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Ballantyne-Way, Duncan: Interview
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ART

Interview

"Beauty is far from banal"

British ceramicist Edmund de Waal about his latest book, the pursuit of beauty and his work currently on show in a World War II bunker vault.

By Duncan Ballantyne-Way

Your work has just been installed in a windowless bunker, this terrifically dark space – were you surprised by the result? What took me aback was how beautifully they'd done it. There are all these conventions and protocols about how to look at art. And one of them – which is incredibly banal – is that it should be well lit, without any shadows. And that is such a homogenised, conventional way to explore and experience art! So it's a relief to find someone taking on my work and just doing something new with it. There'll be 100 other white-cube exhibitions ahead of me, God willing – but this is theatre, isn't it? When you go down into the space and John Cage starts playing, you need to tune in your eyes. Actually, it's closer to a sort of 'happening' than a conventional art space. And why not? My work is often incredibly carefully calibrated, so coming here, and having someone else curate it is just kind of fab. Highly sophisticated fab!

The Feuerle Collection opened in 2016, but you are the first artist to put on a temporary exhibition. One of the reasons for this is that the collector, Désiré Feuerle, believes your work will definitely still be around in 50 years... I thought that was really generous of him to say. And, of course, how does he know? But by being an artist, you're taking a bet on the future, on having something that will survive. He is a serious collector of stuff that is 1000, 2000 or 3000 years old, and why it has survived is a matter of some consequence. So he's not a run-of-the-mill international collector: he's got a very intriguing take on what matters. I like that. I like being part of that collection. I'm also really intrigued to find out the next artist he chooses.

Do you find yourself dwelling on your own legacy as you make work? There are two things there. One is that I'm completely obsessed about 'legacy'. My writing and making is about recovering histories and passing on histories that have been elided or erased. But about my own work, I have no clue whether or not anything will survive. I certainly don't think about it when I'm making pots. That's the joy of just making – it's completely in the present moment. Otherwise, we're lost.

Edmund de Waal was born in 1964 in Nottingham, UK. He studied pottery in Japan before returning to London in 1993, where he began making his distinctive white ceramic works. Since 2000, his practice has involved grouping vessels and objects in relation to openings and spaces. He has exhibited at Tate Britain, Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum. In 2010, he published a family memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*, tracing the history of his Jewish relatives. His third and most recent book, a fictional work named *Letters to Camondo*, was published last year.

IMAGO / Bettina Strenske

You're famous for your intricate ceramic installations. Are these meticulously planned or do you first produce the vessels, then position and compose them? If you were in the studio now, you'd see that there's tonnes of things in various stages, which indicates a huge amount of planning. We're fabricating vitrines, steel, aluminium, lead, plaster, glass and bits of alabaster, and then there's the pots: making, throwing, turning, glazing and firing them. And I plan and plan – but then it all changes! That's the point. As the decades go by, the planning gets more exact, then you make something and it's not right. So you take everything out, change it and go back and make it again. Which is so different from pressing a button and having a finished artwork. I was working on making very thin tiny sheets of porcelain and rolling them out and then letting them dry quickly so they tear. Looking at these last month, I suddenly realised that these torn pieces of porcelain are very close to poetry, which I love. It's archival, almost. Then you suddenly realise you're at the beginning of a whole different body of work.

Your most recent book *Letters to Camondo* reveals the tragic history of the Camondo family through a collection of imaginary letters to famed Jewish collector Moise de Camondo, one of your distant cousins. After the death of his son in World War I, Moise bequeathed his house to the French state – it's now a museum – but the family then died at the hands of the Nazis. It must have been a difficult subject to take on. What's difficult to comprehend is that it was not that long ago. With the museum, there's almost a sense of it being a front, as people can go in and walk around it and have no idea what happened. In the same way that you can walk around Paris and have no idea about about the deportations and the murders and the roundups. In Berlin, it's difficult to move through the city without it resonating – the *Stolpersteine* are on every street corner.

When you put on an exhibition in that museum, you did it in the most unintrusive manner – placing your works in open drawers, almost disguising them. How did that idea come about? When Moise de Camondo left his house to the French state, he made it clear that he didn't want anything to be moved. So the question was: How can I put on an exhibition in the house and still respect his wishes? I did end up moving a few things just a bit and they were only there for a few months. But the process made me look at all the different kinds of residual, impermanent places to put something down. A series of my porcelain letters on a table where he wrote his letters, or opening a drawer and putting some broken porcelain inside. These were spaces and movements that barely drew attention to themselves but reflected the fact it was a family house and this man lived there, wrote letters, had friends and lived a full life there. I was trying to think about that particular house and put work there without it being sentimental or nostalgic.

Is it difficult to avoid being sentimental, considering this is a family that deserves to be memorialised? That's the seduction: to write about a kind of golden age and to slip into writing pleasurably about their lives and lifestyle and all that stuff. That then leads into a kind of false narrative. "They were really lucky, they were really rich, then they lost everything" – that is such a crude and cruel way of talking about real people. When I wrote the *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, I had to write about my family without it being nostalgic. Because I'm not entitled to be nostalgic: I didn't live in a palace on the Ringstraße in Vienna. I'm not entitled to think about the Degas and Renoirs that were lost. That's not the point. It's *a* point but not the point.

Your vessels have a tremendous texture to them, carrying their marks of unevenness and imperfection. Does this allow an audience unable to touch them to imagine their tactility? If you have a sort of perfect artefact, a 19th-century Sèvres item in all its glorious perfection, then all its tactility has been removed. So many people were involved in its making, but it has no mood, no presence in terms of a person. My thrown porcelain – I hope it's beautiful, but it absolutely still has to have the breathing quality of having been made by one person, not by many. And that connects you completely to someone else, to someone else's somatic presence. It's the same with listening to music and listening to a singer, hearing their breathing: it's in them, then somehow it's in you.

You've always said you want to make beautiful works. Few artists speak like that nowadays... I'm pretty unembarrassable about that. Which is, I suppose, one of the touchstones of things that matter to me profoundly. It might be quite a fugitive beauty, it doesn't have to be completely in your face. But actually, it seems worth trying for. And I think one of the marks of something having beauty is that you want to spend time with it. Quite a lot of contemporary art is exhausted – just a one-liner. There's some amazing work out there, but there's also that whole tendency to make something that is homogenised and instantly gettable.

Isn't there a banality in the constant pursuit of beauty... No! Beauty is far from banal. It's complicated, interrogative, worrying and generative of ideas. It's not a somnolent place, or a repose. It makes you more alive, more connected, and takes you to places you didn't actually know you wanted to go. It's entirely the opposite of banal. ■

Edmund de Waal and Unseen Pieces from The Feuerle Collection *Through Apr 9, 2023*
The Feuerle Collection, Kreuzberg.

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