

Art Asia Pacific Magazine

Jhala, Kabir: *Intimacy and denial in equal measure*

July/August 2022



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION



“Intimacy and denial in equal measure”

Elmgreen & Dragset discuss masculinity ideals and posthumanism

BY KABIR JHALA



Installation view of ELMGREEN & DRAGSET's *What's Left*, 2021, silicone, clothing, wire rope, and balancing pole, dimensions variable, at "Useless Bodies?" Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2022. Unless otherwise stated, all photos by Andrea Rossetti, courtesy Fondazione Prada.

If anyone should turn humanity's impending demise into a visual punchline, it should be the task of the artist duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset—collectively known as Elmgreen & Dragset—who opened one of their most ambitious solo exhibitions to date at the Fondazione Prada in Milan in March. "Useless Bodies?" took a probing and playful look at a wholly existential question: where do we physically fit in a world increasingly mediated through digital and virtual technology? To broach this, they have been given carte blanche over the foundation's premises, allowing them to flex their well-established prowess in transforming architectural spaces, reconfiguring them into zones as vital to the show as the works themselves (aptly, the foundation's building was once a distillery). In doing so, Elmgreen & Dragset focus on the manifold relations between art, its surroundings, and the viewer, and, rather than provide answers, elicit and subvert our responses to contemporary issues such as shifting attitudes toward sexuality and gender, consumer culture, and gentrification.

Encompassing several bodies of work from across various time periods, the show provides the duo with a chance to not only speculate on our collective future, but also reflect on their 27-year history of working together, during which they have continued to challenge and raise our expectations of what an interaction with art can be.

In what ways did you transform the Fondazione Prada's space to exemplify and expand upon your practice?

Since the beginning of our practice, we have been interested in how our bodily perception is influenced by the spaces that we navigate, and the diversity of the architecture at Fondazione Prada encouraged us to make an exhibition that consists of four different universes. In one gallery, we reconfigured the spatial features completely, cladding all the walls with four-meter-high, folded aluminum plates to create a capsule-like, windowless domestic setting that envelops the visitor, turning it into this rather unlivable and cold home where the audience finds themselves in the role of uninvited guests. In another section, visitors were invited into three sequential scenarios: a locker-room, an

abandoned swimming pool, and the scene of a tightrope-walking incident. In a gallery upstairs, we created a vast, deserted office landscape. The large room felt like it could have been a laboratory or storage area, so we decided to transform it into a space for human storage. Our installation there, which comprises seemingly endless rows of workstations, draws from the relative minimalism of the building.

You began your show with a room of figurative artworks from the classical period to the 20th century, presented in conversation with your own sculptures. How did you envision these dialogues?

In the Podium, the central glass pavilion where our figurative works were placed in constellations with classic and neoclassical sculptures, there was a real mix of works across the ages predominantly showing the male body. We chose to include Roman sculptures in addition to later, neoclassical works that reimagine ancient subjects. Among these, there are two Thorvaldsen sculptures, which have inspired us in the past. (In 2009, we made a series of prints where items of clothing were superimposed on Thorvaldsen's sculptures.)

The similarities and differences between these works from various time periods speak about the changes in representations of the body, specifically in terms of the way masculinity has been portrayed. In the Nord Gallery, Lucio Fontana's *Concetto Spaziale, La Fine di Dio* (1963) was situated in the kitchen area of the "home" environment, hung in dialogue with our work *Doubt* (2019), where a cantilevered hand pokes through a stainless steel plate that has been pierced several times. There's a link between the two works—visually, in terms of the perforated surfaces, and religiously, in terms of their biblical references. (The title "La Fine di Dio" of the Fontana means "the end of God" and *Doubt* partially references the biblical allegory of Doubting Thomas, the saint who pressed his fingers into the wounds of Christ before accepting the resurrection.)

There is also a Nancy Grossman head [*Black*, 1973-74] in a vitrine with three of our works, which all relate to the gaze or sensory obstructions. *Black* conceals the eyes, nose, and mouth



Installation view of ELMGREEN & DRAGSET's "Useless Bodies?" at Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2022.



Installation view of ELMGREEN & DRAGSET's *Garden of Eden*, 2022, MDF, aluminum, fabric, monitors, keyboards, computer mice, and office chairs, dimensions variable, at "Useless Bodies?" Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2022.



Installation view of ELMGREEN & DRAGSET's "Useless Bodies?" at Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2022.

behind a zipped leather mask and was shown next to our work *The Bed* (2019), a futuristic-looking silver egg-shaped object that conceals two mobile phones. Underneath them were *Looking Back* (2022), a metal square with a peep-hole that reveals an image of an eye, standing on a black, wooden easel, and *Untitled (After The Lovers)* (2015) where two veiled heads meet in what appears to be a kiss. These works speak of intimacy and denial in equal measure.

So where does your work fit into this canon of masculinity in art history?

In the process of bringing together all these varied figurative sculptures in the Podium, we began to realize the breadth in which the male body has been represented through the course of history. Sculptures have, on occasion, shown men beyond persistently "heroic" and "victorious" tropes for centuries, which is something we found deeply reassuring and wanted to bring to the fore. Many of our works are about showing a new and hopefully more nuanced range of masculine identities.

Do you feel like portrayals of masculinity have changed within your own work?

Themes of masculinity, queerness, identity, and belonging have zigzagged through our work since the beginning of our collaboration. We deal with topics relevant to ourselves, so exploring the male body has been intuitive in our artistic approach. At the beginning of our collaboration, we met artistically in performance and used our own bodies to explore new concepts of masculinity. Then, we began to turn toward architectural structures like the white cube, or spatial settings and designs associated with gay culture, such as in our *Cruising Pavilion/Powerless Structures*,

Fig. 55 (1998), exhibited in Aarhus in 1998, which constituted an outdoor artwork but at the same time a functioning space dedicated to the gay community.

We have a persistent interest in how people use spaces, and the relationship between our bodies and surrounding environments. But in terms of portraying masculinities specifically, we've continued to make figurative works since the early 2000s that depict the male body in different ways—at ease, vulnerable, with a sense of intimacy, or in what are traditionally considered as more feminine positions. *Han*, our public sculpture in Helsingør from 2012, shows a male counterpart to the bronze statue of *The Little Mermaid*, the unofficial national icon of Denmark. The work was not wholly well received by the public at the time for being too feminine for the site, which used to be a shipyard. Over the last decade, as we have aged a little, we have also looked back on childhood, which is such a formative and overwhelming time of life, where expectations (of masculinity in particular) are encountered as one becomes familiar with oneself. We hope the pressures of traditional, societal roles and gendered stereotypes will dissolve with coming generations, moving masculinities into all sorts of new and positive directions. And fortunately there seem to be signs that this is about to happen.

Whether introducing notions of intimacy and domesticity into the commercial white cube, or play and humor onto a public plinth, your works have a commonality in that they provide means to critique their settings and open up conversations around the structural aspect of power. But in what ways does that function differ from space to space?

Many of our artworks are made in close dialogue with the contexts around them. Our starting point is often how the architecture of the venue appears aesthetically and what the aesthetic choices behind the design signals, as well as the social mechanisms linked to the place, both now and historically. This process is how we most often work when we make public sculptures. A public sculpture has the potential to impact how a place is understood or navigated. We often ask ourselves how our artwork might connect conceptually to specific surroundings. Our work *Zero* (2018), for example, an eight-meter-high outline of a swimming



ELMGREEN & DRAGSET, *Han*, 2012, polished stainless steel with mechanical eye movements, 1.9 × 1.4 × 0.9 m. Photo by Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy the artists.



Installation view of ELMGREEN & DRAGSET's "Useless Bodies?" at Fondazione Prada, Milan, 2022.

pool that you can see right through, is now permanently installed in Bangkok. Bangkok is a city where there are no municipal pools, but hundreds of hotel pools. And with *Van Gogh's Ear* (2016), our kidney-shaped swimming pool sculpture that was first exhibited in New York in the context of the waning American Dream, we've found that new layers of meaning have become clear as this work has traveled around Asia.

The same process informed shows like "The Collectors," which we curated at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and exhibitions of our work such as "Tomorrow" (2013) at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and "The Well Fair" (2016) at the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. When we do museum shows, we often mix new productions with existing sculptures, and when placed in a new context, these sculptures start to tell new stories, becoming dynamic in their meanings, which can change quite significantly over time. We have a work called *Modern Moses* from 2006 that consists of a lifelike baby in a carrycot placed beneath a cash machine. When it was exhibited at Art Basel, it was said to comment on the financial preoccupation of art fairs and the commercial art world as a whole, but when we exhibited the work in China, while the one-child policy was still in effect, it stimulated discussions on family structures and state control.



Installation view of ELMGREEN & DRAGSET's *Van Gogh's Ear*, 2016, fiberglass, stainless steel, lacquer, lights, 9 x 5 x 2.40m, outside the Rockefeller Center, New York, 2016. Photo by Jason Wyche. Courtesy the artists; K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong; Galerie Perrotin, Hong Kong/Seoul/Tokyo/Shanghai/Paris/New York; Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong; Victoria Miro Gallery, London/Venice; and the Public Art Fund, New York.

That seems to speak to both the power and powerlessness of artists. The greater the impact or reach of a work, the less control you have over its interpretation. Considering that some of your most well-known works are, unsurprisingly, public ones, has the discourse around them, which often extends well beyond the art world, shifted your understanding of the work? Are your works in close dialogue not only with their environments but with their viewers too?

We always have the audience in mind when we do either public art projects or museum shows, but do not aim the concept at a specific group. Hopefully our exhibitions will allow for multiple readings. Many of our sculptures are deliberately open to question because they don't operate within what one can label a strict, linear logic. In that way, we want to give the audience agency. Once we make a work and it's out in the public, it's almost like it's been born and it can then take on its own persona over time, finding a place in the world. Some of our artworks, like *Prada Marfa* (2005), have taken on their own lives through social media, which is always interesting to see. For *Prada Marfa* specifically, which is a forever-closed boutique in the Texan desert, Instagram and TikTok were not around when we made it and deliberately placed it in a remote area. Now, because of the online presence that's been built around it, so many more people can see and become familiar with the work, and hopefully also become interested in other things we do, or art in general.

The Milan show directly engaged with posthumanism and the impending obsolescence of the physical body, which seems apt considering that your visual style contains an absence of human marks on the surface. Your work doesn't seem to be fabricated by your own hands, and your role in the creation process seems

to be more akin to artistic director than traditional artist (whatever that term means). Do you think your approach to art-making has articulated the anxieties and emancipatory potential of posthumanism?

Our works are certainly about human experiences, sometimes in an almost existentialist way, and often relate to our own experiences of the world. We create works that are about growing up, about loneliness, intimacy, identity, belonging, or other inevitable encounters in life. Collaborating with artisans at a bronze foundry or in a wood workshop has been an artistic process that has existed for centuries—or at least since the Renaissance—so we wouldn't label it as "posthuman." We've found that by producing surfaces that are sometimes ultra smooth and works that are highly finished, it is possible to accentuate certain emotions or underline particular aspects of them. To some degree you can almost eliminate the presence of the material so that the form becomes more important than the texture.

"Useless Bodies?" brought together a large number of our works, under one thematic umbrella. As we developed the idea for the exhibition, we realized how many of our works made sense within this thematic framework, which looks at the status of the body in our world today. Perhaps we have been partly articulating the move toward a posthuman world in our work for many years, but we are also quite sure that some of the themes that we have explored in our works have been around forever. *Short Story* (2020), for example, our installation of a tennis court with two figures, speaks of competition, fairness and unfairness, and growing up. Two young boys, "Flo" and "Kev," are positioned at either side of a tennis court. "Flo," who appears older and in proper uniform, is holding a trophy and "Kev," who seems younger, is lying flat on the ground as if in total defeat. The viewer walks around the almost full-size tennis court that establishes a distance between them, and the sculptures might heighten a sense of individual experience, be it winning, losing, sadness, or contentment. It's certainly human, but whether it's posthuman is up to the viewer to decide.

Your reimagining of the architecture of the Fondazione Prada is typical of your attempts to make an exhibition space a vital part of an artwork. Is this an attempt to exalt the physical and sensory realms to provide visitors to your exhibition with something that is difficult to reproduce digitally?

Yes, so much of life is experienced via a screen, and the opportunity to see art in person has become even more valuable today due to the pandemic. It brings people together in the same space, and when people are gathered, different energies are created that are almost impossible to recreate virtually. Then again, the digital realm can reach much further than the physical, and we've always believed in communication and accessibility for all. If someone becomes interested in art through remote viewing, NFTs, gaming, the metaverse, or what have you, that can only be a positive thing.

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET are a Scandinavian artist duo, formed in 1995 by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. After winning the 2002 Preis der Nationalgalerie at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, they curated "The Collectors," the Danish and Nordic Pavilions at the 2009 Venice Biennale. They have held solo exhibitions at the National Gallery, Denmark; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Whitechapel Gallery, London; the Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul; and Nasher Sculpture Centre, Dallas. They have created public commissions for The Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London and the Rockefeller Center in New York City. They are based in Berlin.

KABIR JHALA is an art journalist and editor based between London and Mumbai. His writing focuses on the art market, contemporary art, and cultural heritage. He is currently an associate editor at *The Art Newspaper*.



ELMGREEN & DRAGSET, *Short Story*, 2020, wood, aluminum, paint, EPDM rubber and net, bronze, lacquer, clothes, trophy, and a marble tennis ball, 20×9.5×1.2 m. Photo by Andrea Rossetti. Courtesy König Galerie, Berlin/London/Tokyo.