

Elmgreen & Dragset: This Is How We Bite Our Tongue, Whitechapel Gallery, review: ceci n'est pas une piscine

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Elmgreen & Dragset: This Is How We Bite Our Tongue, at the Whitechapel Gallery
CREDIT: DOUG PETERS

The comic potential of contemporary art is one of the themes of the moment, with an exhibition on the subject at the South London Gallery and a survey of “art as social satire” about to open at the Saatchi. Nevertheless, you may well think that hilarity hardly abounds in this area, and it’s certainly true that most of the funnier artists of recent times – David Shrigley, Grayson Perry and Sarah Lucas for example – shot their best comedic bolts a good decade ago. Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, however, have established themselves as the most likely standard-bearers for humour in art, with so-deadpan-it-hurts conceptual works such as a wanky Prada shoe shop stranded in the Texas desert and a lift crashed into one of Liverpool’s busiest streets, the pavement around it shattered as though it had fallen out of one of the nearby department stores.

You enter the Danish/Norwegian duo’s largest British show to date to find yourself in a derelict municipal swimming pool. The lower gallery has been so credibly transformed with damp-peeling walls and piles of shattered plaster where the water should be, you find yourself chuckling with incredulity, if not quite amusement.

A wall text gives a detailed history of "The Whitechapel Pool", down to the fact that it's about to become part of an art hotel and spa (which is exactly what would happen to such a structure in London's trendy East End), all of which is, of course, complete fiction. Meanwhile, a large, headless bronze statue of a man lies near a large, turd-like aluminium form balanced in the centre of a child's trampoline.



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What does it all mean? Well, this being a contemporary art exhibition there is, inevitably, a booklet explaining everything in elaborate and utterly humourless detail – and nothing is liable to kill laughter like explanation. Yet even after wading through several pages of guff about "questioning the fate of civic space in an era of austerity" and "power structures embedded in the everyday", my readiness to be amused hadn't been entirely extinguished.

Also, at the far end of the lower gallery is what I consider a very good joke. Two urinals stand side by side on the wall, referencing Marcel Duchamp's Fountain of 1915 – simply a urinal that the French artist signed, creating one of the first works of conceptual art – with the outflow pipes conjoined in a coiling mass of stainless steel, entitled Gay Marriage. Coming from a pair of openly gay artists who aren't, as far as I'm aware, personally involved, but whose creative partnership must be as emotionally taxing as any marriage, that is really quite clever.

The theme of gay love and commitment is extended in *Powerless Structures*: simply two pairs of matching Clavin Klein underpants and Levi jeans, left in one of the upper corridors as though just taken off. Mundane, discarded objects have become a commonplace in contemporary art, with the invariable conceit that they're rendered in extremely expensive painted bronze. The conceit here is that they actually are pants and jeans, which is almost refreshing.

The male journey from boy to man, a favourite theme already seen in the pair's work for Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth – a giant golden boy on a rocking horse – is explored in a series of creepy tableaux with blank, white figures in what looks like plaster, but is actually, yes, painted bronze.



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A boy looks longingly up at a rifle in a glass case. A very ordinary-looking man hangs facing a black cross – an inverted Everyman-Christ for our times, perhaps – while a boy sits sulkily in a fireplace with a pregnant maid looking on. While boy and maid are separate works, brought together for the first time, the proximity makes you wonder if the boy with the gun has somehow impregnated the maid.

I didn't laugh out loud at this exhibition, but was aware often of an involuntary internal chuckling. There are dark, skewed moods here, which hint at times towards something that's become even rarer in contemporary art than comedy: tragedy.