

Sleek

McDermott, Emily: *Double Trouble*

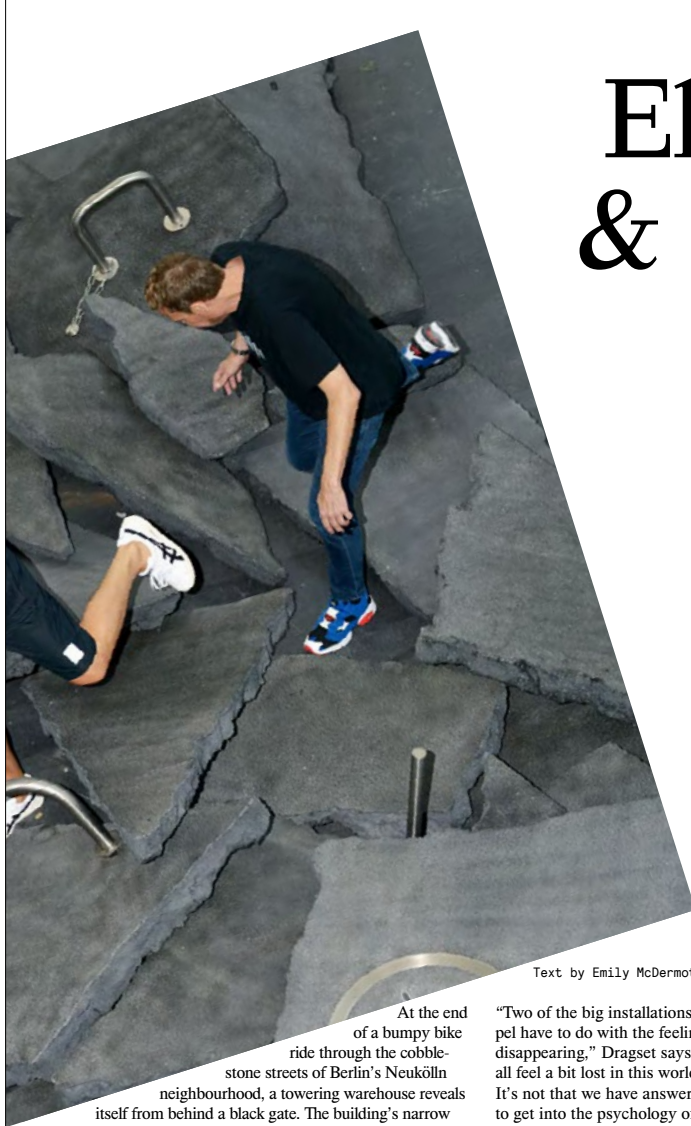
September 2018

# DOUBLE TROUBLE

Portraits by Christian Werner



After becoming art superstars by tackling subjects drawn from personal and political struggles, Berlin-based Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset are now skewering religious taboos of gender and power through their forthcoming shows in Paris and London



# Elmgreen & Dragset



Text by Emily McDermott

At the end of a bumpy bike ride through the cobblestone streets of Berlin's Neukölln neighbourhood, a towering warehouse reveals itself from behind a black gate. The building's narrow windows stretch from the ground to the roof, and three parking spots are filled by two Volvos and a Mercedes Benz pickup truck. An assistant opens the door and after an immediate scene of wooden storage crates, the artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset take centre stage, standing in the middle of a large-scale installation comprising broken chunks of black asphalt. With metal railings emerging from certain pieces, it seems as though Elmgreen & Dragset have collapsed a public square and turned it into an urban version of land art. In October, this installation will be on view at Gallery Perrotin in Paris, concurrent to their show "This Is How We Bite Our Tongue", opening in September at London's Whitechapel Gallery.

"Two of the big installations at Perrotin and Whitechapel have to do with the feeling of the ground below you disappearing," Dragset says. "Things are shifting and we all feel a bit lost in this world, not knowing where to go. It's not that we have answers, but at least we're trying to get into the psychology of what many of us feel at the moment – where will we go next?"

Elmgreen & Dragset have exhibited around the world, from the Danish and Nordic Pavilions in the 53rd Venice Biennale, to the Tate Modern, Metropolitan Museum of Art and Kunsthalle Zurich – yet the pair have humble beginnings. In 1994, they met in Elmgreen's native Copenhagen, where he studied poetry and Dragset studied theatre. Elmgreen introduced Dragset into the city's art world but before then Dragset, who grew up in Trondheim, Norway, had little exposure to contemporary visual art. "A few local artists were known in Trondheim, and you'd know Munch and Picasso, but I had no idea who Jeff Koons was, for instance. I didn't know that you



RIGHT:  
*Statue of Liberty*, 2018,  
original section of the Berlin  
wall, cash machine,  
stainless steel, 298 x 149 x  
148 cm, courtesy GALERIE  
KOENIG. Photo: Elmar Vestner



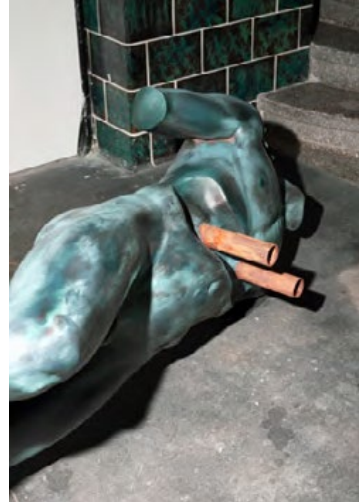
could become an artist and live from it," he remembers. After a few years of making low-budget works out of everyday materials such as Levi's 501s and classic Calvin Klein underwear, the duo (who were also dating for the first nine years of their working relationship) moved to Berlin in 1997, and in 2006 they bought a former water pumping station, where they continue to work. The top floor of the studio reflects some of the domestic feelings of Elmgreen & Dragset's larger immersive installations, and we settle into sofas in the living room, opposite a baby grand piano. A taxidermied kudu hangs above the door. As they pour coffee into mugs bearing the phrase "a good neighbour" – the title of the 15th Istanbul Biennial which they curated last year – we begin speaking about their artistic output, which often takes the form of

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sculpture and large-scale installation to confront political, social and cultural topics, including power structures of the everyday, sexuality and economics. Yet these dense, multilayered topics are always met with a sense of subversion and critical humour.

"Humour is our anger management," Elmgreen says before breaking into a soft laugh. "It's a way to make [these topics] bearable for ourselves, to see the absurd sides. In a way, it becomes black humour."

Take, for example, "One Day" (2015), "Reversed Crucifix" (2016) and "Pregnant White Maid" (2017), three black-and-white figurative sculptures that rethink traditional gender and societal roles, all of which will be included in "This Is How We Bite Our Tongue". "One Day" shows a young boy staring at a white rifle hanging against a black background on the wall. He gazes at this weapon with a sense of adoration and yearning, much like you might expect a boy his age to look at a jar of cookies on top of a refrigerator: off-limits yet incredibly enticing. In "Reversed Crucifix", a white male figure hangs from a black cross, but instead of facing the audience with nails through his appendages, he faces the biblical structure and handcuffs keep him in place; he's there for masochistic pleasure, not crucifixion. The phrase "pregnant white maid" didactically describes the titular piece: a pregnant female figure looks down toward her feet, donning a traditional maid's uniform, apron and



LEFT:  
*One Day*, 2015, courtesy  
of María José Jove Fundación.  
Photo: Holger Honck.  
Installation view: *No  
Hablaemos de Picasso*,  
Palacio Municipal Kiosco,  
Alfonso, A Coruña, 2015

TOP:  
Elmgreen & Dragset's Berlin  
studio. Photo: Christian Werner

all. She could be a symbol of abuse but also hope for the future; yet, summoning a future of “The Handmaid’s Tale” proportions, this optimistic outlook seems unlikely. As a whole, Elmgreen & Dragset use these three figures to humanise broader discussions surrounding gender identity and societal power structures, or as Elmgreen says, “institutions that unsuccessfully try to repress us or control our behavior in different ways”. In London, the sculptures will be exhibited in the same chapel-like room, where they will also assume the religious iconography of relics or icons. In this respect, Dragset is quick to point out that “religion is still influencing our culture – how we feel about our sexuality or identities in general. In one way or another, we relate to those roles.” No matter how much we like to think society has progressed, there remain households that idolise guns, that have maids wear degrading traditional dresses. Unlike these sculptures, the world in which we live is not black and white, despite many attempts to view and discuss it in such a way.

Much like the presentation of their works, when it comes to selecting relevant topics to address, Elmgreen & Dragset find a delicate balance between the personal and the political, always taking into account the location of an exhibition. For their new commissions at both Whitechapel and Perrotin, for example, they decided to continue a thread that began in 2006 at the Serpentine Gallery. Titled “The Welfare Show”, the exhibition dealt

with the deterioration of European welfare systems due to neoliberalism, globalization and technological developments. In the last decade, they say, this situation has exponentially worsened.

“In European societies, we believed that if we made publicly-funded institutions – like libraries, public pools, youth clubs, schools, playgrounds and parks – they would thrive and that would be good for the common wealth, but that has changed with new conservative policies in the past decade,” Elmgreen explains. “We have chosen to cut down the funding for these institutions and we’re concerned about that in our art – that we have become bad citizens, and this includes part of the art world. Our biggest installation [at Whitechapel] deals with the loss of faith in civic space,” he says.

In “The Welfare Show” they used works such as “Go, Go, Go” (2005–2006) and “It’s the Small Things in Life that Really Matter, Blah, Blah, Blah” (2006) to consider societal power structures such as economic disparity and health care. Now, in addressing similar structures and their continued disappearance, they are creating an immersive environment at Whitechapel with various sculptural components, transforming the first floor of the gallery into an abandoned civic space – perhaps a dilapidated city hall or disintegrating immigration office. The artists are sworn to secrecy, unable to provide details until the exhibition’s opening, yet despite the lack



*Self-Portrait, No. 42, 2016,*  
engraved marble, 50 x 75 cm,  
courtesy the artists.  
Photo: Ryan Thayer



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psychology of what many of us  
feel at the moment – where will  
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*Van Gogh's Ear*, 2016,  
Steel, fiberglass, stainless steel,  
lights, 900 x 500 x 240 cm  
Courtesy the artists and the K11 Art  
Foundation, Galerie Perrotin, Gal-  
leria Massimo De Carlo, and Victoria  
Miro Gallery. Photo: Jason Wyche,  
courtesy Public Art Fund, NY



of visual clues, it's clear that they are going to subvert the traditional experience of a gallery exhibition by turning the audience into performers who must navigate their way through a not-so-distant apocalyptic future. The only hints in the studio toward what this might comprise are a male torso – scaled to the size of a giant, resting on its side with its arms cut off – and a wooden plank leaning against a wall with a slug slowly trying to make its way upward. While the slug clings to the last remaining natural element, the man – so large he perhaps represents humanity as a whole – has lost all agency, unable to change the situation at hand. It's a feeling to which we can all relate, a feeling that has led to a certain disconnectedness from the world and people around us.

“In a time where the debates are so overly focused on the little immigration we have to Europe, so blown out of proportion in relation to how central it is, we speak about our ‘European values’, but fuck,” Elmgreen laments, “we lost our European values. We don't have them anymore. The inclusiveness of our society is gone, and we now start the debates and discussions on such a low level. Instead of caring about more complex or special issues, we have to go to the basics.”

“Social media is terrible in that sense,” Dragset continues. “Every response has to be so simple. With our work, we hope we can go a little bit more in-depth and touch people in a different place on their emotional and cerebral faculties.”