or concrete – ideal for use as decorative elements in the garden – Rachel's botanical casts are priced from £30. She also creates more colourful work using added pigments. She will be exhibiting her pieces at Chelsea Flower Show

