

PRESSBOOK

Elmgreen & Dragset

Modern Painters

January 2019



Elmgreen & Dragset,
 "Pregnant White Maid," 2017
 aluminum, stainless steel,
 lacquer, clothes,
 168 x 45 x 66 cm.

Elmgreen & Dragset,
 "Too Heavy," 2017,
 rock: aluminium cast,
 lacquer paint,
 trampoline:
 aluminium cast,
 steel, fabric, rock: 170
 x 170 cm.



LONDON

The Dizzying World of Elmgreen and Dragset at Whitechapel Gallery

To currently step through the doors of the Whitechapel Gallery means taking a moment for a quick, quiet reality check. This is the result of finding yourself unexpectedly face-to-face with an empty public swimming pool, clearly past its heyday, its bottom home to dust, dirt and other debris, cracked paint peeling off the walls. A public notice provides a brief history of this derelict site: originally constructed in 1901 by local philanthropists and social reformers, the Whitechapel Pool lost its public funding in the Thatcherite years, was closed, squatted by "post-punk" bands, and finally sold during Boris Johnson's tenure as Mayor of London to be converted into a luxury design hotel. To honor its civic role and responsibility, the pool will be available not just to hotel guests, but to outside visitors too in possession of a

special membership. The potential reaction to such a gesture by local residents of a borough rife with socio-economic inequality, in a city where much civic space is privatized and corporatized at an alarming speed, is left to the imagination.

The pool and its accompanying history are in fact a fiction dreamed up by artist duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset as part

of their first survey exhibition in the UK. "The Whitechapel Pool" fits neatly into a lineage of large-scale architectural installations, sculptures and performances that the two have been producing since 1995, which are largely narrative-bound, character-oriented and often read like a theatrical set-piece. At their strongest, their pieces drop hints and clues while leaving

Elmgreen & Dragset,
 "The Whitechapel
 Pool," 2018,
 installation view.



much unsaid, teasing out emotions and feelings as much as anything more concrete. The pool reeks of melancholy, despite humorous touches such as the double-handed changing room door (part of Elmgreen and Dragset's "Powerless Structures" series) or "Gay Marriage," 2010, a pair of urinals conjoined by a twisted and knotted loop of metal drainpipe. Fiction this may be, but the reality it speaks of can be seen and felt straight out on Whitechapel High Street and its environs.

The immersive nature of "The Whitechapel Pool" makes way upstairs for stand-alone pieces and smaller sculptural installations that vary from subtle to in-your-face and borderline dogmatic. It takes me two trips up the stairs connecting the gallery's two floors to notice "Donation Box," 2006. Or rather, it takes me two trips for the realization to dawn that said glass box, sat unobtrusively in an alcove, has lost its function and is instead a repository for urban detritus — an old sneaker, train tickets, a hotel room key, a lighter — a time-capsule of the surrounding metropolitan environment but also a slight nod to the complicated economics that prop up institutions like the Whitechapel Gallery. By contrast, a fake ATM with a wax figure of a baby swaddled in a carrycot and deposited next to it ("Modern Moses," 2006), leaves little to the imagination. While the exhibition guide suggests that the work's meaning shifts each time and according to the

context in which it's presented, the meaning here appears to be ready made and pointing at a foregone conclusion: money = power.

The lone figures and objects, reduced to a palette of black and white, that conclude the exhibition in a temple-like mise-en-scène — the pregnant maid ("Pregnant White Maid," 2017), the young boy gazing at a rifle in a display case ("One Day," 2015), a pair of white pillows (actually cast in bronze) with a gentle imprint of buttocks in a nod to Felix Gonzales-Torres — claim a position between the sacred and the profane. But for all their purported ambiguity and invitation to open-ended interpretation, it is hard to move beyond the shiny, lacquered surfaces and blank stares. As counter-intuitive as it may be, Elmgreen and Dragset are better at biting their tongues when their fantasy-laden worlds (such as "The Whitechapel Pool") spill out in full force.

— ANYA HARRISON

Elmgreen &
 Dragset,
 "Gay Marriage,"
 2010, porcelain
 urinals, taps,
 stainless
 steel tubing,
 110 x 43 x 123 cm.

