PRESSBOOK

Elmgreen & Dragset

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MADSAKI, hommage à la bombe
Henri Guette
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Rocking the boat — the artists who don't want you to call their work 'art'

As the duo Elmgreen and Dragset prepare a career retrospective, they tell Rachel Campbell-Johnston why they never reveal too much about what they do

A surprise awaits. A huge new installation is about to take over the ground floor of the Whitechapel Gallery in east London. It is part of a forthcoming survey show of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, the Nordic art duo who have been working together for nearly a quarter of a century. Yet when I ask them for more details about their venture, they refuse to divulge. Surprise, they explain, is a key artistic tool. It just matters too much to spoil.

"Remember when you were a kid and your parents decorated the Christmas tree," Elmgreen says. He, born in 1961 in Denmark, but based for much of his time in London, is the elder and the more loquacious of the pair. "At first that tree probably looked to you completely amazing, but, by the time your parents had done it exactly the same way, over and over and over each year, you slowly began to doubt that it was a surprise at all. Well, it's the same in the art world. When you go into the white cube of a gallery you can too easily find yourself starting a sort of routine inspection, judging and critiquing in a way to which you have grown used. We want to change this. Our work is about changing the behaviour of the audience when they enter our space, about overturning their expectations. People might not even see what we are going to make as an artwork at all."

Above: Ingar Dragset and Michael Elmgreen. Right: Powerless Structures, Fig. 101 on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square

"That would be the perfect way of seeing art," a grinning Dragset says. He, born in 1969 in Norway, lives mostly in Berlin, where the pair have their creative HQ. "Uncertainty is so important, not just to the way we approach art, but to the way we see ourselves."

"Yes, uncertainty," Elmgreen interjects, "and, perhaps even more importantly, not being afraid of uncertainty." Because when you are

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no longer afraid of uncertainty, he explains, you can begin to feel more free. "Art is about making people less fearful of being surprised. It's about making them dare to be more curious, to be more adventurous, to push a few boundaries down."

Elmgreen and Dragset, with their eye for absurdity and a good dose of humour, have certainly pushed at a few boundaries. For their statue for the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square in London in 2012 they set a boy on a rocking horse amid the mounted military heroes. In 2006, for their first significant show in this country, they transformed the Serpentine Gallery

> **Art is about making people less fearful of being surprised**

into a series of drably institutional spaces. Boredom, anonymity, solitude and monotony haunted this place. As a cultural experience it might sound on a par with filling in a tax return, but, undercut by an anarchic sense of humour, it instead roused an alertness to the ridiculous, whetting the knife edge of subversive intelligence.

They met in 1995 in "the dirtiest gay disco in Copenhagen" and, having first become lovers (they no longer are), began working together. In the beginning they were performance artists who based their work on their lives, challenging the clichés of gay iconography, but later developed questions as to the nature of social structures and the way in which they can exercise control. Some of their other typically outlandish projects have involved creating a Prada boutique in the middle of a Texan desert; transforming the Bohen Foundation in New York into an eerily abandoned subway station; imagining the V&A to be the home of a clapped-out architect, then putting the whole building up for sale; and suspending a kidney-shaped swimming pool — *Van Gogh's Ear*, they called it — in Fifth Avenue.

Swimming pools, indeed, appear to have become a bit of a trope ever since: at the 2006 Venice Biennale, they made themselves the most talked-about artists of the entire beano by turning the Danish pavilion into the home of a despairing collector who, even as estate agents took all-comers on a tour of his dream property, could be seen floating face-down in his swimming pool.

"We like pools because they are places in which people gather, but in a very different way than they do in exhibitions," Elmgreen says. "The swimming pool in Britain, for example, is the place where the prude British are comfortable with not being dressed. In Berlin people are so much more easy with their bodies; you see them in the parks buck naked, even right in front of the parliament building."

"Though we haven't seen Angela Merkel yet," Dragset interrupts.

"Not yet!" Elmgreen says, laughing, then continues: "Pools are very important for bringing people together in a physical way; particularly important today when people stay at home on social media. They don't know what to do with their bodies. Swimming pools are a place where fellow citizens can still come together, where we can know we are not alone."

The idea of community and what it means is particularly important to them. "In general," Dragset explains, "we work with social issues surrounding the history of a city, but we use our own history, our own personal stories to colour it, to give it a relevance."

The theme of their new Whitechapel installation will be, emphatically, they say, about the destruction of public space in London. It has got much worse since he moved here, Elmgreen says. Even east London, once full of clubs and independent cafés and cheap artist studios, has been subject to ruthless gentrification. And, of course, this is symptomatic of what is happening in many other cities across the world.

Prada Marfa, 2005, a mock-up of a Prada boutique in the desert near Marfa, Texas

"We are really in danger of xenophobia and fear and egoism," Elmgreen says. "It's really important that we regain our feeling of being good citizens in a city. Togetherness is really important today. And culture has an important role to play in this — more important than ever before." Social media, he suggests, creates a culture that is more and more about the individual; about the ego having to feel that it is at the centre. "Even a great monument needs to have you in front of it before it can matter. We turn the camera to watch ourselves instead of being

> **Power is just a term to describe what people agree upon**

overwhelmed and inspired by the experience all around us."

The Whitechapel show will include a number of figurative sculptures and ready-mades created across the course of their career. These will represent the different repressive mechanisms of modern society, Elmgreen says. A little boy in white-painted bronze gazing up riveted at a rifle hanging in a cabinet on the wall evokes, for instance, the way in which boys are raised to fulfil traditional masculine roles.

"But this is nurture, not nature," he insists. "There is nothing in masculinity encouraging you by nature to kill others. And yet you see it everywhere, escalating to the extreme in the States, where schoolboys commit horrible crimes to mark themselves out as outstanding, as heroes. They want to do that even if it means killing all their classmates."

Another sculpture shows a young man on a cross, but reversed, "so that you see his nice ass instead of his front", Elmgreen says, grinning. "It's about Christianity being based on suffering, on guilt and being ashamed of your body. Our young man is hung on the cross for his own sadomasochistic pleasure. Artists, traditionally, have always questioned religion in this way. Think of Caravaggio. He was so controversial showing the genitals of saints. Artists may have depended on the church for its patronage, but they also challenged it through their artworks at the same time.

"But art," Elmgreen continues, "can often be the beginning of gentrification; the softer element of it. So it is very important for our own artistic community to think about its responsibilities, to see what it is a part of. We can't be naive. We must discuss these things."

"Art," Dragset insists, "can start discussion and debate. It can put the problems on the table, but in a different way to politicians and general media."

Elmgreen and Dragset are nothing if not politically engaged. Their outrage is obvious as they tell me about supreme court legislation just passed in Denmark that immigrant children aged one and over should go to school to learn Danish values. "How un-Danish is that?" Elmgreen snorts. "Inclusion, equality, understanding of the vulnerable: these are Danish values. This ridiculous legislation represents a complete misunderstanding of them. It is a populist lie designed to seduce people."

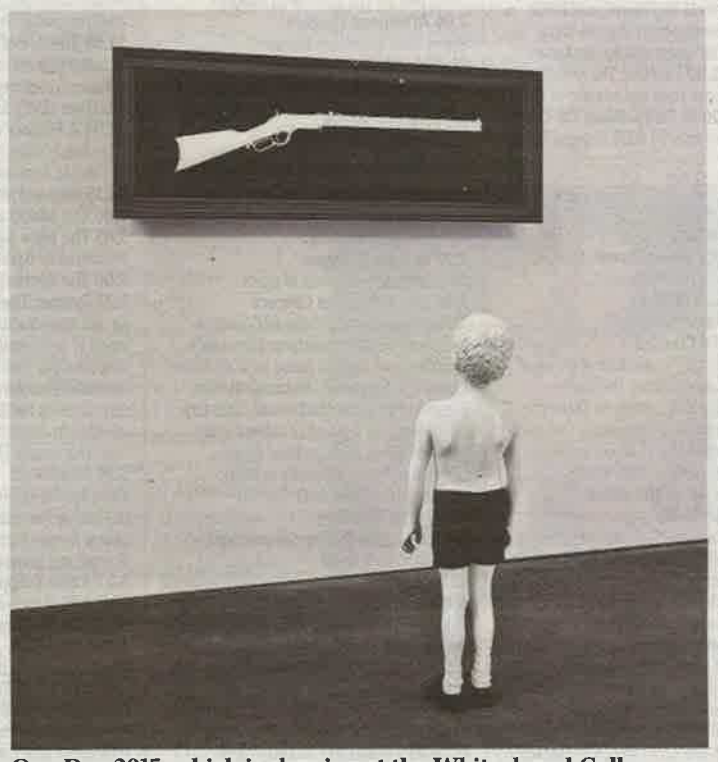
Yet art, he says, cannot have a direct political impact. It must approach more subtly; it must come at politics slantwise. He takes their statue of a boy on a rocking horse for the fourth plinth as an example. They asked Joanna Lumley to unveil it instead of Boris Johnson, who was the London mayor at the time, and, in so doing, they believed they made a political point.

"But we don't pretend to know what is right for people," Elmgreen says. "That's why we make art. We are trying to find out. What we do feel, though, and feel very strongly, is that we need to get strong communities again, to get local communities together to connect in everyday life. Because together we can change things so easily.

"Power," he declares, "is just a term to describe the things that people agree upon. And if we as artists can change something so easily [and a lot of their ideas, he explains, just involve simple flips], then a lot of people can change things. If we could agree upon a change for the better, we could make the world better."

It's all surprisingly simple in the world of Elmgreen and Dragset.

***Elmgreen & Dragset: This is How We Bite Our Tongue* is at the Whitechapel Gallery, London E1, from September 27 to January 13**



One Day 2015, which is showing at the Whitechapel Gallery