

**PRESSBOOK**

**ELMGREEN & DRAGSET**

*Artforum*

*February 2017*



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**Jeffrey Kastner**

## Elmgreen & Dragset

FLAG ART FOUNDATION

Across twenty-odd years of collaboration, the artist team of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset have created a rangy, often memorable body of sculptural and installation work that oscillates—perhaps too freely for some tastes—between the melancholic and the glib, the subtle and the slapstick. All in all, they're probably better known for the latter than for the former: for works such as *Prada Marfa*, 2005, their winking dig at the cultural gentrification of the art-saturated West Texas town, or *Van Gogh's Ear*, 2016, a charmingish public-art non sequitur—amputated body part as modernist swimming pool—that spent the summer decorating a plaza at New York's Rockefeller Center. But even when they dig deeper—into their favored territory around the conditions of institutional and personal identity, of sexuality and mortality—they're not above resorting to the easily digestible punch line in order to make and/or embellish their point. (See, for example, the drowned collector floating in a swimming pool in their ambitious project for the 2009 Venice Biennale.)

As they prepare to enter their third decade of working together, Elmgreen & Dragset would seem to be in something of a retrospective mood: They began 2016 by turning Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary Art into a faux art fair where some eighty works from their partnership were on view, and they ended it with their recent exhibition at the Flag Art Foundation's two-floor Chelsea aerie. This mini-survey eschewed their signature immersive environments in favor of a fairly straightforward presentation: a sequence of relatively self-contained sculptural scenarios and modest installation settings created between 1998 and 2016. Though the works were not without moments of wry humor, in general they displayed a more sober, even wistful, side of the pair's more typically sardonic practice.

Taken together, the works on the first floor enacted a sort of loose ages-of-man pageant—beginning with *Modern Moses*, 2006, featuring an infant in a bassinet abandoned not among the bulrushes but at the foot of an ATM machine, and concluding with *Untitled (Morgue)*, 2011, in which a single open door on a wall of steel refrigerator compartments reveals the bottom half of a male cadaver. If both are predictably executed with convincing verisimilitude, they also demonstrate Elmgreen & Dragset's penchant to content themselves with vaguely gimmicky one-liners, even if the particular setups for them don't fully cohere (an update of the Bible story welded, not terribly persuasively,

onto a poke at the anonymous machinery of contemporary capitalism) or simply dead-end in the spectacularized artifact (a silicone corpse, reliable star of countless *CSI* shows and horror movies). More nuanced and intriguing were the moments in between these bookends, evoked by works that engaged less diagrammatically with questions of desire: *The Experiment*, 2012, in which a young boy stripped down to his underpants but sporting his mom's lipstick and heels gazes into a mirror; *Powerless Structures, Fig. 19*, 1998, featuring two seemingly identical pairs of blue jeans and underwear heaped on the floor, suggesting both a physical and metaphysical moment of rapture; or *Watching*, 2016, a new work in which the figure of a man sitting on a lifeguard stand, all cast in mirror-polished stainless steel, trains a pair of binoculars on the now spic-and-span West Side waterfront in an act that feels as much like nostalgic voyeurism as it does observational vigilance.

If these pieces use the human figure as a vehicle for staging certain modes of subjectivity and affect, others in the show instead reimagined it via other objects or by abstracting it into varieties of data. *Human Scale*, 2016, for example, is a collection of eight rulers hung horizontally on the wall depicting the rough measurements of an adult's body parts (head, hands, legs, etc.), while *Side Effects*, 2015, is an array of large handblown glass containers filled with the pigments used to coat the most recent class of HIV medicines, a field of latter-day canopic jars containing not the remains of the dead but the life-prolonging medical substances of the living. Perhaps because of its formal and conceptual restraint, the show's most low-key work—the Robert Gober-esque *1 hr. 33 mins/2 hrs. 22 mins*, 2016—was also one of its most resonant: Consisting of a pair of half-burned candles cast in marble and set on a plinth, it suggests a spare funerary monument, a memento mori that figures the inescapably entropic effects of time both on our things and on ourselves.

—Jeffrey Kastner



Elmgreen & Dragset,  
*Untitled (Morgue)*,  
2011, mixed media,  
11' 3" × 15' × 7' 1 1/2".