

GAGOSIAN



Poetry and prose — and pottery. This is the stuff of Edmund de Waal's world

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Edmund de Waal: "I call myself everything. My go-to definition for decades was that I'm a potter who writes." Photo: Ben McKee, Gagosian

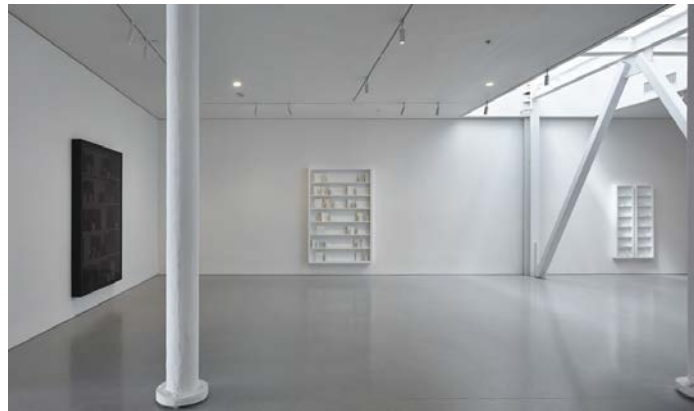
"It's there," says Edmund de Waal, in a conversation on Thursday, Sept. 20, hours before the opening of his exhibition, "the poems of our climate" at San Francisco's Gagosian. The works are far apart, the space is spare, as is the distinctly unadorned appearance of the artist, rangy and elegant in an artist's blue chambray shirt and a non-artist's spotless chinos.

Around us are porcelain vessels he's made and placed on shelves or in boxes and vitrines with silvery chunks of metal upon which handwritten words — not always readable — are inscribed. The words, I am told, are from the poems of Wallace Stevens ("poems of our climate" is his), Emily Dickinson and Rainer Maria Rilke, which "inform" the art, de Waal said later.

The titles on the gallery's handout are a few words from each poem, but individual poems from which those words are taken aren't identified. One might challenge oneself to make some kind of link, or one might turn off that left brain and absorb the forms and contrasts, the juxtapositions of materials and shapes. "It's *all* there," de Waal repeats softly.

De Waal's "The Hare With Amber Eyes," a surprise best-selling family memoir about a passion for collecting, was published in 2010, followed in 2015 by "The White Road," a poetic prose account of his passion for porcelain and his search for its origins.

We move into a back room at the gallery and I ask him first the difference between being a ceramicist, a potter and a maker of porcelain. “In a weird sense,” he says, “there’s no difference. Anyone who can use clay is basically working in a similar way, with different degrees of complexity, of technical challenge,” whether “using brown clay to make garden pots or trying to make porcelain for princes.” The idea, he says, is “using tractable material and trying to make something extraordinary out of it.” He’s a writer, and his words, spoken softly, are chosen carefully. “*Extraordinary*” — the emphasis a whole note introduced by a grace note and followed by a triplet — seems a favorite.



“the poems of our climate” will be at Gagosian through Dec. 8. Photo: Mike Bruce, Gagosian

“I call myself everything,” he says. “My go-to definition for decades was that I’m a potter who writes.” During 40 years of making pots, he came to realize that “as soon as people were making vessels that were useful, they were also making things for ritual and contemplation.” Pottery, he says, has the “extraordinary ability to be functional — the most gruesome term, actually — and/or have symbolic value.”

As to the step that followed, using individual pieces in installations, “that comes out of interest in repetition,” de Waal says. “Making things, I got more and more in love with the difference in that sort of energy field” of putting “many things together,” the genesis of “thinking, gradually, in the last 20 years, for instance, of the gaps between vessels” and “that sort of thing being a kind of language.

“And then the great extraordinary change for me,” de Waal says, “was when I did the book about my family.” “Hare” was about a collection of netsuke passed down from generation to generation in his family. “I got very impressed by vitrines, by about how objects get kept together or are inherently diasporic, get lost in the world. ... And so for me the vitrine became sort of a dynamic place in which objects could be paused to be put together briefly. And in the last 10 years, that language got more and more interesting and more complex.”

De Waal makes single objects in the sense that objects are made one at a time, but they’re “not to stand alone in the world,” he says.

“Yes, I make a single object, yes absolutely, and then I make another single object. And each time they are different.”

If one were to visit his studio in London, he says, “You’d see this beautiful monastic space, a dog under my wheel, white walls, scribbled lines of text on walls and probably the ‘Goldberg Variations’ playing. But it’s probably that thing about repetition and change. You do one thing

and then you do another, and then it's back again. And that's actually sort of the rhythm of my making."

That's not rhythm consciously established, he said. But upon finishing a group of pots, "when you see them, every one is different. You think it's going to be the same, but actually the volume changes each time you make it. And that, for me, is the really interesting thing. It may not be interesting to anyone else, but it's very interesting for me."

As to writing, "at the heart of it, for me, writing is a kind of making, in a very tactile sense." De Waal nurtures "a visual sense of working. ... And finally, in my mid-50s, I'm allowing myself to have words and pots near each other. So am I a writer? I'm possibly a writer, but actually I mean to come out now as a poet, writing a kind of poetry."

With "poems of our climate," he's referring to Stevens, Dickinson, Rilke, "remembering the three people I've been living with all my life. And then there are ones which are a bit further away. But I am closer here to both bits of my life."

I ask whether, before he falls asleep at night, he ponders with words the nature of the pots he's made with his hands. He's "haunted by language," he says. "And so when I'm going to sleep or not going to sleep, the name of the installation hangs there and I know I haven't got there yet. And I know I have to do something that inhabits the language."



*Edmund de Waal shows guests around the exhibition at Gagosian.
Photo: Azzurra Alliata di Montereale, Gagosian*

How is he affected by the reception of the work? "Writing books is that private compulsion to shape something that hasn't been shaped," he says. "Making of something is not that. It's intensely personal. No one's going to say I really need a vitrine bit of Rilke. But I need to do that."

The night before, he said, "after all the wonderful technicians and carry people were all gone," he'd found himself alone in the gallery.

"Actually it was all right. And it being all right is pretty good. Because as an artist, 'it's not incredible but it's all right' means you can let it go, and then you can go on to the next thing. So it's a kind of extraordinary thing: Being all right is all you ever hope for."