

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Poetry Written in Porcelain

Edmund de Waal Prepares for an Exhibition

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Andrew Testa for The New York Times

Edmund de Waal in his studio in London. An exhibition of his porcelains will open on Sept. 12 in New York.

LONDON — In England, Edmund de Waal is a celebrated potter, known for installations of impeccably made vessels in soft shades of celadon or white, many of them permanently displayed in places like the Victoria and Albert Museum here. But in the United States Mr. de Waal is known primarily as a writer whose 2010 family memoir “The Hare With Amber Eyes” became a surprise best seller. Despite countless rejections from publishers, it ended up selling more than 1.5 million copies, has been translated into 26 languages and was recently optioned for a movie.

Chronicling the journey of 264 Japanese netsuke — wood and ivory carvings of animals, plants and people, none larger than the palm of a hand — that Mr. de Waal inherited from his great-uncle Iggy, “The Hare With Amber Eyes” is a sweeping story that begins in Paris in 1871 and progresses through five generations of the Ephrussi family, whose collection of netsuke made its way to Vienna, where it was thought to have been confiscated by the Nazis, and decades later ended up in London. “My making and my writing is one thing,” Mr. de Waal explained, adding, “Pots turn into words, and words turn into pots.”

Like the netsuke, Mr. de Waal’s own work is three-dimensional, tactile and painstakingly fashioned, but in his own Minimalist and modern language. He produces objects like wafer-thin

cylinders, plates and pitchers, carefully arranged to tell a story. While collectors like the cosmetics heir Ronald S. Lauder and Sotheby's vice chairman Charles Moffett have purchased examples of Mr. de Waal's porcelain, there has never been an exhibition of his work in the United States. But after the dealer Larry Gagosian read the memoir, he was curious to see Mr. de Waal's art. "They're really poetic installations," Mr. Gagosian said of his decision to present a major show of Mr. de Waal's porcelain at his Madison Avenue gallery, opening on Sept. 12.

The soft-spoken Mr. de Waal, dressed in clay-splattered bluejeans and a white T-shirt, recently showed a visitor through his new studio, a commodious space in an old munitions factory in Dulwich, an area of South London. Music was playing continuously (Glenn Gould, Meredith Monk) and the white walls were filled with installations of thousands of fragile porcelains waiting to be packed up, vessel by tiny vessel, and shipped by boat to New York for the Gagosian show.

Trying to place the 48-year-old Mr. de Waal among his generation of artists seems nearly impossible. "Edmund is unique," said Martin Roth, director of the Victoria and Albert. "He doesn't fit into a niche, and that's his strength. He's not copying 18th-century or ancient Asian porcelain. His work is completely modern, but it is steeped in a great knowledge of history."



*Current works at his studio.
Credit: Andrew Testa for The New York Times*

A Renaissance man with an expressive face and a gentle manner, Mr. de Waal speaks as passionately about porcelain as he does poetry and painting. When he was 5, his father, the Rev. Victor de Waal, took him to an evening pottery class. "It was a complete epiphany," he said, realizing even then that making pots was what he wanted to do in life. "It was totally compelling, the weirdness of making something out of nothing," he said.

Born in Nottingham, England, he grew up in an unheated medieval house in Lincoln, some two hours north of London, next to the famous cathedral, and later in Canterbury. One of four boys, his father was dean of Canterbury Cathedral for 10 years, and his mother, Esther Moir, is a historian. At school, Mr. de Waal studied with Geoffrey Whiting, a disciple of the British potter Bernard Leach. He was so enamored of Whiting's studio that he deferred an acceptance to Cambridge to become his apprentice — sweeping floors, preparing glazes and making tea. In 1991, five years after he finished Cambridge, he was awarded a two-year scholarship to study Japanese in Tokyo, work in a ceramics studio and research a book he eventually wrote on Leach.

It was there that he would visit his Uncle Iggie, who had moved to Tokyo in 1947 and was the owner of the collection of netsuke.

It was “a metamorphic time,” he recalled. “That’s when I started thinking: ‘How can I work with architecture? How can I work with space? How can I electrify these objects and put them together in different ways?’ ”

His work, he went on, is the “language of sculpture, it’s about multiples and early minimalism; poetry and words and the spaces between words and sounds. When I make something, I hear it.”

Mr. de Waal’s inspiration comes as much from poets and musicians as it does other artists: the Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto “because of the abstract way he deals with an image”; composers like Steve Reich and John Adams, for their serial, repetitive music which “allows me to think about slow, incremental change”; poets like Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery, “because of their cadences and passionate abstraction.”

Mr. de Waal did not start out showing his porcelain in art galleries, but rather at the annual Chelsea Craft Fair in London, where his work happened to be seen by museum curators in the ‘90s. His big breakthrough didn’t come until 2001, when he created an entire room in the Geffrye Museum in East London that ended up traveling. “It was a wall of pots inspired by 18th-century porcelain rooms,” he said. “It was a bit like early minimalist art and it was totally unsaleable but it was exactly what I wanted to do.”

Over the years, his work has become more nuanced and complex. In front of a wall in his studio are 30 exquisitely constructed porcelains arranged in a vitrine sealed with opaque glass that makes the objects blurry, not unlike one of Gerhard Richter’s photorealist paintings. The way the shapes are perceived is deliberate, as it can completely change their meaning. Some are hung high on a wall; others are below eye-level.

“It’s about yearning, like the book,” he said, referring to the netsuke, whose journey and ownership became the lens through which he told his story of possession and restitution. “My porcelains speak to that whole array of emotions: owning, having, losing.”

At one end of his studio is a tiny balcony space with nothing but a stool and a potter’s wheel. Here, Mr. de Waal demonstrated his craft, taking a lump of clay and creating a perfectly formed cylinder in seconds. The act was so effortless, it was like watching a magician pull a handkerchief out of a viewer’s ear. That pot, he explained, would dry overnight, and in the morning he would perfect it with a knife. Once satisfied, he would then put his imprint on it — a special seal, much like a painter signing a canvas — and fire it in one of the kilns that occupy a special room in his studio, where he keeps a book containing thousands of secret recipes for glazes.

While subtle shades of whites and celadon have become his signature, the Gagosian show will feature a departure for Mr. de Waal: black porcelains, many with a hint of gilt. Although working with black is still out of his “comfort zone,” he said his inspiration comes from studying the early Meissen porcelain makers who were working in Dresden, Germany, some 300 years ago. “Their

work was black because it was before they managed to crack the alchemy to make white,” he said. “There’s something incredibly beautiful about those early shadowy black porcelains.”

Unlike most artists, who at least dabble in different mediums, Mr. de Waal doesn’t draw or paint. “I’ve never picked up a brush,” he said. “It doesn’t remotely interest me.”

But writing has always been part of his life. Having his proposal for “The Hare With Amber Eyes” repeatedly turned down because, he was told, “there was no market for a Jewish memoir about a family you can’t spell who collected objects you can’t pronounce,” didn’t stop him. “I just wrote the bloody thing anyway,” he said. It took five years and countless trips to trace his family’s roots in Odessa, Vienna, Paris, Tokyo, writing whenever he found a moment. In the end he got an advance of £10,000, or about \$15,500.

Jonathan Galassi, president of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, the book’s American publisher, said he was amazed at its success. “It was a word-of-mouth thing,” he said. “It’s been one of those books that people buy multiple copies of for friends and pass them from person to person.” Mr. de Waal was as surprised as everyone else. “Not in a million years,” he said when asked if he thought he’d written a best seller. “I was just so glad it was published while my dad was still around, so that my children could talk to him about it.” (Mr. de Waal lives in Dulwich with his wife, Sue Chandler, who works for the International Development Department, and their three children, aged 15, 13 and 11.)

As he was writing the book, he began getting some of the most important commissions of his career, including the Victoria and Albert, which asked him to make a permanent installation for its newly refurbished porcelain galleries, an invitation from the Duke of Devonshire to create a porcelain corridor at Chatsworth, the fabled stately home in Derbyshire, and a commission from Jacob Rothschild to come up with an installation for Waddesdon Manor, his family’s home in Buckinghamshire known for its collections of Sèvres and Meissen porcelain.

Now, beside the coming Gagosian show, he is juggling commissions in Vienna, Amsterdam and Dresden as well as a monumental public artwork in London, where he is working with the architect David Chipperfield on a series of underground vitrines that will be part of a building site in the Victoria area of London.

Yet it is the memoir that he is still best known for. “I am everyone’s cousin,” Mr. de Waal said. “I get letters, ridiculous letters, from people who want to buy the netsuke. But there have been the most amazing moments too, like hearing from someone who knew my grandparents.”

He has also been flooded with interest from filmmakers. “I had people saying Rachel Weisz will play your grandmother,” he recalled. “There is a comic element to the whole thing.” It ended up being optioned by Allon Reich, the British producer of movies like “Never Let Me Go.”

Despite requests from fans, however, he is adamant that there will be no sequel. “I could live perpetually in the shadow of the book,” he said. “But I’ve moved on. I’m elsewhere.”