



Blackwell: A Response [Edmund de Waal](#)

[‘It is a painful thing for an architect to design a mantelpiece for which he dares not hope to choose the ornaments, and which may become a resting place for he knows not what atrocities in china and glass.’  
Baillie Scott – The Studio, vol 6 1896 p105](#)

I have only seen Blackwell in sun. They say there is other weather, but for me it is a house that I have explored, thought about and made for, negotiated only by the shifting patterns of sun and shade. It is a strange series of dynamic spaces: a house that reveals itself in different tempi, long slow corridors, unexpected openings, deferred thresholds. Over the last two years on my visits to the house I have been obsessing, quietly but insistently, about the ways in which the house uses light and shade, how we are manipulated in our movements through the building by the placing of windows. In a more conventional house we rarely think of their placement. At Blackwell it is different. We are in spaces lit through stained glass windows so that we cannot see out or in corridors, perplexed by the height of the window sills. Some windows are almost fiercely geometric, others wilfully odd. Some frame views over Windermere as if to challenge anyone to compete pictorially, others frame views into the building itself. You can find yourself looking into the building through a window. Large passages and volumes of space are yoked together with intimate interstices, windowseats, squints and ledges. Then there are mirrors to pick up fragments of light. And then there are the great fireplaces, powerful statements of a type of which the architect M H Baillie Scott, in his seminal book *Houses and Gardens* of 1906, wrote [‘In the house the fire is practically a substitute for the sun, and it bears the same relation to the household as the sun does to the landscape.’](#) So light

comes in; it also radiates out. It is, quite simply, a house of great and perplexing beauty.

I was asked to work with the house, rather than just provide an exhibition of pots. This way of working, of responding to a building in such a way as to articulate it, converse with it, reveal a different history or interrogate a forgotten past has become an intensely pleasurable path for me. I have been fortunate enough to work with a High Modernist villa from the late 1920s (High Cross House in Devon), a contemporary pavilion attached to an 18th century Orangery (Munckenbeck and Marshall's New Art Centre) and an Edwardian museum (The National Museum in Cardiff). With Blackwell I felt I was being severely challenged. It was not that I had to work with a set of intact furnishings. Blackwell was never a Red House or a Wightwick Manor, those great examples of William Morris Arts and Crafts houses where architecture and furnishings were of a piece, English Gesamtkunstwerk or 'total works of art'. Far from it. Contemporary photographs show how the family who commissioned Blackwell lived in it, with a mixture of furniture, objets, stuffed heads, 'atrocities in china and glass.' This, coupled with its complex story – Blackwell has been a girls' school and offices as well as a family house – mean that there is no danger of preciousness. No 'don't touch that chair!' syndrome. As the influential German writer on English architecture Hermann Muthesius wrote: 'In Baillie Scott's work each room is an individual creation, the elements of which do not happen to be available but spring from the overall idea. Baillie Scott is the first to have realised the interior as an autonomous work of art.'

How could I punctuate the spaces in such a way that the rhythms were respected? There are different rhythms at work. Some are decorative; Baillie Scott's sense of the particular genius of the place meant that the decoration picks up on the flowers, trees and berries of the surrounding landscape just as the round chimneys of the house echo those of the vernacular farmhouse down the road. As he wrote, mountain ash and 'various local plants are represented. One is entwined with bryony, another shows the blooms of the wild guelder-rose, while the bloom and berries of the hawthorn and the wild rose are amongst the features of the carving.' House and Gardens p232. Other rhythms include the fall of light, or the repetition of curves. For all the sinuous qualities of the house (the leaded lights, the sweep of the shelving in the White Drawing Room) there are also many severities. There are the geometries of the house, the panelling, the chequerboard floor. Outside against the white harling of the walls, the strips of stone and mullioned windows add their own sense of structure. Each of these qualities seemed to demand a response.

So pots have been made for particular spaces, some very public and obvious, others more private and hidden. There are groups for the places where pots should be, where normative groups of pots settle: the dining room table, the chimney piece. (Perhaps I should have made something for the piano, but it was just too daunting to make a pot for this Manxman.) Where the pots are positioned is very deliberate. There are formal moments, as on the threshold of the White Drawing Room, where two pairs of tall white lidded jars have been placed like sentinels. On the Dining Room table six place settings have been laid, each setting a group of three interlocking white and celadon dishes, made to echo the interlocking motif of the two grand fireplaces. There are small groups placed to stretch across a particular window embrasure to pick up the morning or evening light,

a nest of white dishes placed under a stained glass window to catch the change in coloured light. Some groups reflect the geometries (a formal group in the centre of the dining table, another grid on a window sill), others the more organic patterns. Two basic forms – the dish and the lidded jar – make up the basis of the rhythmical structure.

There are several completely new departures for me in this work. I have worked with hidden colours and shadows before, but with Blackwell I have tried to extend this into work that is site specific. For instance, in the installation piece for the Hall table frieze I have made vessels that pick up on the colours and structure of the peacock frieze that wraps itself around that part of the room. The frieze isolates colours almost as if they were leaded glass, and the vessels in the installation attempt the same thing. Another departure is in the use of applied decoration. Blackwell seems to be full of materials used in a very sophisticated simulcrum of simplicity: oak, marble, plaster, and lead. There are constant disjunctions between smoothness and roughness in all these materials. For the long – and beautiful – ledge in the White Drawing Room I have made a hundred thin jars. Each of them has a couple of applied pieces of clay, some very slight, some more demonstrative, but all of them echoing the ebb and flow in the movement of the plasterwork. This group, elsewhere, is glazed with many different white glazes. Spending time in this room I became aware of how many whites the room seemed to comprise. It was not the same white an hour later, not the same after a further hour. It was a room in which any potter would want their work; the play of light, the plenitude of shadows gives a depth to any object there.

This is a house that you want to touch as much as see. Baillie Scott knew the value of unevenness, of the contrast between smoothness and texture. As he wrote on woodwork: *'Here as elsewhere we have to contend with that mechanical ideal which is the mark of almost all modern work, and which takes no account of textures or surfaces, but reduces every thing to one monotonous dead level. Those who have felt the charm of an old beam will be able to appreciate how all this is lost under the modern joiner's plane.'* The Studio vol6 1896 p104. In the house you become sensitized to wood and plaster and stone just as you do when you handle a vessel, turning it over in your hands to find a mark, an added piece of clay or a slight impression of a finger or a hand.

Coming back from Blackwell to South London is tough. But I have found the chance of working with Baillie Scott inspiring. He has a voice and a sense of everyday possibility that seems lacking with other Arts and Crafts architects. This might sound perverse, Blackwell being of a scale and ambition that few can aspire to. But listen to this, Baillie Scott talking in his essay 'Making the Best of it' about a house not unlike the one I live in, a London house designed to leave you feel cramped and breathless as you come through a door and meet a staircase. He recommends doing away with a few unnecessary doors and walls and then *'On entering from the porch of such a house, we are at once in a recessed portion of the hall or house place, with its liberal suggestion of space and freedom, instead of that chilling passage which no art of man can make homely and inviting, the dismal passage has disappeared'*. This liberality is what we take away from an encounter with Blackwell.

August 2005



Stet #4  
Cat. 6



Two pairs of white jars  
Cat. 8/9



8 white jars for vitrine above fireplace  
Cat. 11



*Oliver Thompson Room*

Pair of very tall lidded jars  
Cat. 16





## Selected biography

Born 10 September 1964

1993—	Studio in London
1992–93	Mejiro Ceramics Studio, Tokyo
1991–92	Post-graduate Diploma in Japanese Language, Sheffield University
1988–92	Studio in Sheffield
1986–88	Cwm Pottery, Hereford
1983–86	BA (Hons) English Literature (1st Class), Trinity Hall, Cambridge University
1981–83	Apprenticeship with Geoffrey Whiting

## Selected exhibitions

Nov 2005	Transformations: Language of Craft, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
June 2005	'Arcanum', National Gallery and Museum, Wales [solo]
May 2005	Faenza Ceramic Biennale, Italy
May 2004	New Arts Centre, Roche Court, Salisbury [solo]
May 2004	A Secret History of Clay, Tate Liverpool
Oct 2003	World Ceramic Exposition, Ichon
April 2003	'White', Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh
May 2002	'Ceramic Modernism', The Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, Toronto
Sept 2003	Contemporary Applied Arts, London [solo]
Jan 2003	Masterpieces of European Decorative Art, Fondazione per il Libro la Cultura, Turin
Sept 2002	'Ceramic Rooms', Geffrye Museum, London
Sept 1999	High Cross House, Dartington Hall [solo]
Sept 1998	Egg, London [solo]
July 1998	Garth Clark Gallery, New York [solo]
June 1998	Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh [solo]

## Curation

2005	Arcanum: Mapping 18th Century Porcelain, National Museum and Galley of Wales
2004	A Secret History of Clay: From Gauguin to Gormley (Consultant)
2002	Kettle's Yard Open (with Catherine Yass)
1999	Porcelain, Southern Arts Touring Exhibitions
1999	Ceramics and the Memory of Architectur', Heidelberg
1995	Redisplay of ceramics, Tate St. Ives

## Awards

2003	Professor of Ceramics, University of Westminster
2003	Silver Medal, World Ceramic Biennale, Korea
2000–02	Leverhulme Special Research Fellowship
1999	Jerwood Applied Arts Prize, Nominee
1999	Hamlyn Prize, Nominee
1996	Fellow of Royal Society of Arts
1991–93	Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation Scholarship
1985	Trinity Hall, Cambridge Scholarship

Public collections include

Museum of Arts and Design, New York  
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
World Ceramic Exposition Museum, Ichon, Korea  
Victoria & Albert Museum, London  
National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Museum of Decorative Arts, Montreal  
Mint Museum of Craft + Design, Charlotte, North Carolina  
Museum of Western Australia, Perth  
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery  
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge  
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford  
York Museum and Art Gallery  
Ismay Collection, Yorkshire Museum  
British Council, London  
Crafts Council, London  
Contemporary Arts Society, London  
Stoke-on-Trent Museum  
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool  
Cartwright Hall, Bradford  
Geffrye Museum, London  
Middlesborough Institute of Modern Art  
Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead  
The Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, London  
Schroeder's Bank, London  
Banque Paribas, London  
IBM Collection, Copenhagen  
St Georges' Hospital, London  
The University Church of Christ the King, London  
Heythrop College, London  
Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt

# Blackwell

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