

# Art review: Chlorine-sharp swim through puzzling decay

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*'You almost can't tell where the pool ends and the gallery begins'*

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► Shut down in the 1980s, the pool echoes a lost East End community spirit, while the artist duo's bondage crucifix, left, seems intended to excite more mixed reactions

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► **Elmgreen & Dragset: This is How we Bite Our Tongue**  
Whitechapel Gallery, London  
★★★★☆

Adrian Searle

Remember the old Whitechapel swimming pool by Aldgate East in London? The kids dive-bombing, coming some all red-eyed and reeking of chlorine until it was shut down in the 1980s? It was an East End institution. The Whitechapel pool has been sold now, to some art hotel. It'll be a spa, with reduced-price membership for the locals on Wednesday afternoons. You should visit, before they do it up.

A faint tang of chlorine still lingers round the drained pool. The paint is peeling off the walls and there is builders' rubble down the shallow end. Surely this used to be the Whitechapel art gallery? I must've got it wrong. Filled with

► Watching-figure sculptures by Michael Elmgreen, left and Ingar Dragset, below

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an echoing silence now and with a security guard wandering about, these old baths have been here for decades. Just look.

Previously, Elmgreen & Dragset have turned galleries into gay locker-rooms and nightclubs and a collector's private home. They sold the V&A to developers, put up for-sale signs and frightened visitors.

You almost cannot tell where the pool ends and the gallery begins: but the headless, toppled bronze beefcake on the poolside begins to give the game away. Did you notice the slug or the urinals, with their exposed plumbing entwined in a lover's knot?

The Whitechapel Pool is also a comment on the privatisation of public amenities and spaces. There is sadness here as well as humour, overlaying one another in this extremely arresting double-take. I almost didn't want to reveal what the artists have done, so you too could falter on the threshold, gawping, confused and amazed.

The overarching fiction gives way to old works and new in the upper galleries. The lifelike sculpture of a sleeping child in a carry-cot, left

beside the ATM by the stairs was last seen in London in their Welfare Show at the Serpentine in 2006. The sleeping child, adrift in a stream of money, is almost a Victorian parable. So too with the sculpture of a pregnant housemaid, looking at a child sitting in an empty fireplace. Often these single, lonely sculptures beg stories, teetering between sentimental and grisly. A boy in shorts looks longingly at a rifle. Who or what would he like to shoot?

Sometimes the Scandinavian duo go too far, but too far is never far enough, in my view. A man is tied to a high-shen crucifix. Not so much a suffering Christ, more a bloke in a BDSM scene. The very thought of this has obviously overexcited a couple of young men, who have abandoned their trousers and briefs, and gone off to a quiet corner.

Maybe they're in the changing rooms by the pool. Galleries, like public swimming pools, are good for a bit of cruising. I even found myself giving one of the security guards a bit of a glad eye. Talk about relational aesthetics. Fancy a dip?

From 27 September to 13 January