

PRESSBOOK

Elmgreen & Dragset

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ARTS

The art of having a laugh

As artist-tricksters Elmgreen & Dragset stage their most ambitious UK exhibition yet, they tell **Hettie Judah** why they love to play

If you're staying in...

BOOKS
Notes from the Fog

BY BEN MARCUS



The genius of this collection of short stories is that despite the opaque and baroque style, it packs a punch about loneliness, obsession, illness, grief and suffering. There is something of Shirley Jackson or Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the chiselled nature of Marcus' words.

DVD/BLU-RAY
Life of the Party

CERTIFICATE 12, 101 MINS

Melissa McCarthy stars as Deanna, a dedicated housewife who goes back to college after a divorce, winds up in the same class as her daughter (Molly Gordon) and lets loose.



"Humour is our way of biting our tongue," explains Michael Elmgreen, one half of the Danish/Norwegian artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset. "Humour is our anger management."

In the middle of installing an ambitious exhibition that will transform part of London's Whitechapel Gallery, Elmgreen & Dragset are chipper and friendly. The pair are best known in the UK for their 2012 Fourth Plinth Commission *Powerless Structures, Fig. 101*: a monumental bronze of a little boy on a rocking horse, rearing his wooden steed like a military hero leading troops into battle. Embedded in childhood fictions of glorious war, the child appeared to wave imperiously at the crowds in Trafalgar Square. The statue was a typically bathetic gesture: on the surface, funny and comically out of place, but carrying too the weight of melancholy.

Whitechapel will be Elmgreen & Dragset's most ambitious

'Humour is our anger management': Ingar Dragset, left, and Michael Elmgreen

UK show. There are silly and naughty works. *Too Heavy* (2017) appears to show a meteorite flattening a garden trampoline; in *Powerless Structures: Fig. 19* (1998) two sets of jeans and underpants are left crumpled on the floor en route to a passionate encounter.

The artists have a romantic streak. Their "self portrait" room is hung with marble wall labels of artworks that had a powerful, formative impact - among them David Hockney's *Clean Boy* (1964), and General Idea's *Manipulating the Self* (1973). It's the visual arts equivalent of a second-date mixtape.

In the corner is a desk where you can read a diary on the works in private and help yourself to a shot of whisky. "It's very bad whisky," says Elmgreen,

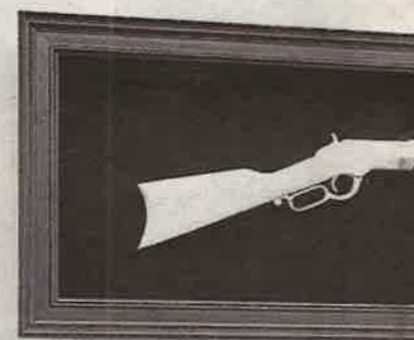
"but we liked the label." "It's Teacher's," adds Ingar Dragset. "It's educational."

The final gallery will be imagined as a chapel-like space with works exploring what Dragset terms "masculinity in crisis". Arranged within are sculptures of a small boy gazing longingly at a gun mounted on the wall ("a male problem"), a boy hiding in the fireplace, and a crucifix with the figure mounted in reverse, buttocks facing outward.

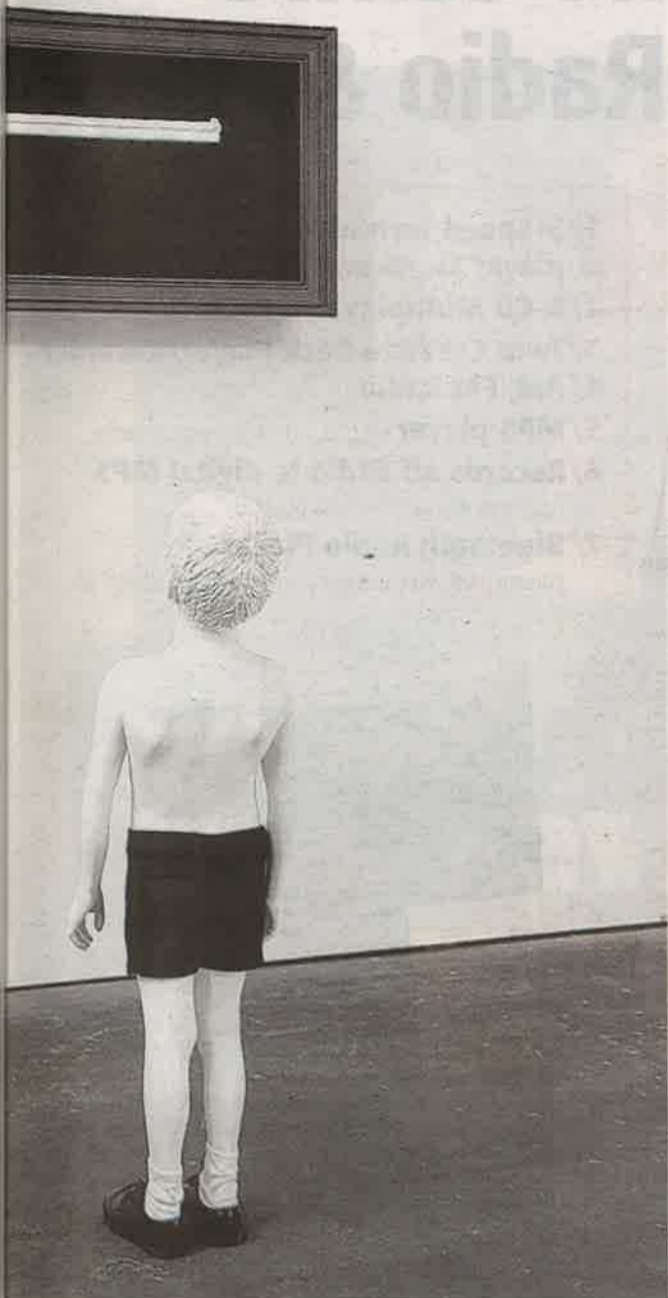
As that last work suggests, the duo are not shy of irreverence. They also see parallels between art galleries of today and the church of yesteryear. "In former times the church took care of people gathering and being together: people would go to the church on a Sunday. They don't do that so much any more," says Elmgreen. "Art has taken over: people go to exhibitions in order to experience each other in a bodily way."

"Of course they don't want to be alone: they sit at home with that flat internet world in front of them and they can't use their body for anything. Then they go and interact in museum spaces."

Having lived in London between



Clockwise from above: Elmgreen & Dragset's *Too Heavy*; *Powerless Structures, Fig. 101*; *One Day*; *Prada Marfa* ROMAN MAERZ; GETTY; HOLGER HONCK



2007 and 2015, Elmgreen is keenly aware of the pressures on housing and the need for public space there. It takes honesty to accept that people go to galleries primarily as a social exercise rather than to worship at the altar of art. "I love the idea of art just being an excuse for people to get together," he says. "That's totally all right, that's very noble."

It shouldn't be so surprising to find Elmgreen & Dragset thinking like architects: they often work at an architectural scale, reimagining buildings as total works of art. Most notorious of these is *Prada Marfa* (2005), an alluringly stocked but mysteriously inaccessible branch of the luxury goods store stationed on the side of a Texas highway.

Five years ago they staged a theatrical intervention in the textile galleries of the V&A.

Five rooms were transformed into a private apartment belonging to a fictional Mr Swann, an elderly, aristocratic architect whose lifetime of failure and frustration could be read in the objects surrounding him. The artists described the work as "a commentary on the disappearance of old British society; the exhibition represents the overall failure of the European experiment. No one here knows how it will continue."

These were prescient words: the intervening years have brought Brexit, and with it the



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"isolationism and separatism that we see happening in so many parts of the world", says Elmgreen. If anything, the unshakable spectre of Britain's former imperial might looms even larger in the political imagination than it did at that "end-of-an-empire" show.

The new intervention commissioned for Whitechapel is of a similarly ambitious scale. Though details are closely guarded, the duo have conceived it as a response to the closure of municipal facilities, such as "youth clubs and public swimming pools", that has accompanied both austerity and the redevelopment of London's less wealthy neighbourhoods into luxury dwellings. "Many of the problems in London are due to this kind of policy," says Elmgreen. "When youth clubs are shut down, violence becomes a side effect of giving people no hope and no care."

Rather than constructing some clunky metaphor, the new installation is something moodier: a space that carries "a sad poetic" quality and a hint of the end of days (though also jokes). This territory between comedy and tragedy, humour and melancholy, theatricality and emotion, is Elmgreen & Dragset's home turf.

In 2009 they took over the Danish and Nordic pavilions at the Venice Biennale, transforming each into the home of a fictional art collector. The Danish collector had suffered personal misfortune: visitors were guided round his house by an estate agent.

The Nordic Pavilion, by contrast, had become an out-of-control party palace: entering the outdoor space, the collector himself was to be discovered floating face down in the swimming pool.

At Whitechapel there appears to be a painting by Christopher Wool - a US artist popular with billionaire collectors - falling off the wall in front of a safe. The work shares its title with the words spray-painted on the canvas: *Capitalism Will Collapse From Within*. Made in 2003, the year of the first Frieze London art fair, this work, too, was a portent of things to come: in this case the corpulent global art market and its association with worsening inequality.

Is it a bit have-your-cake-and-eat-it to criticise the art market while enjoying its fruits?

"It must be possible to criticise something that you're a part of because sometimes you can't escape it fully," Dragset says.

"We're definitely part of an art market," agrees Elmgreen. "But we're also maybe among the last sentimental artists that build up huge environments that can't be sold and have to be dismantled afterwards - and that you only do for the audience. Not for the few with the money or the power."

Elmgreen & Dragset: 'This is How We Bite Our Tongue', Whitechapel Gallery, London, 27 September to 13 January

Last night's television

SARAH CARSON



The intriguing new courtroom comedy that raises the bar

» **Defending the Guilty** BBC2, 10pm ★★★☆☆

» **Bad Move** ITV, 9pm ★★★☆☆

Are there any occupations still awaiting the sitcom treatment? Politicians, paper merchants, priests: all of them, and their principles, have been skewered in British TV comedy. The latest are defence lawyers, in this intriguing pilot from *Cuckoo* writer Kieron Quirke, **Defending the Guilty**.

Will Sharpe - the prodigious young talent who wrote and directed Channel 4's superb *Flowers* - stars as wet-behind-the-ears trainee barrister Will Packham. He's one of four hopefuls attempting to win a pupillage, only his pupilmaster is sex-mad pastry fiend Caroline (played with relish by Katherine Parkinson), who trills off lines like: "I've got fewer defence points than I have viable eggs" while struggling to get a murderer off the hook.

Will is at the bottom of the "leaderboard"; it does not instil much confidence in his future that

Defence law is full of idealists, and the show pokes fun at them smartly

she insists on referring to herself in the third person, as "mummy".

This area of law is a magnet for idealists, and this show sends them up smartly: at one moment Caroline refers to Will's "Guardianista erection". Little details like a foul-mouthed Dickens-loving juvenile delinquent who is "not going to prison for falking like a 12A", or a killer who left his worry beads at the scene, gave this real promise. It did a nice job of poking fun at classism and sexism in the criminal justice system, and the egos the career can attract. It's not perfect: the writer could have been more judicious with the sheer number of colourful references included in the script, which while

often clever, lose their impact in the onslaught. Nor is it laugh-out-loud funny, exactly. But it is entertaining, and Sharpe's portrayal of a young man tussling with his morals, self-esteem and ambition make this a comedy with real heart. I look forward to more.

To another comedy, more of which we could perhaps have done without. **Bad Move**, Jack Dee's sitcom about a couple who up sticks and move to a dilapidated Yorkshire farmhouse returned for a second series last night.

The premise was never original, but that shouldn't have mattered: caricaturing country bumpkin types is fertile comedic ground; just look at *This Country* to see it mined to perfection. But *Bad Move*, from Dee and his *Lead Balloon* co-writer Pete Sinclair, is disappointingly lacking in wit or imagination.

The latest obstacle in Steve (Dee) and Nicky's (Kerry Godliman) pursuit of bucolic nirvana is a hole in the roof. And holes in their clothes, as their home has suffered a moth infestation. In their hunt for a reasonable builder to patch it up, they settle upon Honest John who, seemingly, has a heart of gold and a moral duty to tell the truth. Which, it turns out, isn't what you want when you've got a protected species living in your attic.

The performances from Dee and Godliman are fine, and Miles Jupp hams it up satisfyingly as their smug neighbour Matt, with his runner beans and crab-apple jelly. But the material is lame and tired - "mindfulness is a bit like Buddhism, but you can still eat sausages and stuff" - and the characters feel paint-by-numbers. The only time this show attempts (deliberate) uncomfortable humour, in a dark revelation about Honest John's toupée, it feels so out of sync that it comes off as mean-spirited and jarring. *Bad move*.

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Law unto themselves: The cast of new BBC sitcom 'Defending the Guilty'