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Porcelain ghosts: the secrets of Edmund de Waal's studio

For AS Byatt, De Waal's clay pots evoke everything from Malevich's constructivism to the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Here, she visits his studio to see how they come to life using chemistry, alchemy and an element of hazard

AS Byatt



Detail of Edmund de Waal's Signs and Wonders, 2009. Photograph: Hélène Binet

The title of Edmund de Waal's series *From Zero* is a reference to a quotation from the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich. "It is from zero, in zero, that the true movement of being begins." *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10* was held in St Petersburg in December 1915. This was where Malevich exhibited his *Black Square*. His disciple, El Lissitzky, explained that the black square was both an end and a beginning – pictorial culture narrowed to a uniform square – a diminishing series – but this square was also the beginning of a new line. 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 to 0 but then 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... Malevich called his square "a naked icon without a frame (like my pocket), the icon of my time". It was displayed high, across the corner of the room, as icons were hung in Russian homes.

It has a painterly surface, with small brushstrokes. Other iconic Malevich works in this new form were the *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, and the *Red Square*. If the black square was "zero form", the subtle, tilted white square on a different white background was, Malevich declared, "pure movement". And the red square was sometimes the revolution but also beauty, as the Russian word for "red" is the Russian word for "beautiful" (*krasny*).

De Waal's works call up Malevich's colours, and also a meditation on the appearance of something from nothing, though they are still and self-contained, not needing the fizzing of Malevich's persistent theorising. De Waal says that the beginning of a pot is circular, a ball of clay, an O, turning on a circular wheel, and in his hands clay becomes a repeated series of

cylindrical forms, all the same, all different, each subtly changing the next pot in the group, and in turn the whole series.

Clay, however finely worked, is solid in a way that an abstract painted form is not. Human cultures have always thought of humans as made from clay, of the earth earthy, taking form out of formless mud and going back to it, having gone through fire, water and shaping. There is a sense in which De Waal's cylinders are abstractions, but it is not the same sense as the one in which Malevich's witty suprematist ceramics are abstractions. The suprematists worked at the Porcelain Factory in Saint Petersburg in 1923, making objects that played games with the utilitarian forms of cup and teapot and plate. Malevich made "half-cups", flat on one side, and a suprematist lidded teapot that resembles both a Russian church and a purely abstract geometric construction. Malevich was interested in the inherent – or imposed – three-dimensional geometrical abstractions. "Non-objective abstraction must overturn the object as a utilitarian irrelevance, for only then will new technical potential be born." Whereas De Waal is interested in the clay, and the minerals that go into the glazes, and in the possibilities of the forms of solid geometry in clay.

Cézanne famously said that nature should be understood through the cylinder, the sphere and the cone, and in this sense De Waal's cylinders are abstract forms. But they are objects, as cups and bowls and dishes are objects. Honoré de Balzac said his *Human Comedy* was made up, as the world was, of men, women and things. Manmade things. De Waal's pots are manmade things in the world.

He tells how he decided at the age of five that he would be a potter.

"Did you see a pot?" I asked him, and he said, "Yes, a particular white Chinese pot."

He was taught by Geoffrey Whiting, a follower of Bernard Leach. Leach worked in the tradition of arts and crafts pottery, making useful vessels from earthenware. In William Morris's day, porcelain was felt to be unacceptably refined – made for decoration, over-ornate, shown for display as opposed to being in touch with ancient uses and simplicity. De Waal rejected this narrow idealism, and became interested in Chinese and Korean porcelains. He has said that his use of porcelain joins the Chinese Song dynasty with the simplicities of the Bauhaus.

The literary critic WK Wimsatt said that poems were to be understood as "concrete universals", unique shapes related to the world but self-contained. Sitting in seminars on this subject I always drew pages of differing pots, round, fat, slender, twisted ... De Waal's pots are concrete universals. They are in one sense the platonic form of a pot, the essence of a pot. They have neither lip nor handle, spout nor lid. They are ghosts, in ghostly colours – all kinds of whites and creams, whites with fawn just in them, or ecru, whites touched by the blue of duck eggs or the pale celadon green of Korean jars and dishes. Some have matt surfaces, black as soot, some are brilliantly shiny, glistening like coal or butter or milk. Some of them are grouped in white-plaster shelved cupboards – De Waal says he thinks of these as empty, freshly painted household rooms, before anything is put in them, or any pictures are hung. The pots vary in height, and in their diameter, and to a certain extent in their texture, which is not smooth exactly, and does not ripple or swell exactly, but is somehow alive. The groups of cylinders are like miniature groups of standing stones, or architectural dreams, but small and decorous. Every pot is marked with what De Waal says are ancient Chinese and Japanese seals, of which he has a collection, almost worn away, so that we see "the memory of a mark, so to speak".

Pots are tactile before they are visual – they are made by fingers and need to be touched. If you examine one of these with the fingers, you find that inside the simple cylindrical rim there is a clean band of unglazed clay. Sometimes there is a fine strip of applied gold leaf, hidden from the onlooker, but there.

A very plain series of grouped cylindrical dishes, called *A part of speech*, arranged between narrow shelves, has drops of gold inside the dishes, which were found to radiate a strange, intense golden light, in patches, on the undersides of the higher shelves. De Waal's yellows are unexpected and striking among the blacks and whites. A piece called *Tristia* has an arrangement of low dishes and almost jars, ranging from a bright mustard through butter and celandine to a bare wispy yellow stain. These unusually bright pots are shown between two blocks of plaster, solid white space, that appear to be about to close and crush them. I asked what went into the yellow glazes, and was told "whiting, flint, talc, dolomite, bentonite and nepheline syenite". In the celadon glaze there are "potash feldspar, dolomite, bone ash, china clay, quartz and talc". It is chemistry and alchemy at once. The process of making pots is both precise and uncertain – there is always an element of hazard in what happens in the fire. Yet these colours are wonderfully varied and controlled.

There is one very bright line of colour – a high shelf, *All you can see*, in that rich Chinese red De Waal used for the circular shelf, loaded with pots, in his extraordinary installation in the dome of the Victoria and Albert Museum. It recalls the painterly scarlet of Malevich's *Red Square* – and indeed the high directional red line, with the pots standing in it, is like a suprematist image of movement and flight, containing motionless clay.

There are the pale groups in plaster, and then there are the black groups. There are cases made of lead, inside which are groups of black cylinders. I think of lead as matt, heavy and uniform – but here it shines with strange rainbow lights like shot silk, or spilled oil on a dark street, or glimmerings between dark stones in underground caverns. A shiny glaze, on a black pot, inside this dark casket, is quite different from the limpid surface of the eggshell colours on white. A glossy black pot makes a light in darkness – a matt black pot absorbs light from the shiny pot and from the lead around it, becoming a kind of memory of a pot.

And beyond the bright blackness of the lead cases is a single black oak box, burned and sooty, blacker than black, inside which there is a single black cylinder whose outline is almost the image of an absence.

Malevich sometimes referred to his *Black Square* as the coffin of the sun. He found the image when he was working on the futurist opera, *Victory Over the Sun*. There are clear images of death and burial in De Waal's *From Zero* also. The lead boxes are coffins, and indeed there is a hint of funerary urns – vessels containing the remains of once-living creatures – about all the carefully arranged cylinders. The potter's art, as I said earlier, is intricately interwoven with the ancient human sense of originating in earth and returning to that first state. There are also images of life and light, starting with the dailiness of butter and milk in kitchens. Malevich, in his need to repel the idea of an "object", asked indignantly, "Is a milk bottle, then, the symbol of milk?" I am not quite sure why he was so enraged by this kind of thought. De Waal's containers make us think, if not of milk, at least of milkiness.

From Zero also makes explicit references to the Christian stories of the creation and the resurrection. There are three small altarpieces, in which collections of pots are enclosed like

altars with doors that can be closed or opened. There is *By the wall, standing* in which the vessels stand like abstracts of painted figures, diminishing in size downwards. *An English matins* is perhaps an image of the words and music of the church service of matins, in an English morning light, browns and fawns, creams and whites, English daily colours. *In a garden, two angels* is in unearthly pale golds and vanishing cloud colours. It is the garden of Gethsemane where the angels told the weeping women that Christ was not there, had risen and gone.

De Waal speaks of the light in the spaces between figures in gilded altar paintings. Here, the angels are the spaces between the pots, which are lit by the reflections from the glazes. Indeed, the pots make light in the air around them, reflecting from one surface to another. I remember once in an exhibition of the paintings of Patrick Heron in the Tate gallery, realising that afterimages of the colours I was seeing – in complementary colours – were floating all around me in the air of the room. Something like that happens when I look at these pots – they make an earthly/unearthly light of their own.

When I taught literature to art students I thought I noticed that ceramics students seemed to have less need for, less interest in language than most of the others – painters, graphic designers, textile designers. De Waal studied English literature and is unusual in that his titles do add to and illuminate his work. He uses the idea of language itself as a metaphor for the formations of cylinders.

Or perhaps he uses the pots as a metaphor for the forms of languages. *A part of speech* is a series of small dishes grouped in twos and threes, like definite articles or conjunctions. There is a wonderful large vitrine, *word for word*, which is like a tablet containing word-forms, or sequences of characters waiting to be read. Our first writing was on clay, and the vitrine is both a sophisticated display cabinet and repeated forms asking to be construed and read. He rejected the idea of *In the beginning was the Word* as a title – his titles are unassuming, more tentative than that. But there is a sense of *From Zero* being made up of words put together from letters, something from nothing, *Making*, as medieval poets said of the art of poetry. One of the earliest ideas De Waal mentioned as an origin of the exhibition *From Zero* was a need to make a pot and make a place to put it away, or hide it, give it some room, a place in which to be itself. He says that this was to do with the idea of haecceity, “that things can only reveal themselves in separateness” – he added that “because it is pots, putting them aside can only be provisional. They will be moved on ...”

This idea of the separated object, in its quiddity, made me think of Wallace Stevens’s “Anecdote of the Jar”. Indeed, I kept coming back, as I looked, to Stevens’s meditations on the relations of manmade forms to formlessness, between the world and the mind and the object. One example might be his poem “Angel Surrounded by Paysans”. This is a poem about a painted still life by Tal-Coat, which depicts a Venetian glass bowl and a group of terrines, bottles and glasses. The bowl, Stevens explained, is the Angel, and the paysans are the vessels surrounding it. The poem is spoken by “the angel of reality”, “the necessary angel of the earth”, who enables the hearers to “see the earth again/Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set”. The angel, in some sense, is the focusing of attention on the nature of the objects.

Here is “Anecdote of the Jar”:

*I placed a jar in Tennessee
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.
The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall, and of a port in air.
It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

Stevens had a fine sense of the mysterious relations between the manmade concrete universal, and the wilderness. In “The Idea of Order at Key West”, he sets a singer against the sea, against “the grinding water and the gasping wind”, against “the meaningless plungings of water and the wind”. The singer orders what she hears and sees, and “what she sang was uttered word by word”.

*And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the
maker.*

The song, too, resembles the rhythms of the pots in their settings, rhythms that are metaphors for music as well as for language. The pots give me the same joy Stevens gives me, of recognising the human making of Balzac’s “things”, what Stevens also calls a “blessed rage for order”, here delicate and provisional, as frangible pottery always is.