



Elmgreen and Dragset working on *Tomorrow*, 2013. Photography Jason Schmidt.

## CHECK YOUR PRIVILEGE

In their upcoming exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Elmgreen and Dragset take on London's big spenders.

Words Johan Deurell

"Excess and eccentricity are more interesting now than ever before," say the Danish-Norwegian artist duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. "We are experiencing a time defined by 'The New Boring'. Neo-Victorian morals seem to be on the rise and, even among the younger generation, there is a general tendency to be rather discreet, not too loud, not stick out too much, which unfortunately also means less innovation and experimentation." Elmgreen and Dragset have employed excess as a strategy to say something about everything from shopping and dating to sex and the property market.



*Celebrity: The One and the Many*, 2010, installation view, MNK/ZKM Karlsruhe. Photography Udo Meinel, ONUK.

The pair are perhaps best known for the Nordic and Danish Pavilions at Venice Biennale in 2009, where they turned the venues into homes of eccentric collectors. However, the idea of excess is a long-standing interest of theirs. In the sculpture *Prada Marfa* (2005), a facsimile Prada shop in the middle of the Texan desert, they explored the concept by toying with context. They explain, "Conventions are always dependent on a specific framing in order to function – otherwise they just become nonsense or some sort of mirage. The industry of luxury goods is no exception." Therefore this permanently closed 'store' looks crazy and even vulgar in the desert, whereas it would appear perfectly normal in Mayfair.

If *Prada Marfa* is a comment on the absurdity of consumption, the exhibition *The One and the Many* (2011), at the Submarine Wharf in Rotterdam, was an investigation into another example of excess: the relationship between icons and ordinary people. The show saw a neoclassical ballroom and four-storey residential apartment block installed inside the museum. Visitors could lurk outside the buildings and peek into their windows. Dark silhouettes seen in the frosted windows of the ballroom revealed a party – visitors were not invited in, but could marvel at it from the outside. The voyeuristic nature of the installation is a metaphor for a culture obsessed with stardom. "Celebrity culture, alongside other factors in contemporary culture, has put pressure on all of us to 'stand out', to be something special. On Facebook you are supposed to 'entertain' and show your friends that your life is interesting. You need to be the star! Naturally that makes many people have to lie a bit or exaggerate," say the artists.

One room of the apartment block accommodated a young man, someone who may be a familiar face to readers recruiting dates online: "We created this wax figure of a pretty boy in human size and took snapshots of him and posted them on a GayRomeo profile. The guys on the website went crazy. Some wrote to him over and over again, but he couldn't reply since he wasn't real. It was kind of scary to see how users believe in these small digital pics. And how dating in this format is purely based on one's own projections, rather than any real interest in the other." Inside the installation, the wax figure's computer kept alerting itself for unread messages.

Excessive behaviour can also be associated with challenges to social norms. When Elmgreen and Dragset were asked to create a public sculpture for Marselisborg Forest in Århus, Denmark, the result was *Cruising Pavilion / Powerless Structures*, Fig. 55 (1998). "We used our commission to create a sex space in a park where there was cruising activity going on," say the artists. "The police had been



arresting some of the men, and the park authorities had cut down bushes in that part of the park. We made a very innocent-looking pavilion: a white-painted cubic wooden structure. But inside it was shaped like a maze and the walls had glory holes. The gay men could make out in this pavilion at night, because inside our sculptural work it was no longer illegal.”

Elmgreen and Dragset’s work suggests that the notion of excess has highly political connotations. In *Tomorrow*, their new exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (1 October 2013–2 January 2014), they reconnoitre the unrealised dreams of individuals and a property market shaped by capitalism. “We found these hidden exhibition halls at the V&A, which hadn’t been in use for eight years. All dusty and run down, they almost looked like someone could have lived there. Then we got the idea of turning them into a rather sad, sentimental but beautiful domestic setting: a home for an old disillusioned architect, Norman Swan.” Norman’s

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house is full of antiques sourced by the artists, and furniture from the V&A collection, alongside smaller traces

implying that this is a home, such as personal letters and unpaid bills. With the show, which also acts as the set for an unrealised film, comes a script that the artists have written, together with the Royal Court Theatre. They are secretive about the screenplay, laughing, “It should remain a surprise.”

They are more talkative on the subject of Norman. He was born into money, but loses it all in the end. In the exhibition, in part an indictment of London’s property market, with its ever-increasing prices, we walk into his home just when the family estate is about to be sold. “The show is about the changes in London, where we experience a new type of upper class taking over, defined by a lot of new money and foreign investors,” say the artists. Certainly, the London property market and its winners are defined by excess, but can we think about architects’ ideas of working-class housing here? “That’s an

important part of our concept: to raise the question of how you can plan for other people’s needs and desires if you’ve never experienced a similar life situation,” say Elmgreen and Dragset. Though Norman is interested in social housing, and was influenced by the Bauhaus, “his own background didn’t really match his visions and might have been the reason for him never really understanding the people he wanted to build houses for.”

As the artists point out to me, this could apply to a range of decision-makers, such as politicians. Could champagne socialism be described as excessive? “It can definitely be described as rather eccentric or even decadent, but at least it seems more human and civilised than raw neoliberalism.”

Elmgreen and Dragset’s critique of notions of excess is multilayered, as they both react against it and embrace it. One thing is sure though: excess in art is an antidote to The New Boring. ♦



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*Cruising Pavilion/Powerless Structures*, Fig. 55, 1998. Photography Bent Ryberg. Courtesy Galleri Nicolai Wallner.