

Interview Magazine

Phongsirivech, Pimploy: *The Subject in Question*

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# The Subject in Question

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ELMGREEN & DRAGSET IN NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 2016.

PHOTOS: [CHRISTIAN HÖGSTEDT](#).

“What is ‘the subject’?” asks Michael Elmgreen. The question isn’t rhetorical, but neither he nor Ingar Dragset, the other half of artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset, has a straightforward answer to it. After over two decades of installing both entertaining and socially conscious works worldwide, the pair has mastered the art of disorientation. They’re known for displacing—and misplacing—objects, ridding them of their functionality. Take, for example, *Van Gogh’s Ear* (2016), the 30-foot-tall swimming pool displayed in the middle of New York’s Rockefeller Center over the summer; or *Prada Marfa* (2005), a small building resembling a Prada store that seemed to materialize on a highway in the middle of Texas. Last spring, they even brought their fictionalized character Norman Swann to New York to set up [a residence for him](#) at Galerie Perrotin.

Now, the Berlin-based duo has returned to New York, this time moving southwestward to the FLAG Art Foundation in Chelsea with a two-level exhibition featuring old, new, and site-specific works. Titled “Changing Subjects,” it explores that initial question Elmgreen posed and the pause that followed.

“Changing Subjects” doesn’t trace the life of an individual. Instead, it recreates, sans character, an entire lifespan from start (*Modern Moses*, 2006, consists of a wax figure of a newborn in a carrycot and an ATM) to finish (*Untitled*, 2011, depicts a morgue). What happens in between these two junctures is left for viewers to fill in, begging Elmgreen’s question: What is the subject—or, rather, *who* is the subject? “Subject can be subject matter, but it could also be subject as in a person,” says Elmgreen. “We don’t really know if it’s one person or if it’s multiple characters that the show depicts. That is up to the viewer to think about.”

Elmgreen and Dragset certainly provide one with plenty to consider. The very absence of subjects, for instance, is impossible to ignore. “You have the left [behind] baby, the guy in the morgue who’s left on his own, and you have the lifeguard sitting without any real purpose out on the terrace,” says Elmgreen. In *Human Scale* (2016), rulers are mounted on a wall; they vary in length, corresponding to various measurements of an unknown, specific individual. *Powerless Structure, Fig. 19* (1998) consists of two pairs of discarded Levi’s and Calvin Klein underwear pooled on the floor, as if the figures had vacated them only moments before. The lingering absence that seeps through the works achieves both intimacy and distance.

Elmgreen and Dragset also balance wit with weight. Such is evident in *Side Effects* (2015), a display of pastel glass vases shaped not unlike urns. Inside the vases are the pigments used to color HIV medication. “The piece appears to be very poetic and beautiful until you know what the actual content is,” says Elmgreen. The vases are displayed in couplets and triplets, correlating to the number of tablets taken. “It’s quite remarkable how the pills are colored in these yummy candy-like colors, which seems to sugarcoat how toxic they are and how serious the side effects of the medicine are.”

In a new piece, *1 hr. 33 mins/2 hrs. 22 mins* (2016), two candles made of marble stand beside one another. “We use a lot of doubling and mirroring,” says Dragset. In this case, the mirroring is more introspective. “You have this permanence that you normally don’t associate with candles,” explains Elmgreen. “It’s also a self-portrait in a way. Those two candles represent different lengths and there was the realization, of course, that lives will end at different times. Ingar is younger and living more healthily than me,” he continues, despite Dragset’s protestations.

While as an entity, Elmgreen and Dragset have created dialogs on the personal, the political, and how art fits in between, the two men didn’t always see themselves as artists. “The thing about art ... well, the label ‘art’ isn’t really a quality stamp. There’s a lot of bad art around,” Elmgreen notes. “For us, it’s more important to give people an experience and be able to reflect upon issues.” And now? “Now we have no choice,” says Dragset, laughing. “It’s too late to change professions.”

*“CHANGING SUBJECTS” IS ON VIEW AT THE FLAG ART FOUNDATION IN NEW YORK THROUGH DECEMBER 17, 2016.*