

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

CHRISTIE'S

My London: Edmund de Waal

The potter discusses the importance of his dog to his studio space, the liberating quality of clay, and how 3am is the time he finds for reading — one in a series of interviews taken from London Burning: Portraits from a Creative City (Thames & Hudson)



Edmund de Waal, splitting conceptual infinitives in several senses, looks through a Plexiglas vitrine containing some of his delicate porcelain vessels, of which only shadows are visible, leaving the viewer to imagine what the eye cannot make out.

How would you describe the neighbourhood of West Norwood, where you have your studio?

Dull.

Is dull inspirational?

Dull is very good, because dull in a big factory next to a bus garage is about as anonymous as you can get. You can drive along a road and it's not here. So it's a place that you can absolutely escape to. You can open and close a door, and you can be wherever you want.

It's almost as if you need a Narnia cupboard to walk through.

A cupboard is a very interesting idea. Yes, you walk through a door and things change. It's all about thresholds, the liminal.

What form does your focus take while you're working?

Oh, it's a tunnel. I mean, it's all about movement isn't it? You move towards something. Whether or not you get there is not really important. Keeping moving is the significant thing. For

instance, if you think spatially about the studio, I come in across this threshold, I can choose to go up into my library and write, or I can choose to make pots.

So when you exit this tunnel, you don't know which direction you're going in?

No.

And this happens every day?

Well, sometimes it does. Having said that, I have to finish a book to make an exhibition. What do I do? It's interesting for me (not for other people) because those things are hugely connected. Going upstairs, opening a book, beginning to write, beginning to look at things, beginning to try to trace a line of thinking in words. Or picking up clay, beginning to make something, beginning a line of thought which will end up in a vitrine.

To get to this tunnel of movement, do you take the bus, do you drive, or do you walk to work?

I live a mile and a half away, so when I can I walk with the dog or I cycle.

How important is the dog in your scheme of things?

Massively significant. The studio might be a white space, but it's not a minimal space. There's people coming and going all the time. You've got lots of conversation happening. Having a dog who's running around and meeting people, barking and needing walks, it's all part of the openness of normal life. It's not some hieratic, priestly, sacrosanct space. It's a real, living space.

With a dog yapping and a telephone snapping and people chatting, though, how do you manage to get any work done?

I'm very good at turning down the volume. This is partly about having children. But I can have lots of stuff happening around me and be able to write a book or make pots. And there are things that help you along the way. One is that I put on very, very loud music, Steve Reich or Philip Glass, and saturate the space with sound. The real thing is the training to be able to continue with your thinking no matter what's going on around you.

Let's go back to your childhood. Your father was Chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral and Dean of Canterbury. Is the sociology of religion embedded in the way that you exclude things from, or include them, in your work? I'm talking about method and discipline in spirit.

God, that's a tough question to be asked on a Friday morning! Genuine response is yes, it's very important. Actually, there's a real connection there between early experiences of church, of being around people who were involved in some kind of spiritual discipline, and my own path with clay.

What is it about clay in particular?

Well, clay does several things. It's grounding. It's about being on the Earth. Clay is the ur-material, the thing that defines you as a human being. It's the fact that you pick up clay and you make something out of it. But it's also the utter, ridiculous fragility of what you do. Nothing you do will survive. It will survive for a bit, but everything ends up as shards. Everything is broken.

So you're involved in this art where everything is paused and poised, just for a bit intact in the world. You always end up, if you make things out of clay, like Job sitting on your pile of shards.

But the shards provide a reading of the history of humankind.

Exactly. Upstairs, there's all these 12th-century broken bits of pot I found on a hillside in China. When you pick them up, you've got that pulse of someone else, eight hundred years ago, making something. And you've got the moment of fracture, the disruptive moment when something gets broken. And you've got this puzzle. You've got this extraordinary, dense, physical object which tells you something, but not everything, about what happened.

So you close your eyes and hold the piece of broken pottery and imagine?

Yes. You absolutely feel it. You know you can't get the whole thing.

You feel it? What do you mean?

Well, when you pick it up, you feel that this pot has been made very fast or very slowly. That it has taken attention, or if the person was thinking of something else. You can see how much it mattered to them. I've spent forty-five or fifty years making pots. You pick something up, you read it with your hands, you read it with your body.

You had, at age five, a key to the back door of the Deanery and managed to escape to some potter's shed where you swept up and did what was necessary to ingratiate yourself with the potter. Have you thought about how unusual that was for a small child?

Yes, I have. In some ways, you could say, why at five doesn't everyone want to be a potter? It's about play. It's about being in control of something and not being in control. It's about that wonderful moment of slipping in between, fluidity. You make something. And what is that about? It's about storytelling! You start to make a bowl and it ends up as a jug. And then the jug collapses and it's an ashtray for your mother.

It's the story of everything, isn't it?

It's the story of all stories. You being somewhere else ... you take it and it becomes something different. That's what clay does. It reads your thinking and how you pace what you're trying to say in different ways.

Surely that's not something you'd relate to young children, though.

Now, that's great at five, it's great when you're an adolescent, because you're trying to work out who you are and things keep changing. Then you have this great decision about how disciplined you want to be. You go into this long, dark tunnel of apprenticeship, and that takes however many years. You end up with skills with which you can then decide what kind of storytelling you want to be involved in.

Has your attitude towards clay changed over the years?

Of course. Clay changes all the time.

So, metaphorically speaking, clay matures in your hands?

Yes. If you choose to use a material, you don't decide at five and then that's that. You're in step with this process of self-discovery.

Who makes the decisions, you or the clay?

Well, that's the biblical question! I don't know, is the answer.

Do you think you are going to last longer than your work or the other way round?

Oh, I'll be gone. But what will happen is that there will be shards. And that, you see, is quite liberating. As an artist it's liberating because it's what you're trying to do. I do this ridiculous art form which is that I make things. And, even more ridiculously, I put them out and I say, 'That's my poem. That's how I want it to be. I want it to be in this particular frame, this particular vitrine. I want them to be in that order. I want them to have that kind of energy in those gaps. And I want this colour here.' But you know what? Some pots will be broken. They'll be moved. The collector who's just bought it might not like it. It will disappear, it will come back, and it will fall apart. That's absolutely fine.

You don't mind if the whole thing falls apart or breaks?

I don't mind, because the moment it leaves the studio, things change.

So you're not invested in ownership?

I'm not.

Looking closely at some of your work makes me think of music.

Good. Lots of things come out of scores and notation. I do this whole thing which very much came out of Bach, endlessly.

Are you good at maths?

No, I'm hopeless.

So this is your maths?

Yes. Scoring is one thing. It's intervals and repetitions. But there's also a lot of words, phrases and picking up of syllables.

Do they need interpretation?

No! Sod interpretation!

But that's what everyone in art does!

That's fine. I really don't care. I do quite a lot of reading and quite a lot of writing.

How many hours a day reading?

How long is the day?

I mean, you've got a dog, you've got children, you've got a wife, you've got pottery ...

Yes, but I also have three in the morning when I'm reading books.

When do you sleep?

The next decade I'll sleep. That's fine.

Still, the interpretation thing is important given the immense intellectual and spiritual investment in time and effort, no?

You know, the interpretation thing is important because you give something you've made a name. The name, the title, is part of the poem. It's sometimes helpful and sometimes distracting. Sometimes it's a joke.

Is the creation adopted, or is it a natural child? Because you mentioned things changing once a piece leaves your domain ...

That's a good question. I don't know. If I was over-identified with all the things that I had done, I would spend my life anxious about all these children. As it is already, I have too many people trying to ask me stuff about what I have done. You make a child and the child walks off down the road. Of course, you're concerned because it's your child. But at a certain moment your child has to have its own life. You absolutely have to let go in order to have the room to make the next thing, to take that line of thought somewhere else.

You grew up in a well-to-do, left-wing, Guardian-reading, Anglican family. Is that the sort of upbringing that you can ever escape from?

No, never.

How did this environment affect or train your mind?

Lots and lots of argument all the time. Argumentative brothers, argumentative parents.

And from a potter you have become a celebrity. How has that affected you?

Well, it's ridiculous. I mean it's such a joke. A celebrity potter? Have you ever heard of such a thing?

But you're one of these guys with the big names and people chase you around. They do programmes about you on BBC and all that stuff.

Look, what it does is two things. It means that the projects that you really want to do have more chance of happening. You have more agency in the world. There were many decades of not getting published or not doing the projects that I wanted to do, so now that's great. I enjoy it.

What sustained you through these years? You weren't a starving artist exactly, or were you?

Actually I was for quite a long time. What sustains you is, you enjoy what you're doing. How good is it when you know what you want to do, and do it? That's an incredible privilege. You may not get paid for it, but come on! Paying for it is way down the line.

So, we have two naturally ordained disciples, Discipline and Passion. Is there any relationship between the passion of creativity and the discipline of religious faith?

The creative passion, the elemental passion, the absolute passion, is making something. When you make something yourself, you make something of the world around you change a little bit. What you do by making something with passion is, you're taking a bet on something. That's not insignificant.

Let's talk about inspiration. It's been said that a dinner conversation led to you writing your best-selling book, *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*. That can't be true, can it?

Well, of course I wanted to do it. The line between telling someone a story and then deciding to actually write it is an interesting one.

How long was the line in this instance?

That process was seven years, from dinner party to publication.

In writing a book, you can use language as a metaphor. Can you talk about the translation of language or thinking into a clay pot?

The only thing more simple than the word is a vessel. A vessel is something with an interior space. And each of those things, the word and a vessel, is a breath. When you're making something, you're making an internal space. It's pretty good to have a life to try and work out what that means. You can turn that into poems, you can turn it into installations, you can turn it into books, you can turn it into huge things in museums. But at the same time it's also, absolutely, just a pot and just a word.

London Burning: Portraits from a Creative City, Author & Editor Hossein Amirsadeghi, Executive Editor: Maryam Eisler, is published by Thames & Hudson on 19 October 2015, priced £58 (hardback). All images are copyright Transglobe Publishing. *The White Road: A Pilgrimage of Sorts* by Edmund de Waal (Random House) is out now