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.
white: a project by Edmund de Waal

Library and Print Room, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 26 Sep–3 Jan 2016. All tickets to this event are timed. Friends tickets £5. See page 12 for more details. To book tickets call 0207 300 5635 or visit http://roy.ac/deWaal

The White Road: a pilgrimage of sorts by Edmund de Waal is published 24 Sep, Chatto & Windus, £20, hardback

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 epistles 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 incised 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)