

# Masculine makeover

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Elmgreen & Dragset | The Scandinavian duo have been making a mark with public art that is at once witty, poignant and potent. By Gareth Harris

Artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset are mischief-makers with international clout. They may not be household names yet, but over the past decade the Scandinavian duo have been making a mark with public art that is at once witty, poignant and potent. Theirs, for instance, was the golden boy on a rocking horse on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth in 2012 ("Powerless Structures, Fig. 101"), a playful rebuke to the bellicose military statues all around it. In Berlin, their "Memorial to the Homosexuals Persecuted Under the National Socialist Regime" (2008), a forbidding grey cube that originally housed tender footage of kissing couples, is a permanent fixture on the Tiergarten.

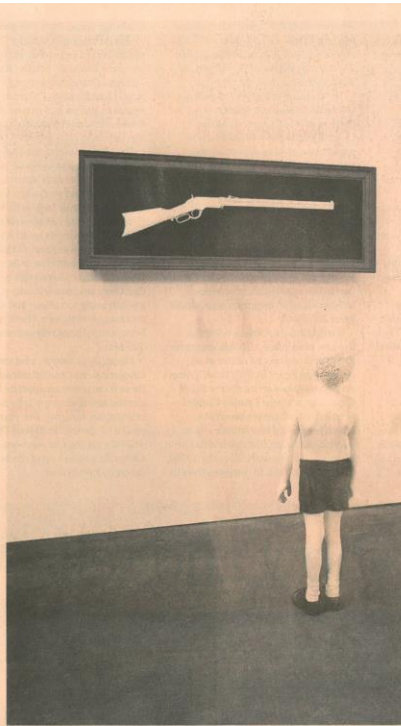
Their profile is set to rise further. In October they plan to install 100 bronze starfish, all unique, on the Place Vendôme in Paris to coincide with the Fiac art fair. Next year will see the unveiling of "Bent Pool", a mind-bending, arch-shaped swimming pool sculpture in Miami. But the main event in the immediate future is a major

survey – 26 early pieces spanning more than 20 years and six new works – opening later this month at the Whitechapel Gallery in London.

Elmgreen & Dragset are unapologetic about giving their art a comical, provocative edge. "People ask, 'Why do you use humour in your works?'" It's pure anger management. It's better to scream with laughter than just scream," Elmgreen says, over fruit and coffee at their elegant 1920s studio in Berlin.

Their easy chat and unguarded nature are testament to a long and colourful history. The pair met in 1994 in a gay nightclub called After Dark in Copenhagen, and were in a relationship until 2004. They first worked on joint performance pieces – the medium was the perfect fit given that Elmgreen wrote poetry and Dragset studied acting – while pursuing their own rather esoteric interests: Copenhagen-born Elmgreen, 57, designs industrial objects; Dragset, 49, who hails from Norway, was in an indie band called Asia Today (selling a song to a Mexican soap opera was a high point for the group).

It would be easy to label some of their



works as glib, but many of their pieces seem much more poised in hindsight. In 2006, they presented *The Welfare Show* at London's Serpentine Gallery, a searing examination of the welfare model in western society. In their scenario, the system was fraying under the strains imposed by neoliberalism. A series of waiting rooms peopled by bored uniformed officials symbolised the soulless, bureaucratic aspect of the public sector; strip lighting and white noise added to the sense of visiting a nightmarish day-care centre.

One of the pieces exhibited at the Serpentine show, "Modern Moses" (2006), comprises a lifelike wax baby in a cot, lying at the foot of a cash machine. Seeing a helpless human abandoned at an ATM elicits uneasy, conflicting reactions but the work points especially to the issue of collective and individual responsibility.

"Modern Moses" will be among the

From left: Elmgreen & Dragset; 'One Day' (2015); 'Powerless Structures, Fig. 101' (2012) — Clara Wheeler; Hans José Jové Fundación Holger Hanché; Getty Images

works appearing in the Whitechapel's retrospective. According to curator Laura Smith, Elmgreen & Dragset prompt us to question how society is organised. "They make us aware of the configurations and constraints that surround us all," she says.

Dragset remarks that putting *The Welfare Show* on now would be more fraught than in pre-economic crisis days. "Things just seem much more complex today – things have accelerated." Elmgreen goes further. "At that time, back in 2006, you would at least consider people equal under the law. Today you can't because there are parts of the population who no longer have the same rights. There is such a strong sense of xenophobia, stirred up by tabloid media and certain populist politicians," he says.

He used to divide his time between London and Berlin but has now decamped permanently to the German capital, feeling aggrieved by the UK's decision to divorce from the EU.

Nonetheless, the Whitechapel show may seem at times like a wistful love letter to London and the Brits. The UK – its quirks, ways and politics – is the backdrop for this ambitious mid-career survey. The title, *This is How We Bite Our Tongue*, draws on the stereotypical British penchant for reserve and pent-up emotion, the pair say.

A judge's wig hangs forlornly on a steel hanger ("Heritage", 2014), the outline of a head taking shape in the void created. "The work shows how tradition is embedded in all British institutions. Britain still thinks it's an empire. It's crazy," Elmgreen says. There is also a swipe at gentrification in London's East End via a major new commission which, for now, is under wraps. The installation, which takes up the entire ground floor, depicts an abandoned civic space, a calamitous casualty of the UK government's austerity policies.

I point out that in the Whitechapel show, the issue of masculinity also emerges as a concern and concept. "Invisible" (2017) comprises a sculpture of an anxious schoolboy huddled inside a grand fireplace. "One Day" (2015) consists of a boy figure looking up admiringly at a rifle in a glass cabinet. "Violence is a masculine problem," Elmgreen explains. "Certain expectations of boyish behaviour might create violent tendencies later on."

But humour, albeit of a downbeat sort, defuses the tenser moments (they

don't poke fun at the audience, which might explain why their art is so engaging). "Donation Box" (2006), a perspex cube filled with detritus such as grubby trainers, mocks the way museums needily solicit handouts from visitors.

Meanwhile visitors are encouraged to sit at a small table, browse a diary and sip whisky for the work entitled "The Bottle and the Book" (2015). "Perhaps you can just come and get wasted; that will generate an entirely new kind of audience," Elmgreen says of this melancholic, funny piece.

The question that springs to mind, though, with any working partnership is do they really get on? Dragset admits



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that if they do not fight during the course of a project, alarm bells ring. "We gave up authorship in a way by having two people," he says. "Every day is like a set of disappointments because there is constant negotiation."

I come back to the humour in their art. Are they hoping that audiences will react by screaming with laughter? Up to a point, Dragset replies. "We still want people to listen," he says. "If you scream too loud, it means nobody is going to hear anything."

*This is How We Bite Our Tongue* Whitechapel Gallery, September 27–January 15, whitechapelgallery.org

