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The Fourth Plinth: ‘The Horse and His Boy’ unveiled



By Peter Aspden

Trafalgar Square’s next incumbent is a quietly subversive work by Scandinavian artists Elmgreen & Dragset.



‘Powerless Structures, Fig. 101’ by Elmgreen & Dragset

Another year, another controversy. For one more time, those stately heroes keeping a zealous guard over three corners of Trafalgar Square have to welcome a colourful interloper who is about to hold court in the fourth. This Thursday sees the unveiling of the latest contemporary art work to be commissioned for the square’s now-famously vacant fourth plinth. Once more, the solemn grey statues of King George IV and Generals Napier and Havelock, stoic observers in one of central London’s liveliest public spaces, will watch as a sprightly newcomer attracts all the headlines.

Since the beginning of the Fourth Plinth art project in 2005, the works commissioned for the space have been wilful provocations, designed to upset the square’s militaristic air.

There was Marc Quinn’s “Alison Lapper Pregnant”, a depiction of a disabled woman carrying a child, and the cheerful demotic buzz of Antony Gormley’s “One and Other”, which allowed members of the public to mount the plinth and air their various concerns to the watching population.

Now comes an image more innocent, and more subversive still: a young boy on a rocking horse. The plinth was originally intended to support an equestrian statue of William IV, which was never installed. The equestrian theme survives but the jokey treatment is bound to offend conservative tastes. The artists, the Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset, are relishing the confrontation. “Being non-British, it is astonishing to us to see how many monuments here celebrate battle victories,” says Michael Elmgreen. “We wanted to comment on that, and how politicians here still speak in terms of victory and defeat, in very classic terms. We wanted to highlight ordinary, everyday life. To say that there is more to life than being a winner or a loser.”



Ingar Dragset (left) and Michael Elmgreen in the foundry they have been using in east London

We are speaking in a foundry in London’s East End, where the two artists are putting finishing touches to – or rather giving final instructions on – the new work, titled “Powerless Structures, Fig. 101”. The boy on the rocking horse is part of a series of works celebrating absence of power, in gleeful antithesis of one of sculpture’s most resonant themes. The work has been cast in bright bronze, stands 4m high and, even viewed at ground level, has a joyous power.

“It is a risk,” says Elmgreen as we circle the work. “It is on the borderline of being embarrassing. But we like a challenge. We wanted to make an image that was a different depiction of masculinity from what you find in most public monuments. Men don’t have to be conquerors. Maybe you can be a hero in a different way, a more fragile way.”

The deconstruction of public spaces is one of the abiding themes in Elmgreen & Dragset’s work. They have placed the storefront of a Prada boutique in the Texas desert, and turned the national pavilions of the Venice Biennale into facsimiles of private villas. Trafalgar Square fitted their bill perfectly: “It is a space that is used for so many different things, you have schoolgirls in pink leggings doing aerobics, parties for Chinese New Year, and it is also a battlefield for political struggles. It is a place of change,” says the Danish Elmgreen.



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I ask if they have any sympathy with traditional movements such as the campaign to place Sir Keith Park, a distinguished second world war pilot, on the fourth plinth. Is it wrong to

think of the square as a place for military heroes?

“I think it is wrong, yes,” says Elmgreen. “To keep the works changing every year, and all the debate surrounding the choices, it is a fantastic thing. This is a symbol of London as a changing city, with a changing population. Maybe we should remember the battles of the past in different ways from endless monuments celebrating victory, or commemorating victims. Besides it doesn’t even work – not many people look at the other statues [in the square], or know who they are.”



The figure is sculpted in resin, used to make the mould

The playful nature of Elmgreen & Dragset’s work does not mean that they shirk more serious projects. In 2006 they won a competition to make a memorial in Berlin to commemorate homosexuals who were persecuted under the Nazis. The artists designed a concrete cube with a small window through which viewers can see a film of two kissing men. “It was important not just to look back at a tragic event but also to give a positive message,” says Norwegian-born Ingar Dragset.

Elmgreen emphasises the forward-looking element in the work. “When governments install memorials, it is quite often so that they can wash their hands [of the subject being commemorated]. Instead of keeping the memory alive, they become tools for forgetting.” The two men lived in Berlin after meeting in 1995; Elmgreen has also worked in London.

There was a more light-hearted spirit at play in “Prada Marfa”, the fake storefront placed on Route 90, near the Texan city of Marfa, in 2005. I ask the artists if the early vandalism had subsided. “Now they just shoot at it,” says Dragset drily. “You always have to deal with the public’s reaction,” adds Elmgreen. “In Texas you get bullet holes, in Trafalgar Square it is bird shit. You always have these obstacles, which is the beauty of work being out in public – you can’t control it.”

“We worked hard in advance [in Texas], we spoke to the important people, because if they didn’t like you

out there, it would have been impossible,” says Dragset. “Nobody knows who the vandals are, probably bored kids. But there is even a movement now to keep it in good condition.”

“It certainly has very few viewers compared to what we will have in Trafalgar Square,” says Elmgreen. “But it is important when you do something that it doesn’t completely alienate the average, normal passer-by. There are truck-drivers who haven’t seen a diner for miles, who see the work, stop and scratch their heads. It doesn’t matter if they know that it is an art project. It gives them something to think about. It’s the same with Trafalgar Square – it should be possible to experience the work without thinking about all the issues we have thought about, without knowing the art historical details.”



A technician polishes the bronze on the lower leg



The statue's right arm is welded to the body

The public nature of the duo’s works puts them at odds with the individualistic nature of today’s art scene, with its emphasis on a febrile art market. Elmgreen detects a change, though: “I think there is a mood among artists not to be so egomaniacal. We base all our productions on our dialogues, and it has maybe helped us become more open-minded. And here in the foundry, we depend so much on the guys ... who execute the work.

“People talk about contemporary artists not doing all their own work, but it has always been the way, because artists couldn’t run a foundry themselves, they couldn’t pour in the bronze themselves. They have always needed their teams.”

So to Thursday. I ask them if Boris Johnson, mayor of London and a recent, if unconvincing, convert to the cause of contemporary art, will unveil the work. “No, we have Joanna Lumley,” says Elmgreen firmly. “She will be much better.”

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For a slideshow go to www.ft.com/4thplinth

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