

Boys' TOYS

From fairground rides to a four-poster at Louis Vuitton, Elmgreen and Dragset are the brains behind the most playful art projects around, says *Jo Craven*



MICHAEL ELMGREEN, LEFT, AND INGAR DRAGSET IN THEIR BARCELONA APARTMENT. PHOTOGRAPH: GREGORI CIVERA. SITTINGS EDITOR: JO CRAVEN

Elmgreen and Dragset's art is unmissable. Take a look at the playful bronze boy on a rocking-horse on the Fourth Plinth that rules the roost in Trafalgar Square. Over at Louis Vuitton on Old Bond Street, don't be surprised to catch staff taking turns in the artists' four-poster bed, a performance piece for hour-long snooze slots, with bedtime stories read by the likes of Jeremy Irons or Sophie Dahl. This month, the pair's London gallery, Victoria Miro, will run their second solo show, *Harvest*, a study of our modern-day fixation with all things bucolic.

This Norwegian-Danish duo are the most exciting thing to come out of Scandinavia since Sarah Lund's woolly jumper. But they are far from being an art-world dose of Nordic noir. In fact, when we meet in their new flat in Barcelona, there is much

laughter without a trace of gloom. They've just begun decorating, raiding the nearby junk shops for modern Scandinavian furniture, including one prized purchase: a life-size, antique-bronze warrior sheathing his sword. The flat is a new shared space for them. They split up as a couple in 2004 after a 10-year relationship that resulted from a coincidental meeting in a club and the discovery that they lived, at the time, in the same building.

Ingar Dragset is the bearded, smiling one of the pair, and lives in Berlin with his new partner, artist Simon Fujiwara. Michael Elmgreen is the more talkative, and usually lives in London with Three Floor



FROM TOP: *SHORT CUT* (2003), IN MILAN'S GALLERIA VITTORIO EMANUELE II, JUXTAPOSED TRADITION WITH THE ROUGHNESS OF MODERNITY; *POWERLESS STRUCTURES FIG 101*, WHICH SITS ON TRAFALGAR SQUARE'S FOURTH PLINTH UNTIL APRIL 1

fashion designer Han Chong. They both love the bustle of Barcelona, where they can walk to the beach for paella, or head to the market down the street to stock up on mini salamis and dark green olives. It's a gentle step outside their hectic lives.

The luxury world, always attuned to the art world, has adored them ever since their Prada store appeared like magic in the Texan desert in 2005. (Louis Vuitton was one of the sponsors of the Fourth Plinth.) The store promised retail therapy in the most obscure of locations, but you couldn't buy a thing. Its door does not open, it is simply a permanent sculpture.

The project came about thanks to Yvonne Force Villareal, an art-world fixer in New York. "Never have I seen such a stunningly worked out and pivotal proposal," she says of her original meeting with the couple. They unfolded an image of a pristine Prada boutique in the middle of the desert, the

working title of which was *Prada Nevada*. "Since Marfa is a great art destination, thanks to Donald Judd [his sculptures are also in the desert], we said to the guys: 'What about *Prada Marfa*?' The four of us shook hands."

Playing with conventions, their Prada store certainly puts a new spin on window-

shopping, hinting at the boom in the luxury market, making it a different kind of mecca for fashion- and art-lovers alike. Someone regularly takes pot shots at the building, >

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others spray graffiti, and once a hit-and-run made off with all the shoes (all left-foot only) and six handbags. Miuccia Prada replaced everything, and it's still standing.

The duo also worked with Villareal on another project called *WoW* ("works on whatever"), a limited-edition road sign personalised with the distance from the buyer's home to Marfa in kilometres. In every episode of *Gossip Girl*, one of these signs appears in the mother's apartment. They get called "the artists from *Gossip Girl*". As Villareal says, "A show like that brings in the broadest possible audience, it is the most visible public-art project ever created. In addition, the canvas edition sales go right to keeping *Prada Marfa* in good condition, which is challenging in the middle of the desert."

Elmgreen and Dragset challenge our emotions, the way we relate to artwork, and never intentionally offer any neat conclusions. A diving board protrudes through a glass window; an art collector floats face-down in the pool of his designer home. When they were given neighbouring Norwegian and Danish pavilions at the Venice Biennale – a first – they invited other artists to exhibit and put a "for sale" sign outside. Everything has an intentionally larger resonance, and often a political aspect.

You'd expect this certain liberal tone, thanks to their Scandinavian roots, except that, in their unpredictable way, they both loathe the monoculture of where they grew up. In their homelands, they feel people are suspicious of them. As Dragset puts it: "The Nordic mentality is that art has to be for everyone and to have reasonable value – whereas conceptual art is hard to quantify." But they both love the moral searching of Ingmar Bergman's films – "a world that's not black and white, where the people who seem to have the very good will are often the worst". It follows that their humour is dark with "a serious undertone that is absurd and deliberately melancholic".

They often draw attention to marginalised figures. In *The Welfare Show* at the Serpentine in 2006, they left a mop and bucket scattered on a poledancer's podium to reference the cleaners and sex workers whom society finds so easy to ignore.

Don't they ever wonder how they arrived at this point of popularity? "We are not used to the art world, we have not

grown up in the art world, we have no art education," says Dragset, by way of explanation. Their working process involves collaborating with teams – "You can't be an expert at all these things," says Elmgreen. They have the idea and a clear view of "how we want things to be", and the end result dazzles. "We are exacting and precise about what we want but we can't make everything ourselves." As their work includes everything from bronze statues to giant concrete buildings to metal fairground rides, you can see what they mean.

Success keeps on coming: they've been appointed creative directors of the city of Munich for 2013, masterminding numerous public spaces. Needless to say, they are working on detailed plans.

How they operate as a duo is intriguing. While Dragset realised he was gay by reading *Romeo and Juliet* as a confused seven-year-old, Elmgreen discovered his sexuality through a quiet Norwegian childhood that found him, aged 10, bored, reading Seventies feminist literature. Dragset's was a complex childhood that saw him leave home at 16 and now have no contact with his family. Elmgreen had a

more conventional background. Then they met in that Copenhagen nightclub and now they're an impressive double act, the left hand shaking the right, each "half an artist" and completing the other, no clear distinction between who does what.

The Victoria Miro gallery will display *Harvest*, a solo show in which the upstairs of the space will host a recreated barn



"WE ARE NOT USED TO THE ART WORLD, WE HAVE NOT GROWN UP IN THE ART WORLD, WE HAVE NO ART EDUCATION," SAYS DRAGSET. FROM TOP: LAND-ART PROJECT PRADA MARFA (2005); PART OF A SCULPTURE CURRENTLY IN PROGRESS, DEATH OF A COLLECTOR (2009), AT THE VENICE BIENNALE

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with a bronze scarecrow and bales of hay. As Elmgreen comments: "It's crazy in New York and London these days – everything is rustic, linen shirts and cupcakes everywhere." Downstairs will be nine framed works. In the frames are fragments of paint that have been painstakingly removed by art conservators from the walls of art museums like Moma, the New Museum and the Guggenheim. The museum walls have been restored, leaving no trace of the process. The minimalism of modern art galleries coupled with the current appetite for high-octane architecture is under scrutiny here. A question is posed: can the gallery become the artwork?

As if to keep us on our toes, Elmgreen and Dragset are also planning to change the face of cooking with "a nice-looking rice cooker". Yes, really. "There are two billion rice eaters in the world and they all have these hideous round rice cookers in their kitchens," laughs Elmgreen, truly keen to sell millions. Their own design resembles a pretty good-looking white cube.

"Harvest" is at the Victoria Miro Gallery, N1, until November 2013 (Victoria-miro.com)