

Don't step on the starfish. It carries a message

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THE ART OF COLLECTING

Don't step on the starfish. It carries a message.

Elmgreen & Dragset bring a light touch to a serious subject at Place Vendôme

BY TED LOOS

Artists see the world differently from everyone else. And the Scandinavian duo known as Elmgreen & Dragset have a particularly distinctive and skewed take on what the public sphere should look like.

In 2016, for example, they took a curved swimming pool and stood it upright at Rockefeller Center in New York, calling it "Van Gogh's Ear."

Based in Berlin, the Danish-born Michael Elmgreen and the Norwegian-born Ingar Dragset have found their voice with cheeky public installations like that one and their 2005 Potemkin luxury store "Prada Marfa." A small, real-looking Prada outlet on a desert road near Marfa, Tex., it is a favorite of the Instagram crowd, with nearly 45,000 hashtag name-checks.

Their latest provocation, "To Whom It May Concern," has taken over the upscale Place Vendôme in Paris, with 100 red starfish, in bronze and steel, strewn over the paving stones.

The piece was commissioned by FIAC, the Foire Internationale d'Art Contemporain (International Contemporary Art Fair), as part of its Hors les Murs (Outside the Walls) program, and will remain on view until Nov. 2.

"We had carte blanche from the fair," Mr. Elmgreen said in a joint telephone interview with his artistic partner, noting that they chose red for the starfish to contrast with the green of the historic Vendôme Column, originally erected by Napoleon, which dominates the square. Climate change inspired the idea.

"Every time we were in Paris lately, the subways were flooded," Mr. Elmgreen said. "So we imagined water coming all the way to the Place Vendôme. What's left when it recedes? A swarm of friendly intruders."

The square's history also got the men thinking, as they have often addressed similar triumphal plazas, including Trafalgar Square in London.

"It's important to make these impressive and spectacular squares more human, and give them a humorous twist with more humanity and less authoritarianism," Mr. Elmgreen said, adding that the current debate about migrants and immigration also influenced their approach.

"There's increased fear in our public spaces," he said. "We're not familiar with the Other."



FRANCOIS GILLOT/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES



STEFANIA N. SZALASZ/SHR/GETTY IMAGES

Making a point
The artists Michael Elmgreen, left, and Ingar Dragset chose "To Whom It May Concern" to make a statement about climate change. They have scattered 100 red starfish, in bronze and steel, over the paving stones of the upscale Place Vendôme in Paris, below.



ELMGREEN & DRAGSET / ADAGE PARIS SIDA, VIA PERROTTE, COLLECTION DRAGONOFF

Mr. Elmgreen, 57, and Mr. Dragset, 49, met in the mid-1990s and immediately formed a romantic partnership as well as one based on art. But they are no longer a couple.

"That's so long ago we can barely remember it," Mr. Dragset said, laughing. "The art was always the core of the relationship."

They once did a Berlin gallery show inspired by joint laundry duties: The installation was full of single socks, and if viewers brought in one that matched, they could take that pair home.

Massimiliano Gioni, the artistic director of the New Museum in New York, noted the pair's knack for "institutional critique in the Instagram age."

Mr. Gioni first worked with the men in 2003, in his role as artistic director of the Trussardi Foundation in Milan. He commissioned "Short Cut," in which a car towing a trailer seems to emerge from the ground.

"They are very savvy about communication, and the ways of the art world," Mr. Gioni said.

Fairs have been humorous targets for the men more than once. In 2016, they created a fictional art fair, made up of a few dozen of their own works, at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. Later that year, they set up a booth by itself in an otherwise empty part of the Grand Palais, jumping the gun on FIAC by a few weeks with a one-day installation.

Who does what in the partnership remains a mystery even to experts.

"There's a sense of something more than collaboration — the work comes with its own interpretation, with the two of them bouncing ideas around," Mr. Gioni said. "You never know who is having the idea, and who is delivering it."

In an age when fiery, politically trenchant contemporary artworks often take center stage, perhaps what is most distinctive about Elmgreen & Dragset is that they seem to be enjoying themselves.

"We don't want to be dictators of what people should think," Mr. Dragset said. "We want to give people some excitement and surprise."