

Exhibitions

lionising of these few men as they are defined within this group, missing an opportunity to deliver much-needed critical engagement with their work and that made in the years following 1947 in India.

1 For the Salem exhibition, see S. Bean, ed.: exh. cat. *Midnight to the Boom: Painting in India after Independence*, Salem (Peabody Essex Museum) 2013. For the monographic exhibitions, see S. Poddar: exh. cat. *V.S. Gaitonde: Painting as Process, Painting as Life*, New York (Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation) and Venice (Peggy Guggenheim Collection) 2014; R. Karode, ed.: exh. cat. *Nasreen Mohamedi: Waiting Is a Part of Intense Living*, Madrid (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia) and New York (Met Breuer) 2015; and C. Dercon and N. Raza, eds.: exh. cat. *Bhupen Khakhar: You Can't Please All*, London (Tate Modern) 2016.

2 See, for example, I. Dadi: *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, Chapel Hill 2010; and N. Adajania: *The Thirteenth Place: Positionality as Critique in the Art of Navjot Altaf*, Mumbai 2016. Other recent books have been written by Karin Zitzewitz, Sonal Khullar, the present author and Emilia Terracciano.

3 Catalogue: *The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India*. Edited by Boon Hui Tan and Zehra Jumabhoy. 208 pp. incl. 120 col. ills. (Prestel, New York, 2018), £49.99. ISBN 978-3-7913-5768-3.

Elmgreen & Dragset: This Is How We Bite Our Tongue
Whitechapel Gallery, London
27th September 2018–13th January

by JAMES CAHILL

Elmgreen & Dragset’s exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, plunges visitors into an empty swimming pool. By way of an anticlimactic centrepiece, the duo have transformed the main gallery into a derelict municipal space titled *The Whitechapel pool* (Fig.28). The turquoise basin is scattered with rubble and bordered by tiled walkways. The surrounding walls are coated with flaking, filthy paintwork; there are railings, a lifebuoy and a faint whiff of chlorine in the air. And yet none of it feels quite real.

The artists, originally from Denmark and Norway, who have worked collaboratively since 1995,

have in this forlorn scenario created a piece of living fiction. The pool sides are hollow underfoot, the dirt is a little too artfully spread and the door marked ‘Changing Room’ is too small to be convincing. It has a handle and hinges on each side, as if it could open both ways or neither. Compared with the meticulously fabricated environments of Christoph Büchel, where it is almost possible to forget that you are in an art gallery, Elmgreen & Dragset’s derelict pool is artificial and knowingly so. It is a literary conceit – the pool as metaphor.

In this respect, the work echoes their installation *Death of a collector* at the Venice Biennale in 2009, which saw the Norwegian and Danish pavilions converted into the houses of imaginary art collectors. Outside one of these, a Beverly-Hills-style retreat, the supposed owner lay floating face-down in a swimming pool like

28. *The Whitechapel pool*, by Elmgreen & Dragset. 2018. Installation (Photograph Jack Hems; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).

Opposite 29. *Too heavy*, by Elmgreen & Dragset. 2017. Aluminium with lacquer paint and trampoline, 170 by 170 cm. (Courtesy of König Gallery; photograph Roman Maerz; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).





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a latter-day Jay Gatsby or Joe Gillis, while rent boys continued to wander insouciantly around the house. The notion of a wry short story turned into an inhabitable *mise en scène* has remained one of the defining qualities of Elmgreen & Dragset's work. More than most contemporary artists, they are novelistic.

Nine years on, and the story at the Whitechapel Gallery is more dreary – straitened, perhaps, in line with the times. A panel on the wall tells the tale of the 'Whitechapel Pool', built in 1901 at the initiative of the philanthropist John Passmore Edwards, renovated in 1953, abandoned in the 1980s after losing its public funding (so far, so believable), and soon to be renovated as a luxury spa by the 'Desert Flower Art Hotel and Resort Corporation'. Fun has been had in the spinning of this yarn, even if the political critique feels clunky.

And yet it is arguably the power of the swimming pool as an idea that fascinates the artists, over and above the particulars of this pool in this setting. Rather than wanting to convince us (or even hold our interest) with their story about a civic space in Whitechapel, the artists seem to revel in the fictional potential of the pool per se – its capacity to mean or signal many things. 'It is believed that David Hockney made his first drawings of the surface of a swimming pool's water at this site', the wall text spuriously claims, seeming to veer off script.

And indeed, it is possible to see the vacant pool at the Whitechapel as a melancholic foil for the shimmering waters of Hockney's early paintings, where the pool is a beautiful blank or *tabula rasa* – a space for the formulation of gay identity (a recurring theme too in Elmgreen & Dragset's art), as well as a boundless otherworld in which the body is annihilated, subsumed by a splash. Here that sense of infinite possibility has drained away, literally – leaving a blank that is disillusioning and downbeat. It is like the empty pool encountered by the protagonist of John Cheever's *The swimmer* (1964) as he swims through the pools of his various neighbours on a strange summertime jaunt that becomes a



30. *Modern Moses*, by Elmgreen & Dragset. 2006. Installation (Photograph Doug Peters; exh. Whitechapel Gallery, London).

metaphor for his unravelling life. Elmgreen & Dragset's installation is an economic statement, doubtless, to do with gentrification and decay; but it is also a personal and cultural one ('And we don't understand what's going on – in Europe, as well', the artists have recently been quoted as saying. 'Why did this happen?').¹

The Whitechapel pool sets the tone for much of what follows – a condensed array of works that frequently carries a mood of wry melancholia or deadpan absurdism. Around the sides of the pool are beached sculptural fragments including a faux-bronze, mock-Neo-classical, headless statue pierced by rusty dowels, *Some stayed on while others left* (2018). A massive aluminium-hued nugget, *Too heavy* (Fig.29), sits like a fallen meteor in a trampoline. The steel u-bends of two ceramic urinals have knotted together into a snaking loop – ouroboros plumbing – in a pairing titled *Gay marriage* from 2010.

The literary sensibility of much of Elmgreen & Dragset's work – their privileging of text and context over the specific object – is made explicit,

almost paradoxically so, in a series of works described as *Self-portraits*. Wall labels denoting other artists' works – Hockney's drawing *Clean boy* (1964), for instance – are reproduced as engraved marble plaques or inscribed canvases. The marginal text is made large and lapidary, and the 'original' artwork and artist are evoked through their absence. Despite their intended neutrality, the textual slabs, with their different typographies and orphaned titles, come to seem subjective, time-bound and nostalgic. What may look like austere conceptualist word art is – like the vacant pool – an elegiac statement.

The *Self-portraits* are emblematic of the way in which Elmgreen & Dragset's work almost always takes the form of a suggestion – a nod and a wink – rather than a clear proposition; a suggestion, even, to sit down and read a book about the artists' work with a bottle of whiskey for company. The installation *The bottle and the book* (2015) is precisely this – a table, chair, book and bottle; or a 'drinking sculpture'. Indeed, Elmgreen & Dragset's work often resonates with that of Gilbert & George (albeit in mood more than appearance): the conjoined urinals are not a million miles from the 'Reclining Drunk' series (1973) of gin bottles made by the British artists. Two pairs of identical jeans and Calvin Klein underpants lying in a heap in a red-tinted lobby between two galleries

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31. Installation view of Elmgreen & Dragset: *This Is How We Bite Our Tongue* at Whitechapel Gallery, London (Photograph Doug Peters).

– which might again be seen as 1990s counterparts to Gilbert & George's suits and ties – suggest a recent or still-under-way assignation.

Mundane things – mere cast-offs – carry an unexpected symbolic weight in this way. A baby in a carrycot has been placed beneath a cash machine at the top of a flight of steps, in a tableau called *Modern Moses* (Fig.30) that the artists have repeated in numerous other contexts. The machine is functionless and the baby is clearly fake – this is no hyper-real infant in the vein of Ron Mueck or Duane Hanson, but a waxen-skinned plastic doll. A reference to the Old Testament story of Moses abandoned in the reeds beside the Nile, the assemblage is also deliberately offhand.

In much of the duo's work, image and characters appear as repeating and rearrangeable components, akin to pregnant images within a

sprawling Modernist poem. This idea is clearest in the upper gallery, where black-and-white sculptures have been placed in a staggered parade (Fig.31), either side of six free-standing walls, in arrangement that appears both disjointed and – at some enigmatic level – articulated and sequential.

A marble-pale boy (actually an aluminium cast) in black shorts and little school shoes stares up in awe at a marble rifle encased in a frame (*One day*, 2015); a vulture in the same ghostly monochrome perches on a branch and peers over a nest, casting Baroque shadows on the wall (*Emerging*, 2016); while in *Reversed crucifix* (2016) we are presented with a verso view of the crucified Christ. A cast of an ordinary man, unheroic in physique and not unlike Mark Wallinger's *Ecce Homo* (2000), is tethered to a glossy black cross as if ready for an altogether more erotic Passion.

Like the precision casts of Charles Ray or 3D prints, these figures have an immaculate quality that somehow precludes empathy – an estranging and distancing effect that gives them, once more, the patina of fiction. They are more compelling as ideas or quasi-literary conceits than as objects. This is both the fascination and occasionally the frustration of Elmgreen & Dragset's work. In the flesh, their creations can seem to lean too insistently towards crisp understatement and contrivance, and yet their quiet symbolic power – over and above their material interest – is what lingers in the mind.

1 B. Luke: 'Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset talk turning Whitechapel Gallery into disused swimming pool', *Evening Standard*, <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/michael-elmgreen-ingar-dragset-whitechapel-gallery-swimming-pool-a3945056.html>, accessed 12th December 2018.

