

Off their rockers: the artists behind the latest addition to the fourth plinth

A bronze boy on a rocking horse will bound on to the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square on Thursday. Why have Elmgreen and Dragset made him so camp?



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Horses for courses ... Elmgreen, left, and Dragset, whose statue can be seen in full later this week. Photograph: David Levene for the Guardian

Glinting in the cold winter light, the boy on a rocking horse towers over everything in the bronze foundry in east London where it was cast – including [Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset](#), the Scandinavian artists who created it. The boy looms, too, over fragments of wax castings lying broken in the gloom and dust. The atmosphere, the technology and the banter around us are almost medieval. This is a place where people actually *make* things. Other works, in various states of incompleteness, stand about, including one by Marc Quinn, whose [sculpture of Alison Lapper Pregnant](#) occupied Trafalgar Square's [fourth plinth](#) from 2005 to 2007.

Elmgreen does most of the talking. "He's Danish," Dragset says. "We Norwegians are ... slower." Elmgreen steps in, explaining that many hands helped to make the boy. "We love to do these multiple collaborations," he says. "I think artists always did. It's bonkers when conservative critics blame artists for not making their own work today, because they never could. You can't run a foundry on your own. No one ever did that."



A detail of 'Powerless Structures, Fig. 101. Photograph:

David Levene for the Guardian

Powerless Structures Fig 101, as the piece by the Berlin-based artists is called, will replace [Yinka Shonibare's Nelson's Ship in a Bottle](#), which spent 18 months on the plinth. The crew at the foundry have done a great job, making the boy look almost gilded, the horse like spray-painted MDF. With his curls and wry smile, this golden boy in his little shorts and braces peers down from his bronze steed, one arm raised delicately. He looks almost classical. But look again. Those shorts could be leather. He might also be down the disco, I suggest. "He is a bit camp," says Elmgreen. "He's almost a Victorian toy, but the horse is more an Ikea version."

Elmgreen and Dragset's artistic collaboration began by chance. They met in a gay club in Copenhagen and discovered that they lived not just on the same street, but in the same building. They became lovers and, later, artistic collaborators. Their friendship has moved on, but the two have continued to make work together since 1997, the year they moved to Berlin.

When they have [transformed galleries into gay nightclubs and saunas](#), they have just wanted to show people how they live. [Celebrity: the One and the Many](#), a recent gargantuan work in Rotterdam, replicated a social housing block and a glitzy ballroom – full size. Actors played hustlers, teenage mums and sex workers, and you could peek into people's lonely apartments. In 2009, they converted the Danish and Nordic pavilions at the Venice Biennale into [a couple of art collectors' houses](#). There were lots of art jokes. A mannequin of a dead collector floated face down in a swimming pool, a sort of warning to the rich who wandered through the biennale.

What could be more conservative, and at once so unexpected, as a bronze boy on a horse? The permanent sculpture originally planned for the plinth, more than 170 years ago, was an equestrian statue of William IV, but the money ran out. "We don't sit down and think what could piss people off," says Dragset, who began his career in theatre. "We think of our work as welcoming and even poetic," adds Elmgreen, a former poet. "When people go to a gallery or a museum, they ask for trouble. Here you need to take the people passing through the square into consideration. The context is the starting point."

Trafalgar Square is all about symbols of power. The artists want the boy on the horse to be more vulnerable, while maintaining a connection with the materials and aesthetics of the permanent statues and monuments there. "It needs to be in a dialogue," says Elmgreen. "We consciously used these authoritarian tricks, like having the boy gaze down at you, to talk about something that's rather unauthoritarian." I ask if they see their work as having a social purpose. "We are Scandinavian, maybe we can't help it," Dragset replies. "Boys grow up still thinking they need to be a hero," says Elmgreen. "Trafalgar Square is a symbol of that. It is so masculine. We are talking about a different kind of masculinity."

The boy on the horse, as the artists see it, is a depiction of what we should really celebrate: banal, everyday life, the heroism of the unexceptional, the powerless. "The word hero is also a problematic term," Elmgreen says, "because it is about being outstanding. But what about being a hero because you managed to grow up at all, despite all the obstacles? It is heroic to become a relatively civilised human being, despite everything. Not everyone can be fucking brilliant, and people feel like a big failure if they're not going to become a successful banker, have perfect tits or win The X Factor. Before, you could be proud of being the 13th generation of steel workers in the family, or keeping the wheels running in a society."

The pair see their work as an antidote to "this American Dream sickness". When their Welfare Show was at the Serpentine Gallery in 2008, they got Tony Benn to come and speak. "The best thing about the fourth plinth is that it creates such public debate," says Elmgreen. "And when it's all settled, it's time for the next show. It is actually really progressive to have a new public sculpture in the most significant square in London. It's such a positive symbol of a city in flux. Permanent public sculptures have a tendency to go out of date, because the city is changing around them. A lot of sculptures in different town squares look somehow random, even if they made sense when they were first installed. They maybe had a radical formal language, corresponding with the architecture, but then the architecture changed and the language ceased to be radical. People come to look, but they don't know why these sculptures are there. I think you should be able to move some of these permanent sculptures and make things a bit more lively."

Elmgreen and Dragset have their own solution to the problem of unwanted public sculptures. "We actually have a hospice, or a kennel, for public sculptures that are unpopular. It's in a very remote area of northern Germany. It is a plot of land with a nice white fence around it and an illuminated sign: [Park for Unwanted Sculptures](#)." They haven't got Richard Serra's [Tilted Arc](#) in there, by any chance? "No!" Dragset cries. "We should write to him!" For a minute, I think he's going to ask me for a phone number for Serra, whose magnificent sculpture in New York's Federal Plaza was removed, after years of debate, in 1989. Are Elmgreen and Dragset afraid of failure on the plinth?

"One thing that is absolutely forbidden in the public realm is to show emotions and be fragile," Elmgreen says. "That is something we wanted to touch upon in the square, where it's all about power. The sculpture is not about pop culture issues, or what is in trend at the moment. You step outside the whole thing and try to speak with another voice."

"It's beyond that," says Dragset. "It's like daring to expose sides of yourself you're not supposed to show. Like vulnerability. It is often on our minds at the moment. Dare to be uncool!"

• **The sculpture, in Trafalgar Square, London WC2, will be unveiled in a public ceremony at 9.30am on Thursday 23 February.**

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