

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# Wallpaper\*

## Edmund de Waal's ceramic installations go on show in New York

Stephanie Murg



*'Atemwende' (detail), 2013. Photography: Mike Bruce*

Tenacity isn't the first word that comes to mind when one thinks of porcelain, but it's pretty tough stuff, with a delicate texture that belies its resilience in the face of chemical insults and thermal shocks. This sly strength comes as no surprise to Edmund de Waal, who remains enchanted with the medium some three decades after switching from stoneware to Limoges.

'Porcelain is incredibly resonant, culturally and historically. It's deep in the DNA of trade and of meaning and the passage of objects from one part of the world to another,' says de Waal, surrounded by hundreds of his hand-sized vessels in vitrines that line the walls of Gagosian Gallery in New York. 'It's a seductive, beautifully immersive material to use, and therefore you're always on the cusp of losing yourself in it.'

The delicious precariousness of working with porcelain - an unforgiving material with no patience for creative deliberation - is conveyed in 'Atemwende,' De Waal's first exhibition with Gagosian and in a country that knows him best for his 2010 family memoir, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. The 20 new works, which stretch over two floors and weave between them, are simultaneously mesmerizing and inscrutable, inviting contemplation while hinting at the obsession that generated them.

'Each piece is a rhythmical series of breaths, and then it's a bringing together of spaces, of pauses,'

explains de Waal of his highly iterative process, which always begins at the potter's wheel in his London studio. 'And then the spacing of one and another and another and another, and making sense of something through repetition.'

He borrowed 'Atemwende' ('breathturn') from Paul Celan, who used the term in a 1967 poetry collection to describe the moment when words transcend literal meaning. De Waal's vessels - arrayed in purposeful rows that pulse with meaning, and presented in vitrines varying in scale, material, configuration, and colour - evoke everything from musical staves and Morse code to the work of Giorgio Morandi and (through blurry glass) Gerhard Richter.

And while de Waal continues to be fascinated by the colour white, here enlivened by hints of gilt, he has also embraced black, a move inspired by the work of Kazimir Malevich. 'I had to think hard about the black square instead of the white square, and work out what black did in the world,' he says. 'It's been years of quietly, secretly working on black glazes.' Among the eight all-black pieces is the title work, an otherworldly cabinet of 302 porcelain vessels that beckon viewers to consider them from multiple vantage points.

As he moves effortlessly among references to Steve Reich and Donald Judd, the history of Chinese civilization and the collections of eighteenth century Europe, de Waal settles on a term that encapsulates his oeuvre and the immersive material he adores. 'Porcelain has a real connectivity with passionate minimalism,' he says with a smile. 'And I suppose passionate minimalism is probably where I am too, actually.'