

ELMGREEN & DRAGSET

CLICHÉD PERCEPTION



White Maid, fig. 2, 2014

“Welcome!” A maid, dressed in a representative black-and-white uniform greets the person coming toward her. Clichéd, as if awaiting your orders, the maid’s posture implies the attentiveness but inconspicuousness that typically embodies dignity and subservience. This is a narrative scenario created by the artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset.

White Maid shown here is a unique artwork, completing a series of faithful portraits, all sculptured after the cast’s original models who come from different corners of the world. Most of them have in fact been maids at some point in real life. With sculptures like *White Maid*, Elmgreen & Dragset explore the dodgy layers of our understanding, longings, and the ritually-based power structures implanted in our social roles and in the objects which surround us as a reflection of our capitalist system.

The installation *Back in Five* is another work in the same vein. It comprises a ticket office window—devoid of any context—mounted on a wall with the blind pulled down. The counter is closed or temporarily shut, to which the title of the artwork by the artist-couple alludes. This installation puzzles the viewer, since it includes real elements: glass, an aluminium frame, a paper blind, a deposited key with a humorous Pinocchio pendant and, to increase the realistic allusion, the bottom right-hand corner of the roller blind is dirty, as if from everyday use—but the ticket office window has no function.

The title *Back in Five* plays with the idea of time, waiting, and distraction. The function of the ticket window has lost its role and becomes seemingly meaningless: what may once have been an important entity to regulate admission and collect fees has been rendered useless, making the window superfluous and powerless. This installation is directly related to one of the artists’ most important series of works entitled *Powerless Structure*, in which they examine the varied possibilities and functions of meanings of public, private or institutional spaces.

With these works Elmgreen & Dragset facilitate the re-definition of well-known objects by overriding generally accepted definitions, leaving room for thought for new perceptions. As a result, all artworks by the duo are expressions of the variability of established structures.

The artwork *Lowered Goals* from 2012 similarly questions stereotypical notions. It consists of two real basketball “goals”: the first is identical to those used in professional basketball, with a white backboard, black markings, and an orange metal hoop. The second is the same except that—ineffectively—it has neither hoop nor net. They have been installed on the wall next to one another, ready for a game, but not at either end of a court as would be expected. While thought provoking it also conveys a deeper message: *Lowered Goals* in the sense of “lowered standards” might give a hint at inflated self-estimation or vice versa, fraught with complexities. Together the basketball goals form an artwork with a powerful social and cultural comment, so typical of the artists’ work, which is critical of institutions, society, and generally social values.

Visitors coming face to face with installations by Elmgreen & Dragset often have the surprising feeling that an activity has been going on prior to their arrival or that something is just about to happen. As a result they feel directly involved and may well be playing a part in some sort of narrative script, some unknown performance, in which they have to make a conscious decision about (clichéd) perception.

Florentine Rosemeyer



Lowered Goals, 2012



Back in Five, 2014