

Wallpaper\*

Chan, TF: *Cell Mate*. 'The Bed', by Elmgreen & Dragset and Georg Jensen

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## Elmgreen & Dragset and Georg Jensen invite you to put your phones to bed

Explore the making-of 'The Bed', a Wallpaper\* Handmade X project intended to protect lovers from digital interference

From concept to completion, watch Elmgreen & Dragset and Georg Jensen bring 'The Bed' to life for Wallpaper\* Handmade X. *Videography: Mattia Abeni, courtesy of Georg Jensen*

Georg Jensen's HQ occupies a yellow-brick, former porcelain factory building in the leafy neighbourhood of Frederiksberg, Copenhagen. It's a suitably impressive place, befitting a world-renowned heritage brand, but what sets it apart is what it contains, rather than its architecture. On its first floor is the world's largest silver smithy, where the time-honoured craft of shaping hollowware by hand, and without the use of moulds, is still practised. There are up to 25 silversmiths working at a time, on an output of varying scale and design, from small spoons to magnificent tureens, and from the art nouveau creations of the brand's eponymous founder to contemporary tea sets by Marc Newson (see W\*200) and Kengo Kuma. Despite the clatter of hammers, the mood is calm and purposeful.

On a cold, blustery day in January, artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset have flown over from Berlin to develop their Handmade project with Georg Jensen. Chief creative officer Nicholas Manville gives them a tour, showing them the 3D printers used for prototyping, introducing them to a craftsman who has been toiling over a Henning Koppel fish dish, then lingering on an egg-shaped bonbonnière from 1908, laden with amber and green agate. This is followed by a visit to the archive, a Wunderkammer crammed with historic pieces and original sketches.



(Image credit: Frederik Lindstrøm)



Georg Jensen's expert silversmith Michael Birkefeldt works two ovoid sheets of raw material into half-egg forms (pictured top). It's a painstaking process, involving a steel hammer and a wooden stake, starting from the centre and hammering in a gradual spiral. When worked in such a way, silver can harden, so from time to time it has to be heated up with a blowtorch (pictured bottom) and cooled back down in water, in a process known as annealing.

(Image credit: Frederik Lindstrøm)

Elmgreen & Dragset come from Denmark and Norway respectively, so they are longtime admirers of Georg Jensen. 'We've seen first-hand how it is an important part of the design landscape,' they say. They are the first artists to be working with Georg Jensen in recent memory, but artistic collaborations, starting with painter Johan Rohde in 1906, shaped the brand's early years. An artist collaboration makes perfect sense, says Manville. 'We have an artistic language that we use in-house when developing designs. So why not work with someone in the art world?'

The artists have brought along a 3D-printed model of their design for Handmade, which will be made in sterling silver and come to be known as 'The Bed'. It can be thought of as a futuristic interpretation of that ovoid bonbonnière, divided into two halves and containing an upholstered interior in the artists' signature cyan. Within the base are parallel slots to fit two iPhone X, which, when inserted, would look as though they're in bed together. Reinforcing both function and metaphor, the interior structure would block both signal reception and sound.

'The biggest threat to our love lives and relationships might be our use of cell phones,' says Elmgreen, who recalls that one of his relationships had in fact ended because of his partner's excessive phone use. 'The Bed', therefore, is a relationship therapist in object form, intended 'to protect real-life intimacy, and protect lovers from the digital interference around them'.

The egg-like form, as the artists point out, comes with the promise of incubation and birth. But 'The Bed' also stands for a promise of a different sort – of a mutual commitment to human interaction. The two owners of the piece are meant to put their phones 'in bed' as they enter their home, 'a symbol of each partner agreeing to fully enter the situation of being together', says Dragset. 'We live in a world of too many stimuli, so we need to de-invent,' adds Elmgreen. 'This is an old-school object, in an old-school material, to contradict the invention of the smartphone.'

Georg Jensen's product developer Philip Mørch-Lassen, a silversmith with a background in computer animation, was tasked with turning Elmgreen & Dragset's vision into reality. He runs through the technicalities with the artists – the sharpness of the indentations, the way the lid will close, the choice of fabric for the interior – before mapping out 'The Bed' on his computer to calculate the amount of silver required for the piece. Then it's off to the smithy.

A project like this usually takes half a year to turn around, but with less than three months until the piece had to be exhibited in Milan, the making was entrusted to the finest of experts, Michael Birkefeldt, who has worked at Georg Jensen for two decades, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. His biggest challenge was ensuring a perfect union between base and lid. Once this was done, 'The Bed' was fitted with its high-density foam interior, which was lined with felt by a nearby upholsterer.



(Image credit: Frederik Lindstrøm)



The Georg Jensen silversmithy does not use moulds. Instead, the hand-hammered half-egg shapes were measured periodically and refined until they reached the desired forms.

(Image credit: Frederik Lindstrøm)



While Birkefeldt worked to create two 'Beds', so one could be shown open and the other closed, Elmgreen & Dragset drew up plans for the display, a half-egg-shaped white plinth with a strip of Black Belgian marble, and a matching reception desk, which would take over the foyer of our venue in Milan, nodding to the suggested positioning of 'The Bed' at the entrance to a home.

The finished 'Beds' were a hit in Milan, and judging from the fingerprints that kept appearing on the silver in spite of our best efforts to polish it, many visitors couldn't keep their hands to themselves. 'It was nice to see how people reacted,' reflects Manville. 'A craft that is over a hundred years old came to life in such a contemporary environment. This project has made Georg Jensen bolder about what we can contribute to the conversation between art and craft.'

In fact, both parties were so pleased with their Handmade adventure that they are producing a limited-edition series of five (in addition to the original, bound for Elmgreen & Dragset's Berlin studio). Manville has plans to send the pieces on a world tour in Georg Jensen stores. So if you missed 'The Bed' in Milan, there will be plenty of opportunities to see it. Just resist the impulse to whip out your phone and broadcast that moment on social media – like love, this is an artwork best experienced in real time, in real life.



Artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset at the Georg Jensen archives, with a 3D-printed model of their artwork and, far right, an image of the ornate 1908 bonbonnière that inspired its shape.

(Image credit: Frederik Lindstrøm)



The 1908 bonbonnière, laden with amber and green agate, that inspired the form of 'The Bed'.  
(Image credit: Frederik Lindstrøm)



The finished artwork, made of 925 sterling silver, on a workbench beside a piece from Kengo Kuma's tea set for Georg Jensen.

(Image credit: Frederik Lindstrøm)



Finished version of 'The Bed', installed the Wallpaper\* Handmade X exhibition in Milan, during Salone del Mobile 2019.

(Image credit: Alberto Strada / Wallpaper\* Handmade X)