

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

RA

Regional Preview: Edmund de Waal at Waddesdon

Edmund de Waal is the first contemporary artist to exhibit within the Rothschild collection at Waddesdon Manor

Emma Crichton-Miller



Edmund de Waal with his installation, 'Between Two Breaths', 2012, in the Breakfast Room at Waddesdon Manor. Photo © Sam Frost.

In some ways this is a most unlikely exhibition: the Japanese-influenced minimalism of ceramicist Edmund de Waal's work displayed within the extravagant interiors of the Rothschild's faux-French château, Waddesdon Manor. In other ways, however, this project represents a homecoming for de Waal. He has travelled the world to talk about his hugely successful book, *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010), in which he traces his inherited collection of 264 Japanese *netsuke* back through his father's family, the Ephrussi, a Jewish dynasty who built their fortune on grain trading and banking in the 19th century. When Lord Rothschild and the curators of Waddesdon invited him to create 12 installations in response to the rooms of this glorious building, he returned with new energy to the studio.

Alongside the Reynolds portraits, Dutch Old Masters and 18th-century French furniture at Waddesdon, are rich collections of Meissen and Sèvres porcelain. This grand tradition in European ceramics has long been a focus for a dialogue through which de Waal's own porcelain work has evolved. More personally, the Waddesdon project has enabled him to explore his own

family history, through the house and collections of this great family of Jewish art collectors who had intermarried with the Ephrussi.

‘It all came about in the most lovely way possible,’ de Waal explains. In *The Hare with the Amber Eyes* he had described a photograph of his great-grandmother, Baroness Emmy Schey von Koromla, as a girl in Vienna, dressed as Titian’s Isabella d’Este in velvet and fur, ‘while other cousins are pretty Chardin and Pieter de Hooch servant-girls.’ Having read the book, the Waddesdon curators wanted to know if there were any Viennese Rothschilds in the photos, and invited de Waal along to the house.

From that meeting has developed a project which is both homage to the Rothschild passion for collecting and a questioning of the artist’s own sense of belonging. He is the first contemporary artist to be invited to respond to specific locations within the collection. In the Breakfast Room, for instance, *Between Two Breaths* (2012), a pair of vitrines containing 43 white porcelain vessels, echoes the density of two Meissen animal figures featured in the room. De Waal’s vitrines – edged in black – frame his pots, distinctly marking them off from their surroundings: ‘This is the first exhibition of mine where everything has its own presence in a freestanding vitrine. After all, what can you possibly bring into Waddesdon,’ he says.

Notable themes are lost collections and dispersal – the Ephrussi lost virtually everything except the *netsuke* prior to the Second World War, while some important Rothschild collections have been given to the British Museum. In his installation, *A Promise* (2012), five pots are placed in vitrines of frosted glass, to convey the idea of things not quite seen.

Other vitrines stand on perspex plinths: ‘These installations float above bits of furniture,’ says de Waal. ‘They are with it but not of it. This is my take on what the house is trying to do – making a place for the Rothschild family within English society but quite other from it.’