

# Forbes

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## Elmgreen And Dragset Give New Meaning To Everyday Objects Through Their Powerful And Provocative Art



Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle - Contributor  
Watches & Jewelry

We sit down with Berlin-based artist duo, Michael Elmgreen from Denmark and Ingar Dragset from Norway, who say that art is important to remind people that they can break their routine and do things in a different way.

**Tell me about your upbringing, and how you went from poetry and theater to making art.**

**Michael Elmgreen:** I didn't come from a family that would ever go to a museum. The first time I visited a museum was when I was invited to show in one. But Ingar and I, we met in a nightclub in Copenhagen and decided to start to work together. Ingar came from performance; I came from writing. We did performance pieces first and then we thought why not also try to do sculptures? The first piece we did was a diving board penetrating the window of the Louisiana Museum outside Copenhagen, so it was partly inside the museum and partly sticking outside. Then we started combining performance art, our sculpture practice and our installations.



Elmgreen & Dragset's solo exhibition *Overheated* transformed Massimo de Carlo's gallery in Hong Kong into an abandoned, underground boiler room that redirected visitors' movements into new patterns as they had to step over, bend under or walk around industrial tubes of various sizes and colors, continuing the artist duo's practice of altering white cube art spaces into other kinds of environments. Photo courtesy of Massimo De Carlo

**What made you decide to work together in 1995 and how did you develop your unique artistic language?**

**Ingar Dragset:** At the beginning, it's kind of strange that we met in a club. It was the most unartistic place to meet, but we realized that we lived in the same building in the same area of Copenhagen and, funnily enough, after having been together for years as a couple, we realized that we had so much in common, so many similar interests, political views, shared ideals and dreams, so we thought we need to do something about this. And then performance art was sort of a meeting point between a poetic language, theater and visual art, so it was a way of expressing a new masculinity and new behavioral patterns like we had done at the beginning – we did very ritualistic performances, for instance, where I was knitting at one end of a long cloth, and Michael, who is the more destructive type, was unraveling from the other side.



Van Gogh's Ear, 2016, steel, fiberglass, stainless steel, lights, 951 x 496 x 210 cm

Photo Jason Wyche. Courtesy of Public Art Fund, NY

## How do you balance your roles – who does what?

**ME:** We're kind of equally bad at anything, so we help each other. We both come up with ideas. We both take care of practical matters. Fortunately, today, we have a big studio where we have very good people to help us with some of the logistics, technical issues and so on. That makes our lives a bit easier, but our work process is based on dialog. The pieces come from us speaking together about ideas – an idea comes up and then the other one says why don't we do it a little bit more from a different angle, why don't we do it in a different material or we can add this, so it grows through the conversations we have. It's not so different from artists who work on their own because they maybe use friends, lovers or studio staff to have these conversations. All artists speak about their work during the process, or most artists do. That's simply how we create and after 24 years, we're almost one brain.



Tomorrow, 2013, exhibited at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London Photo Anders Sune Berg

## Are there many disagreements?

**ID:** Less today than before because at the beginning, you're much more busy. It's a lot of pressure and you do everything yourself, so fights about how everything is done. But I think today, we have more help, more support, very good galleries, we work with very good institutions, so in a way, it's easier today.

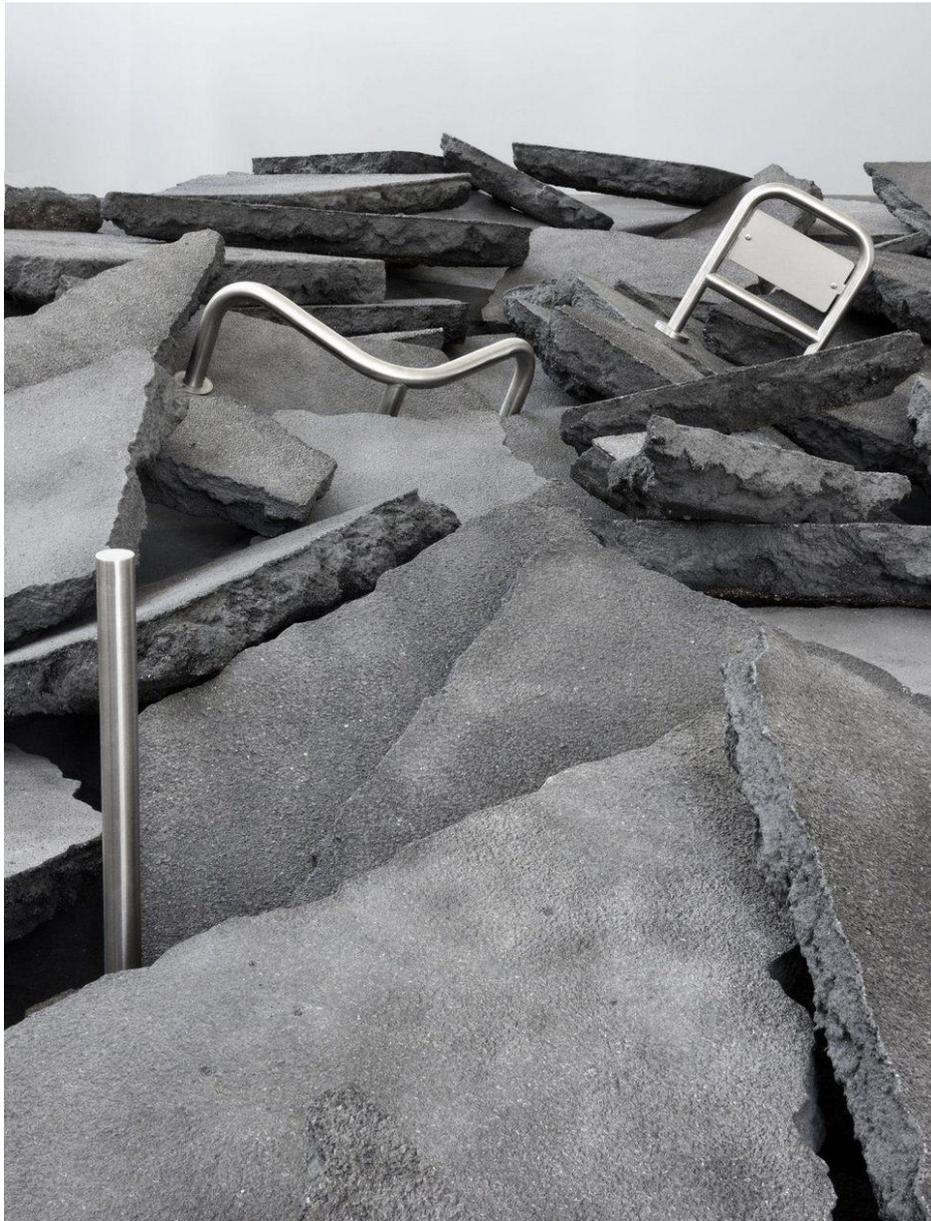
**ME:** Less fighting, less temper. We're also becoming a bit older.

**ID:** Maybe we're exhausted. But sometimes they say when you get really old, you get grumpier, so who knows? Wait and see. If you interview us again in 10 or 15 years, it might be a different story. We might be back to fighting.

**After a decade as a couple, you split up, but how did you manage to continue working together?**

**ME:** We dared to split up because we knew that we wouldn't lose each other. Sometimes when people who have been married or who have been together for many years split up, they never see each other again. It's so tragic because you erase a whole part of your history and identity. We knew that we would have each other around. We just wouldn't share socks, pocket money or the bedroom anymore.

**ID:** Our artworks are our children. We need to take care of them constantly.



Asphalt piece, 2018, exhibited at Galerie Perrotin, Paris Photo Elmar Vestner. Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin

**Although you are from chilly Scandinavia where nobody had outdoor pools, why the obsession with swimming pool sculptures, where you give new context to everybody objects (*Van Gogh's Ear, Death of a Collector, Catch Me Should I Fall*)?**

**ID:** There are definitely not many domestic pools in Scandinavia. The first work that dealt in a way with the pool was our work at Louisiana Museum: the diving board. That was partly inspired by a show by David Hockney that had been on just before our exhibition. He of course made the famous paintings from his California home or other places in California, kind of like a happy, middle-class life, good vibrations, which was very interesting and important in its own right, but also we felt that within the institutional setting, there's a big divide between individuality and desire and the rules and regulations that are put upon us when we enter these institutions. So we wanted with our diving board to break that membrane of the museum in a way, to point out that there's life outside that's important to the life inside, and there needs to be a dialogue.

**ME:** And the art world is one place where people meet in a bodily way because in our Internet-fixated reality today, we spend a lot of time in environments where our bodies cannot follow. We can't carry them into virtual reality, so the art world is one place where we can meet with our bodies and go to exhibitions, look at objects and drink champagne, but there are other options for meeting in a bodily way like around a public pool, for instance, where people see each other less stressed than normal. And in societies that are a little bit shy, like British society, where you don't dress down so much, actually the encounters around the swimming pool where you're allowed to be in your bikini or your bathing trunks are quite important that we actually meet and see each other's bodies, so we don't get so scared when we meet them in a different way.



Untitled (Prada Marfa), 2007, photographic print, dibond, Plexiglas, frame, h. 63 in × l. 6.8 ft

Photo James Evans

## **What is the role of humor in your work?**

**ID:** Humor is a good way of starting a conversation with the audience because it makes people more open. We also like absurdist theater or surreal art that have taught us that there's a different story under the laughter sometimes. Often in our work, it's not so funny when you look deeper into it, but then you're already in and part of the story. That's life: there's a darker side, there's a brighter side, and we have to find a compromise. If you don't find that balance, it can be hard to function somehow. So maybe it's a sort of therapy for us also.

**ME:** We call our use of humor our anger management. It's a way to speak about serious matters in a way that's bearable.

**ID:** We also use sleek surfaces as a way for people to appreciate the object and then they get to the content, or we let the surface clash with the content.

**ME:** You can trace in many of our sculptures our Scandinavian heritage, the Scandinavian design approach, very clean, minimal lines, but then we fill it with different content than normal.



Zero, 2018, exhibited at the East Asiatic Building during the Bangkok Art Biennale

Photo courtesy of Bangkok Art Biennale

**You've created several site-specific works, often on an architectural scale: apartment interiors, hospital rooms, prison cells, taking over the Grand Palais with the Perrotin booth, etc. Why do you build huge environments that are costly, can't be sold and have to be dismantled afterwards, and what is your relationship with space?**

**ME:** When we did the collectors' homes for the Danish and Nordic Pavilions at the Venice Biennale, it was because the pavilions looked like villas, so we were like why don't we just turn them into that? When we created an art fair at the UCCA in Beijing, it was because when we entered, we said this is so big it could host an art fair, so why don't we do it? But a fictional one. At the Whitechapel Gallery in London, we made an abandoned swimming pool. It was wonderful to hear people coming in and being completely disoriented, saying was this pool already here or was there a pool before it became a gallery, asking a lot of questions. So we can make people look at art in a different way.

**ID:** The sale should never be the main goal of making an artwork. With many of these projects, the architecture itself and the environment around it inspired us. The foundation we exhibited in had similar columns and gratings to a New York subway station, so it didn't take much to transform the gallery space into one. It makes people much more aware of their expectations of going into a place. All these conventions make people lazy and we find if we give people a surprise, it sharpens their brains.



Artists Ingar Dragset and Michael Elmgreen in front of their installation at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2016 that consisted of placing an exact replica of the Galerie Perrotin booth that would be displayed at the FIAC art fair a month before the event actually started, having it stand alone, isolated, inside the vast empty nave as a takedown of the international art fair model Photo Claire Dorn

**Describe your installation *To Whom It May Concern*, where you exhibited 100 red starfish on Place Vendome in Paris in a type of horizontal, minimal land art, which represents the hope for regrowth and new ways of living.**

**ME:** We wanted to do a work that would be non-monumental because everything is so grand at Place Vendome. Some sculptures we have seen that are quite big look so small, so we

thought why don't we do it very small and intimate, and then the little starfish creature came up. There are many different species of starfish, so we could make variations of the starfish. They're red, which was a very nice contrast to the Vendome column. They don't have any brain, but they're really good at surviving. If one arm gets cut off, they regrow easily. So they are probably one of the last creatures to survive our climate change in the world.

**ID:** Humans are the most intelligent mammals on the planet and we're ruining it. And they are maybe the least intelligent in terms of brain capacity because they have no brain, but they have an incredible survival instinct.

**ME:** The environment is a major concern for everyone in the world. Maybe they know it, maybe they don't, but it will concern them. Being aware of the climate is not about doing good. It's not a question of ethics – it's a question of survival.

### **Where do you make your works?**

**ME:** In our studio in Berlin. We were very lucky. We got a very big studio when it was still affordable in Berlin, so we have a studio in a former water plant.

**ID:** We now have 10 people working for us, so it's not so big, but we work very closely with different workshops in Berlin and also other places because of course when you work in bronze, you have specialists and special foundries. You cannot have a studio that does that.

**ME:** Our swimming pool sculptures are made by different people for the different components. The small things, the diving board and the ladder are made in the studio. The pool itself is made by a guy who works in that material. The base is made in a different metal workshop that we always work with. Then we put everything together in the studio, and send it to a special paint shop that can do our color code because we have a special color code for all our pools we always use.



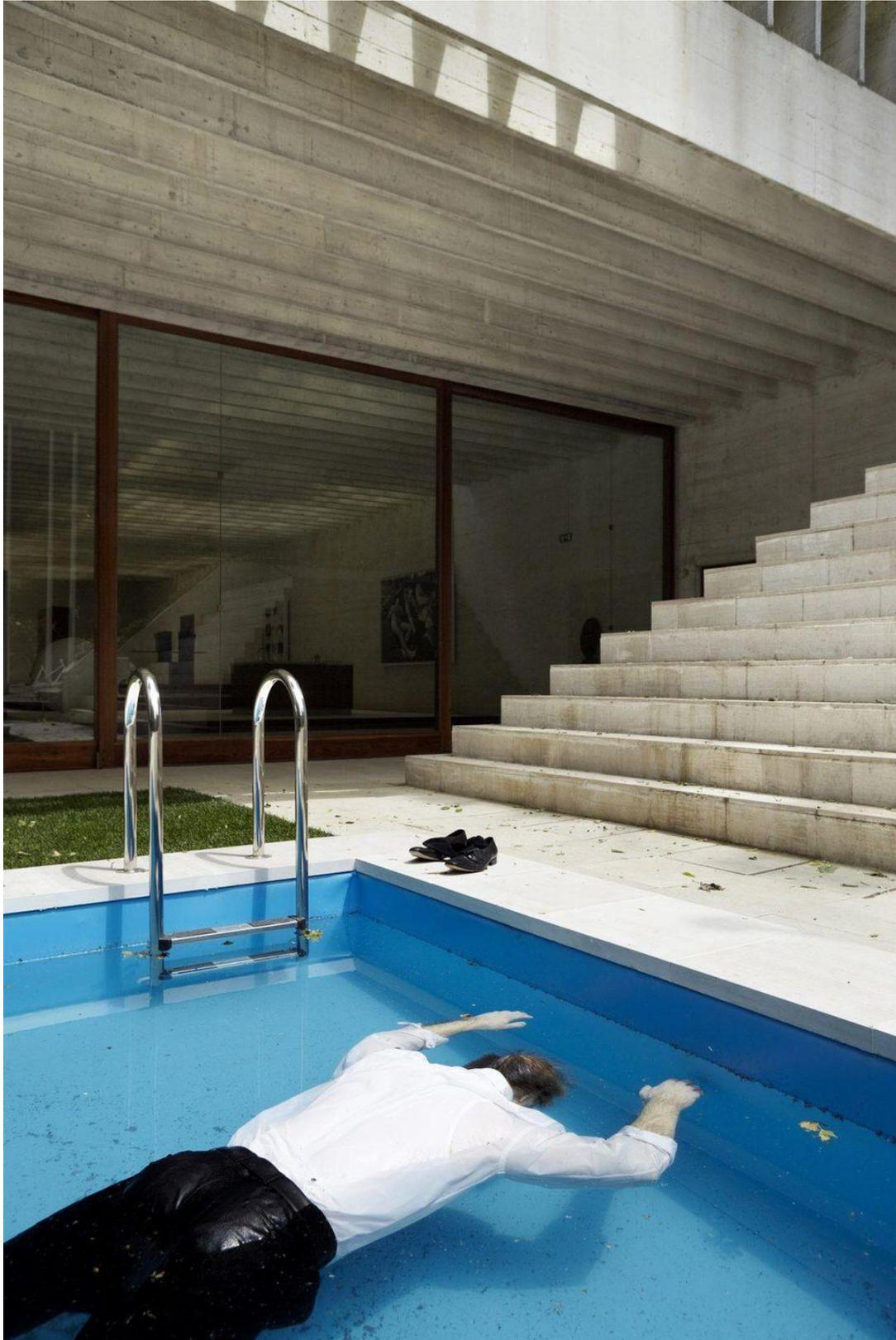
Triple Diving Board, 2018, MDF, PVC, aluminum, stainless steel, 220 x 48 x 32 cm, exhibited at Galerie Perrotin, Paris

Photo Claire Dorn. Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin

### **How has your art evolved over the past 24 years?**

**ME:** We got more help and we have more money. That makes life a little bit easier, and we have more possibilities because of that.

**ID:** It started with performance, then we went through a series of works that we called *Powerless Structures*, where we worked with the structures of the white cube of institutions, so recognizable architectural features such as doors, door handles, benches and so on. Then it got more narrative when we started making these complete environments like the subway of Venice projects, with many different layers. We got more into a sort of storytelling, but we don't complete any stories. We give hints by selecting certain design objects, artworks by other artists combined with our own art and changing the architecture, so it becomes a multi-layered story. At the Victoria and Albert Museum, we made fictional letters, a passport, a family album, family pictures on the wall and a whole bookshelf of books from the V&A collection and other historical books, so you could get a clear picture of who the man living there was. Then as you get older, you start also to pick up on what you had done earlier, so our Perrotin Paris exhibition, for instance, sort of points back to the first diving board at the Louisiana Museum. And the bar that was shown at the National Gallery Singapore marks, in a way, the 20th anniversary of our bar.



Death of a Collector, 2009, swimming pool, silicone figure, Rolex watch, pack of Marlboro cigarettes, clothing, shoes, 100 x 600 x 200 cm, exhibited at "The Collectors", Nordic Pavilion, 53rd Venice Biennale

Photo Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy of Colección Helga de Alvear, Madrid/Cáceres

**What do you feel is the role of the artist in society? What do you hope to achieve or what message do you hope to convey through your art at the end of the day?**

**ME:** To make people less fearful. Only fearful people can be manipulated, and art can make people dare to look at things in a different way, maybe even go home and do something themselves. If two guys like us can do this, they can do that, maybe they can think like that.

**ID:** Also to keep certain ideas alive that have no other way of surviving in a society where people have so much pressure because art is not logical. It can speak to your brain and your heart at the same time.