

PRESSBOOK

Elmgreen & Dragset

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Elmgreen & Dragset review – a deep dive into sadness, humour and sex

4 / 5 stars



Whitechapel Gallery, London

From an installation of a decaying public pool to lonely sculptures thinking the unthinkable, the Scandinavian duobring their subversive wit to social and sexual politics



Decaying ... Elmgreen and Dragset's installation of the Whitechapel pool in their new show, *This Is How We Bite Our Tongue*, at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Photograph: Doug Peters/PA

Remember the old Whitechapel swimming pool by Aldgate East in London? The kids dive-bombing and semi-drowning, and coming home all red-eyed and reeking of chlorine? The banter in the changing rooms, the towel-flicking and the furtive looks? After it was shut down in the 1980s, there were the club nights, the squatters and the illegal raves. It was an institution, proper old East End. The Whitechapel pool has been sold to some art hotel and resort corporation. It will be a spa, with reduced-price membership for locals on Wednesday afternoons and slack time for wellness junkies and gym bunnies. You should visit before they do it up.

A faint tang of chlorine still lingers round the drained pool. The paint is peeling off the walls and the tiles are cracked. There is builders' rubble down the shallow end and scaffolding up by the entrance. Some of the stains are worrying. The ceiling might be about to give way. Surely this used to be the Whitechapel Gallery? I must have got it wrong. Filled with an echoing silence and with a security guard wandering about, these old baths have been here for decades. Just look.

Elmgreen & Dragset: 'Making art is a headache. Only 2.5% of it is fun'

Previously, Elmgreen & Dragset have turned galleries into gay locker rooms and nightclubs, and a collector's private home. Once, they sold off London's Victoria and Albert Museum to developers, put up hoardings and "For sale" signs, and frightened visitors. They

take their fictions and ruses to an extreme, though without the exact verisimilitude of Christof Büchel. The artists had a lot of fun distressing the walls and giving the place an air of municipal failure and disuse. You almost can't tell where the pool ends and the gallery begins, but the headless, toppled bronze beefcake on the poolside and the lumpy aluminium rock, too bulked-up to use the trampoline, begin to give the game away. Did you notice the slug, the changing room doors, the urinals at the back, with their exposed plumbing entwined in a lover's knot?



One Day ... a work by Elmgreen & Dragset at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Photograph: Doug Peters/PA

The Whitechapel pool is also a comment on the privatisation of public amenities and spaces, the corporate taking over from the communal. Sadness and humour overlay one another in this arresting double-take. I almost did not want to reveal what the artists have done so you too could falter on the threshold, momentarily speechless and gawping, confused and amazed.

The overarching fiction gives way to old works and new in the upper galleries. But wait: the gallery's Perspex donations box on the landing is full of rubbish. A single trainer, an old Oyster card, a bronze OBE decoration (bought on eBay), a remain flyer, a starfish and a bottle of poppers nestle among dollar bills and fivers. Easy to miss, unlike the lifelike sculpture of a sleeping tot in a carry-cot, left beside the ATM at the top of the stairs. This was last seen in London in the artists' Welfare Show at the Serpentine in 2006. The sleeping child is a modern infant Moses, adrift in the stream of money. Or no money. It is almost a Victorian parable. So, too, is the sculpture of a uniformed, pregnant housemaid, looking at a child sitting in an empty fireplace. Often these single, lonely sculptures beg stories, teetering between the sentimental and the grisly. A boy in shorts looks longingly at a rifle hung decoratively on a wall. Who or what would he like to shoot?



Crucified ... an installation by Elmgreen and Dragset at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. Photograph: Doug Peters/PA

Sometimes the Scandinavian duo go too far, but too far is never far enough, in my view. A man is tied to a high-sheen crucifix, facing the cross. Not so much a suffering Christ as a bloke in a BDSM scene, awaiting a thrashing on his white, patinated bronze buttocks. The very thought of this has obviously overexcited a couple of young men, who have abandoned their trousers and Calvin Klein briefs by the door to the gallery offices, and gone off to get up to something or the other in a quiet corner. Maybe they are in the changing rooms by the pool. Galleries, like public swimming pools, are good for a bit of cruising. I found myself giving one of the security guards a bit of a glad eye. Talk about relational aesthetics. Fancy a dip?