

PRESSBOOK

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

Wallpaper

April 2015

Elmgreen & Dragset document a life in progress at Galerie Perrotin

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Swann, after his stint in London's Victoria & Albert Museum in 2013, has downsized to a single splendid room in New York's Upper East Side, with double-height ceilings, dentil mouldings and crimson walls

When last we encountered architect Norman Swann he was between bankruptcy and his 75th birthday, still stubbornly ensconced in his family home - a grand residence that shared an address with the Victoria & Albert Museum. The ornery bachelor, now 76, has recently traded South Kensington for New York's Upper East Side, where he has downsized to a single splendid room - double-height, dentil moldings, crimson walls - in a landmark 1930s building on Madison Avenue. Until 23 May, visitors are welcome to barge in and snoop around.

INFORMATION

Elmgreen & Dragset: 'Past Tomorrow' is at Galerie Perrotin until 23 May 2015
Photography: Guillaume Ziccarelli; Courtesy of the artists and Galerie Perrotin

ADDRESS

909 Madison Avenue & 73rd Street
Upper East Side
New York
NY 10021

TELEPHONE

1.212.812.2902

'Be a not-so-polite guest - sneak into his private stuff!' encourages Michael Elmgreen, one half of the Danish-Norwegian artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset, as he reaches for a leather-bound photo album resting not far from a half-drunk cup of tea. 'The more you look at things, the more curious you will get.'

Despite the ephemera of a life in progress - personal photos (handsome young men, gorgeous buildings) and correspondence, shelves of well-thumbed books (Foucault, Proust, a 39-volume set of Shakespeare's complete works in miniature) and stacks of yellowing magazines - Swann is not a real person. He is the creation of Elmgreen & Dragset and his bedroom is their latest solo exhibition, on show at Galerie Perrotin.

Entitled 'Past Tomorrow' and accompanied by a short book written in the style of a screenplay, it picks up where the artists' 2013 V&A installation left off, with Swann realising he has little more than maquettes to show for a life that prized utopia over reality, theory over practice, dogmatism over compromise.

'We were jealous that filmmakers could focus on a few characters and comment on society through those fictional characters, so that's what we've done over the last few years - look at different characters and try to tell their stories and also our stories through their objects, their collections, all of the traces they leave in a domestic setting,' says Ingar Dragset. 'It's quite rare to make a sequel in an art context, but we're always up for a new challenge.'

Under the hungry gaze of a gilded vulture (dubbed 'The Critic', who appears in all Elmgreen & Dragset shows) perched atop Swann's bed, elements of the artists' previous projects mingle with clues into their character's past and present: a ghostly portrait of the architect as a young man, a poster for a 1959 'Building for the Masses' exhibition in Utrecht, a sculptural adaptation of Magritte's shrouded 'Lovers' placed beside a metronome on the piano, a bedside drawer left ajar to reveal protease inhibitors and other antiviral medication.

And if Swann's shrinking world, with its framed sampler embroidered with a reminder that 'Home is the place you left,' is a plush monument to failure, then its creators have succeeded. 'We love to describe failure - it is such an underestimated virtue in today's society, where everything counts on success,' says Elmgreen. 'Norman didn't do so well in life, but a lot of interesting things come out of failure.' Surely Swann wouldn't have it any other way.