

Elmgreen & Dragset’s “Useless Bodies?”

by Cathryn Drake

March 31–August 22, 2022

Fondazione Prada, Milan

May 6, 2022



Elmgreen & Dragset, *What’s Left?*, 2021. Silicone, clothing, wire rope, balancing pole, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artists. Photo by Elmar Vestner.

The sleek, sardonic work of Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset has found a consummate context in the Fondazione Prada, a private museum founded by luxury fashion entrepreneurs. The question mark in the exhibition title—“Useless Bodies?”—signals an interrogation of the human body as a viable organ in contemporary society, played out within the context of a western-centric ideal of beauty and vitality.

The main space, called the Podium and employed in all the term’s senses of stage, soapbox, and platform, is arrayed with human figures engaged in related but disassociated activities. Classical marble nudes—tautly muscled athletes, a young shepherd with a dog, and a reclining gladiator among them—mingle with bronze sculptures of pubescent boys to suggest a diorama in an archaeological museum. The only woman represented is *Pregnant White Maid* (2017), regarding a petulant, pouting schoolboy (*Invisible*, 2017) with her eyes decidedly shut. All of the contemporary bronze figures are lacquered in opaque white or buffed to a brilliant glow, with the exception of a striking black *Runner*, from the first century BC, idealized with Caucasian features and a startlingly realistic gaze.

Like a terrarium, the main space is transparent yet hermetic, enhancing a sense of highly visible isolation, not unlike the state of existence in the digital realm. *This Is How We Play Together* (2021) depicts two teens sporting Oculus headsets, expressionless and blind to what is around them, one sitting passively and the other reaching out into emptiness. Not far away, *Flo* (2020) holds a trophy, his facial expression unexpectedly glum for a victor. A portal mounted with multiple mirrors facing in different directions, *Elevator* (2022), conveys the fleeting and fragmented construction of identity, endlessly refracted by public exposure.

“Useless Bodies?” amplifies the alienation and paranoia embodied by the physical premises of the Fondazione Prada itself. Upstairs is an open-plan office environment, *Garden of Eden* (2022), comprised of a fluorescent-lit grid of cubicles scanned by surveillance cameras, where the desks are furnished with identical black computer monitors and chairs. A cooler labeled *Flint water* (2022) evidences corporate disregard for human wellbeing, and the paltry personal effects on the desktops are unsettling: candies piled in a desk corner in a nod to Félix González-Torres; a generic bottle of pills; a Fondazione Prada staff badge; and a statuette of Karl Marx along with a necktie draped over the chair—a token of (superficial) liberation. Your presence is noted, if not respected.

Are we really canceling ourselves out, rendering our bodies obsolete in the face of automation and digital technology? Or is the primped, pampered, and pumped-up body—perpetually in search of perfection—simply outliving its expiry date? Here’s a thought: if the human body is white and male, it may well be limping toward obsolescence.

In the stark courtyard, doubled by a massive mirrored façade, are three trees pruned according to an ornamental technique used to retard maturation. They resemble the sedate subject of the photograph *Pollarded Tree* (2022) adorning a modernist bunker installed in the Nord gallery. An architectural plan for “ANOTHER MUSEUM,” based on the layout for a Victorian radial prison, bears the foundation’s address. Its all-gender bathroom is positioned identically to the one in the exhibition space—remarkably dark and disorienting, with heavy gridded metal doors that are nearly indistinguishable from the walls. The requisite pet in the futuristic living module is a robotic canine whose mechanical twitching and rotating is the only movement in the sterile room. Relief comes, strangely enough, in a morgue staged on the end wall, where a shrouded (male) corpse—*Untitled* (2011), after Andrea Mantegna’s c. 1480 self-portrait *Dead Christ*—provides the only sign of human existence.

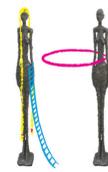
Whose body are we talking about anyway? It is always our own, naturally. The artists drew inspiration from the 2015 Fondazione Prada exhibition “Serial Classic,” which highlighted the practice of producing multiples of classical masterpieces, copying the copies until the original was lost in translation. In a statement characterized by Elmgreen & Dragset’s hallmark acerbic humor, the artists explain the tongue-in-cheek nature of the exhibition: “One could claim our physical selves have even become more of an obstacle than an advantage.” Irony is perhaps an Achilles heel, employed as a coping mechanism in a world spiraling out of our control. The artists’ own bodies underscore the point: an effigy of Michael Elmgreen dangles precariously from a tightrope, wearing a T-shirt inscribed with the titular words *What’s Left?* (2021). The answer, for some, may be nowhere but down.

On the other side of Milan, at the postindustrial premises of Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Anicka Yi’s show “Metaspore” presents an alluring alternative. The glowing installations in the dark, vast belly of the space conjure a sense of immersion in the festering choreography of the—normally imperceptible—life that surrounds us. Collaborating with biological organisms to produce visual and olfactory compositions that unfold over time, Yi calls on the unpredictability of natural processes, favoring mutability over stability, as an artistic mechanism. Just inside, *Biologizing the Machine (spillover zoonotica)* (2022)—seven glass cases containing ecosystems of soil bacteria, cyanobacteria, and algae extracted from around Milan—hosts colorful compositions that continually transform as the compound grows, interacts, and decays. In contrast to the self-reflexive, dead-end approach to survival showcased at the Fondazione Prada, Yi presents the world as a constantly evolving symbiotic whole in which the environment is an extension of our bodies.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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