

# Shapes of Silence:

## A Conversation with Edmund de Waal

by Elizabeth Fullerton

**Gathered in large-scale** installations and enclosed within minimal structures, Edmund de Waal's porcelain vessels become vehicles for human narrative and emotion, objects of almost ritual significance haunted by memory. Recently de Waal has begun to engage the present as explicitly as he does the past, using the ancient Japanese art of *kintsugi* to highlight the idea of brokenness. He has also made sculptures liberated from display and framing devices and meant to be handled. "tacet" (Latin for "it is silent"), his recent show at the New Art Centre, featured mottled stone benches with undulating surfaces celebrating the comfort of touch and luminous, shrine-like installations emanating a quiet tranquility.

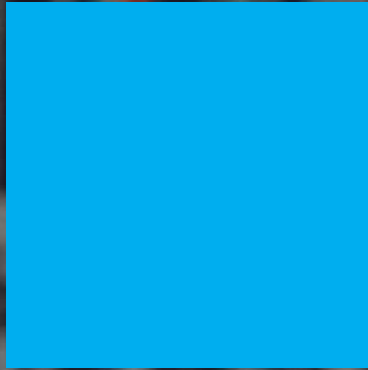
Breakage and mending are also important metaphors in de Waal's *library of exile*, an installation of books by

exiled writers from around the world housed within a porcelain-covered pavilion where visitors could read and reflect on displacement and migration. Launched at the 2019 Venice Biennale, *library of exile* traveled to Dresden, London, and finally to Iraq; de Waal then donated its 2,000 books to the Mosul University Library, which was destroyed by Islamic militants in 2014.

The theme of exile is personal for de Waal, whose family arrived in Britain as refugees in 1939. Many of his Jewish relatives perished in the Holocaust. His family memoir *The Hare With Amber Eyes* (2010) recounts this story of aspiration, loss, and bearing witness through a collection of netsuke that he inherited. These same ideas are reprised in *Letters to Camondo*, which de Waal wrote while planning his



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TOM JAMIESON

Edmund de Waal



current exhibition of the same name at the Musée Nissim de Camondo in Paris. Originally built in 1911 by the Jewish banker Count Moïse de Camondo to house his decorative arts collection, the mansion became a memorial to his son Nissim who was killed in World War I. Camondo died in 1935, and the Nazis subsequently murdered his daughter and her family. Untouched since Camondo's death, the museum embodies a repository of accumulated tragedies and memories, many mirroring those of de Waal's own family.

**Elizabeth Fullerton: How did the pandemic lockdown affect your practice?**

**Edmund de Waal:** At the heart of it would be an unambiguous need to be alone more. I realized that my life has sped up and that I need an awful lot more silence. I wouldn't have found the space to write a new book without it. It also took me back to an absolute core need to make pots. For about 20 years, I've been thinking and writing about fracture and brokenness; I realized that part of what I wanted was just to think more deeply about brokenness in what I do, and that took me to *kintsugi*. People had been talking about memorials, and I kept going back to the question of how you acknowledge a mark, a fracture, a brokenness, and not elide it, not smooth it over, not try and make it better. So, what you see is one material held with a different material, lead or gold, broken and patched up and mended.

**EF: To what extent is there a symbolic aspect to that?**

**EdW:** It seems to me a very truthful way of dealing with something that is really painful. Somehow by doing that act of mapping what's happened, you're allowing it to have both visual and emotional resonance. It really works for me as a metaphor.

**EF: You've talked before about speaking truth to power. Is *kintsugi* a means to do that?**

**EdW:** How much agency do you really have in the world as an artist? Let's not pretend; you have a bit, but not very much. But also don't underestimate the need to be truthful to your own practice. I can write books, I can talk on the radio, but making pots and letting them go into the world in a particular state, in a particular



mode of connectedness, seems to me what I can do. Years ago, I did an exhibition in Berlin working with the Walter Benjamin Archive, thinking about fracture and brokenness and unresolvedness and departures. But this is absolutely about now.

**EF: Are you referring to Brexit or a general brokenness in the world?**

**EdW:** Both. The *library of exile* project came out of an absolute anger and despair at the stigmatization of refugees and exiles and a desperate need to celebrate the gift of migration and the family story. It was also about the destruction of libraries and making a new one. The surrounding wall where I listed all the destroyed libraries of the world was a pretty raw bit of graphic artwork—it's a really big list. Then you go in, and there's a richness and polyphonic "ta-dah" of all these different writers. It's not all about despair; it is also about trying to make something beautiful and resonant.

**OPPOSITE:**  
*library of exile*,  
2019.

View of installation at the British Museum, London, 2020–21.

**THIS PAGE:**  
Installation view of "some winter pots," Gagosian, London, 2020–21.



THIS PAGE:

***petrichor,***  
2021.

Installation view of  
"Lettres à Camondo,"  
Musée Nissim de  
Camondo, Paris.

OPPOSITE, TOP  
TO BOTTOM:

***Lettres à Camondo, I,***  
2021.

Porcelain, gold, oak,  
liquid china clay, steel,  
and lead.  
5 x 22 x 17.8 cm.

***muet, V,***  
2021.

Installation view of  
"Lettres à Camondo."



“ I kept going back to the question of how you acknowledge a mark, a fracture, a brokenness, and not elide it, not smooth it over, not try and make it better. ”

**EF:** You use the word “palimpsest” a lot. How much does this concept underpin your practice and identity?

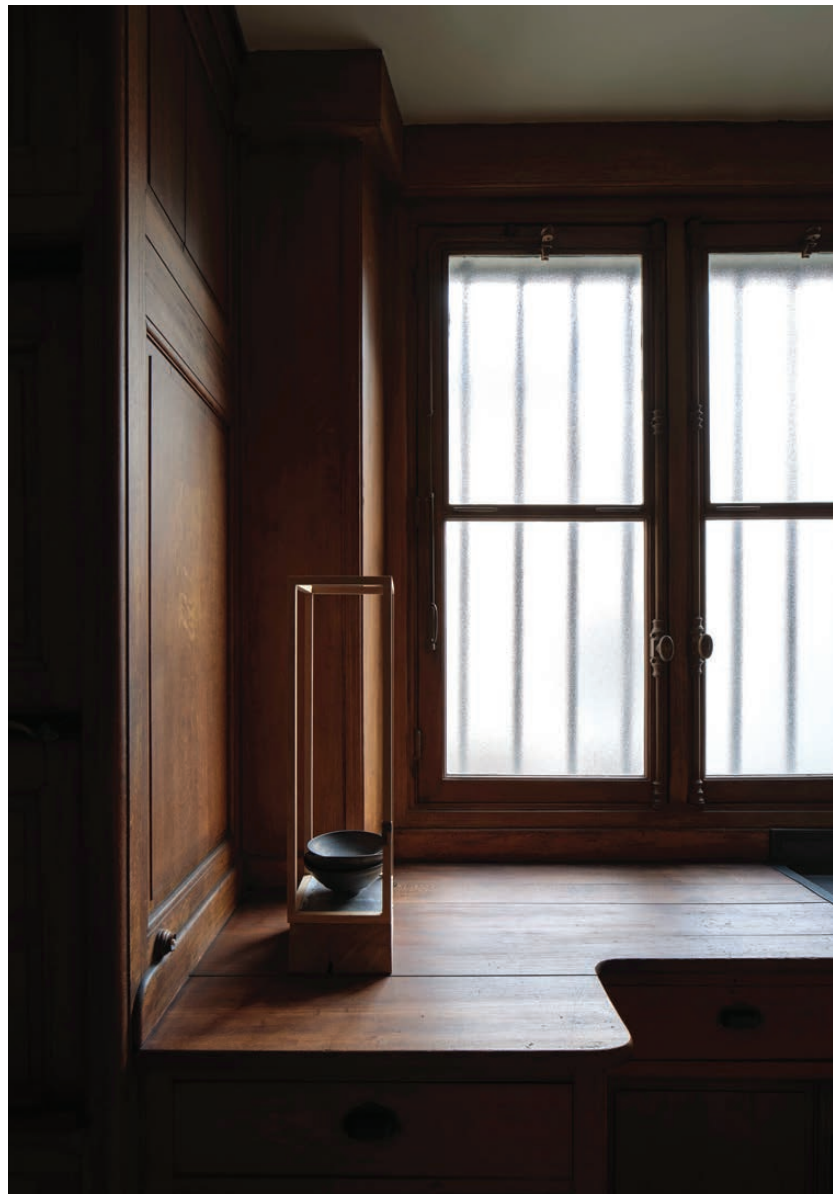
**EdW:** It’s genuinely the richest image for the overlaying, the multiplicity, the multiple natures of how we are. Where do you want to sit in relation to who you are? Who you want to become? It is a very engaging image. Of course, it’s absolutely part of the things I make and write. I yearn for Donald Judd’s clarity. I yearn for that didactic, beautiful Minimalism. But my Minimalism is errant because I keep adding layers, or finding them.

**EF:** What about touch? You’ve been making works specifically to be handled.

**EdW:** There’s nothing like being told that touch is dangerous, that toxicity will pass on through touch, that you’re not allowed to hug anyone. During the first part of the pandemic, hands became a place of danger rather than of solace. So what do you do? You want to restore touch, you want people to feel the warmth of material and contact again. Other people will also touch the benches, for instance; it’s not dangerous. They’re meant to be unapologetically, straightforwardly places to sit, but they’re also beautiful, with lead and gold insertions.

**EF:** What is behind the larger scale of many of these recent works?

**EdW:** I suppose it’s the hug. You can only just get your arms around some of the dishes, and the benches are big enough for two or three people to sit on. So, it’s social. The scale matters because it’s less optical and more about the body.



**EF: Has your attitude to the vitrine changed?**

**EdW:** There are still structures, but there's no glass now. That feels very significant. For quite a long time, I've used the vitrine as a way of holding things, pausing them, but I need the air to come through. You need to be able to reach in and touch. And using wood rather than steel or aluminum is very, very big for me. The Camondo house is full of extraordinary materials, including amazing Belle Époque veneer furniture. To bring very hard and perfect vitrines into such spaces would have felt completely wrong in terms of tactility and spirit—like an art world intervention.

**EF: How did the Camondo exhibition come about, and what prompted you to write letters to the long-dead Count and collect them in a book?**

**EdW:** The invitation came about five years ago. I'd been mulling over the exhibition, going to the house and working in the archives. I had no plans to write a book, and then in lockdown, I realized that I was walking around the studio and beginning to talk to him. I couldn't get to Paris, and somehow it became letters. Letters are interesting because you can move between moods. It seemed like a good form because he wasn't answering me; it was really about my questions and my sense of kinship with him. Questions such as: What's it like to leave Constantinople and come to Paris? Why did you want to become French? What's assimilation? These questions are part of the old anxieties and worries that I've been writing and thinking about for 20 years. The book happened rather fiercely, with an intensity to it.

**EF: So, in the book, you're not imagining responses from him?**

**EdW:** No. He died in 1935, and the house is silent; there is an extraordinary, painful, complicated silence. He builds the house, then makes his collection into a memorial for the son who died in World War I, transforming the whole house into an act of mourning. It takes him years to finish—he's going to give it to France, but, of course, what he's doing is about grief; he wants his son to walk through the door. Then he dies. Six years later, his daughter, his son-in-law, and his grandchildren

*one equal music, I,*  
2021.  
Installation view of  
"Lettres à Camondo,"  
Musée Nissim de  
Camondo, Paris.









“ **I yearn for Donald Judd’s clarity.** I yearn for that didactic, beautiful Minimalism. But my Minimalism is errant because I keep adding layers, or finding them. ”



are murdered in Auschwitz. So, the shape of the memorial, that silence, is completely, irrevocably different from the shape that he thought he had created. There is one silence overlapping another, bigger silence.

I want to shake him, I want to tell him what happens. There is a kind of imperative behind the letters and trying to work out all the overlapping silences and stories—palimpsest stuff. I also want to make him laugh, talk to him about food, so it's not all miserable.

ABOVE AND DETAIL:  
*Signs & Wonders*,  
2009.  
425 porcelain vessels  
contained in a  
red aluminum shelf,  
40 x 3700 x 16 cm.



**EF:** How does the book relate to the works that you made for the show?

**EdW:** I don't think that words and sculpture map each other. It's not me doing the same thing twice. Camondo was very clear that he didn't want anyone to bring anything into the house. So, I'm already in emotionally quite difficult territory. In the book, which is me talking to him, I don't mention the exhibition, which is me exploring the unresolved feelings that I have about the perfection of the house in its current state. The exhibition is me reentering the house and his life and leaving particular places slightly untidy, slightly jagged, and adding question marks. I want to bring in *kintsugi*, to bring in the fracture briefly—show it, record it, and take it out again. That's not what the book is doing.

**EF:** What are some of the conversations that you wanted to have with his collection and the setting?

**EdW:** Actually, that's one of the reasons why there's no glass. Those structures are ways of framing particular moments. I'm trying to talk with some affection, but with *kintsugi*, to his collection of Sèvres porcelain, or to a metamorphic table, which changes from one thing into another. That's what he does. He's a Jewish Constantinople merchant who becomes a Parisian man of society. I put small things on those tables. Then, there's the desk where he used to sit and answer letters from all the dealers trying to flog him stuff. I envisioned making a stack of porcelain tiles above this unanswerable stack of letters.

**EF:** You've exhibited in various historic collections, including Kettles Yard in Cambridge, England, and the Frick Collection (2019) in New York. There's a sharp



**contrast between your Minimalist displays and the lavish interiors. What do these dialogues bring?**

**EdW:** They all have different resonances and multiple histories to them. I have no interest at all in doing that jaded thing where you bring contemporary art into historic settings so people will visit—that’s insulting to nuanced and interesting places. For me, it’s simply wanting to talk to people. I want to talk to Frick about money and power and steel. I want to talk to Camondo about his family and about silences. Being invited to do these things is really personal. I’m not trying to reveal anything in a polemical way, I’m just talking aloud.

**EF: What originally sparked your infatuation with porcelain?**

**EdW:** That was being away, having very doggedly made Bernard Leach-style pots. I was in Tokyo, on a scholarship writing a book, and I was playing again for the first time since childhood. It was just joy. I was very good at making stoneware repetitions, but I couldn’t do it in porcelain. It was gorgeous, sticky play time. And I loved it. I haven’t lost the pleasure of it at all. I still get huge, huge happiness from throwing pots.

**EF: How did your book *The White Road* (2015), which traces the history of porcelain, affect your obsession?**

**EdW:** It deepened it. This isn’t an easy material culturally to use. It’s a material of obsession, it’s a material that’s been used to animate ideas of purity at huge, painful cost. Its purity is dangerous. It’s not a neutral material. I’m very into that complicated history.

**EF: In a way, it’s engaging every day with the problem at the heart of your family history. White porcelain evokes Nazi history and the Aryan race, and, of course, slavery and white supremacy.**

**EdW:** There’s also the story of Josiah Wedgwood sending people off to steal the clay of the Cherokee Indians and bring it back. It’s about violence, and it’s about power.

**EF: Yet your sculptures are contemplative. *sukkah* (2019), originally made for the Scuola Canton in Venice’s Jewish ghetto, was exhibited at Canterbury Cathedral. Do you consider your works to have a spiritual purpose?**

**EdW:** I’m not sure about a purpose, but I’m old enough to say yes. Not, I hope, in a didactic way. I am conflicted Anglican, Jewish, Quaker, Buddhist—a lapsed everything—but I’m very drawn to these places. I want to write a book navigating the psalms in architecture, literature, and music, in both faiths.

**EF: Your wall vitrines with groupings of rows of pots resemble poetic stanzas and musical scores. What is the relationship of poetry and music to your work?**

**EdW:** I live with poetry; it’s pretty much in my day. Objects and sound are very, very close. Every poem is a score, an opportunity for the voice to sound out words in space. When you look at a poem, you hear sound; for me, it’s a completely spatial thing, it’s wanting to relate that to the physical world. There are particular poets—Paul Celan, William Carlos Williams, Emily Dickinson, but also John Cage—whose scores are both musical and visual. And there’s also interface between how you might note down the graphic possibility of a performance, of something happening in space; that can be a sculpture or a piece of writing.

**EF: Do you conceive of your works as visual poems when you’re making them?**

**EdW:** Sometimes. During lockdown, I did versions of Chinese poems, Cold Mountain Poems, writing them at intervals and covering them up with liquid porcelain and writing them again. So, there have been moments when words and sculpture come together much more obviously.

**EF: What drives you back to the wheel each day?**

**EdW:** It’s begin again, begin again, begin again. It’s an in breath putting clay on the wheel and an out breath making a vessel. It’s my practice, it’s what I do, it’s how I define myself. ■

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*“Lettres à Camondo” is on view at the Musée Nissim de Camondo, Paris, through May 15, 2022. The Jewish Museum in New York is hosting “The Hare with Amber Eyes,” an exhibition conceived in collaboration with de Waal that explores the history and collection of the Ephrussi family, through May 15, 2022.*

OPPOSITE:  
**sukkah,**  
2019.  
Porcelain, steel, gold,  
aluminum, and Plexiglas,  
184.5 x 126 x 69 cm.