white

a project by Edmund de Waal

My project *white* at the Royal Academy looks very hard at what white means. It is an interweaving of words and books with sculpture, paintings and photographs.

White is aura. White is a staging post to look at the world from. White is not neutral; it forces other colours to reveal themselves. It moralises – it is clean when nothing else is clean, it is light when most things are heavy. It is about impossibility. Think of *Moby Dick* and Captain Ahab, the question crying out, 'What is this thing of whiteness?' White is a place to begin and a place to end.

I have spent my life thinking about white. My very first pot, thrown on a potter's wheel as a child, was white. Forty-five years later, I am still making white pots, porcelain vessels. For the past six years I have been travelling to the places

in the world where porcelain was discovered and desired, researching and writing a book called *The White Road* about the cost of this obsession with white. On my journey I have dreamed of the images and objects that matter to me most. Some of them are included in my project at the RA.

It is not an exhibition in a white cube gallery. It is an intervention in the Library and Print Room, whose interiors were designed by H.T. Cadbury-Brown RA almost three decades ago. They are reached from the sculpture gallery in the Sackler Wing. At one end of the gallery is Michelangelo's *Taddei Tondo* (*c*.1504-05). At the other, a modest door to the Library and Print Room, often walked past unseen. These rooms were first added to the top of Burlington House when the RA moved here in 1868 to house the collection of

white marble sculptures and casts. My project brings this early history home.

There are objects from the RA Collection that embody memory: a beautiful bust of Ippolita Maria Sforza, a plaster taken from the original 15th-century marble, destroyed in the bombing of Berlin (see page 72); a torso of Europa made in the fourth century BC, a study of flowing cloth over a body; the 1841 death mask of Francis Chantrey RA and the life mask of Thomas Banks RA, from 1790; the porcelain watercolour palette owned by J.M.W. Turner RA, a stormy sky of colours on a white ground. These rooms are archive, reliquary, store room, memory palace and lumber room for the Academy. There is a 19th-century elephant folio of white pages, completely empty. There is a stack of redundant mounts, kept for 200 years, waiting.

This project endeavours to look at white
as both object and experience.

Visitors come into the dramatic, dark spaces
of the Print Room and see an early Cy Twombly
painted bronze, glowing in front of them. There
are vitrines with manuscripts, poems and ripostes
around white – the white pages of *Tristram
Shandy*, Samuel Beckett, the silent score for
John Cage's *4'33"*, Rachel Whiteread's plaster
sculpture *FOLDED* (opposite), a lithograph
from Josef Albers' 1966 'White Line Square'
series. A beautiful Robert Ryman painting from
1998, a vortex of repeated white markings, hangs
at eye level, demanding you give it time. There
are also small works that capture the difficulties
of white: a Malevich drawing, early photographs
and photogenic drawings from the mid-19th
century, a Renaissance *grisaille* on enamel
illustrating the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth,
an ivory netsuke of a hare. And, crucially for me,
one of the first pieces of white porcelain made in
the West, a delicate cup from Meissen (page 70).

Stepping from the Print Room into the
Library itself, one sees that some of the books
on the shelves have been displaced by a drawing,
a sculpture or a vitrine. A Morandi still life of
vessels on a table top takes the place of a run
of periodicals. Up high is the fragment of a
12th-century corbel head of a saint. Malevich's
Suprematist Teapot – intensely, angrily pure –
sits on a shelf. A marble lantern by Ai Weiwei
Hon RA is juxtaposed with a porcelain table
by Amanda Levete Architects: weight and
weightlessness. High above is a new work by
Garry Fabian Miller, *open clear light* (2014-15;

left). I have made a couple of vitrines of porcelain
to sit near particular books I love, including
reminding, trying to remind (2015).

This is a project bringing together objects
from the collection as well as from further afield.
Held in a working library, it is a quiet journey of
discovery through and up and around the spaces.
It is intended as an unexpected journey through
things that displace the world through white.
Many artists have explored white. There are those
for whom it is central and those for whom it has
been a moment of symbolic, critical disjuncture.
There are artists who have used white as a way
of abstracting, of understanding the structure of
the world through the removal of the extraneous,
and others for whom it is a form of exploration of
the spiritual. All these are different journeys into
white, different explorations of what white does
to the world around it.

This is not about minimalism, or rounding
up the people who have made things in white,
but about something much harder and fiercer.
There is nothing whiter than a white page,
nothing quieter than a library. But as in the score
of John Cage, when in silence we are compelled
to listen hard to what happens when we stop
moving, we look harder when we see white.
Because white is a place to start again.