

BOOKLET TEXTS

# ELMGREEN & DRAGSET STILLEBEN MIT GEMÜSE

20 MAY 2026 TO 27 FEBRUARY 2027

For their exhibition “Stilleben mit Gemüse” (Still Live with Vegetables), Elmgreen & Dragset use the Städel Museum as their canvas. The exhibition engages in a close dialogue with both the permanent collection and the architecture of the building: the artists’ sculptural works and installations are not presented as isolated objects but respond directly to specific locations within the museum.

At the centre of the exhibition, visitors encounter two large-scale installations: *The Cloud*—a high-end restaurant—and *Garden of Eden*—an office landscape. Positioned directly above one another on two separate floors, these works articulate tensions between labour and luxury, aspiration and illusion. Together, they map out familiar yet contrasting environments from our everyday lives. Further works interact with the museum’s collection, which spans around 700 years, and appear throughout the various exhibition spaces as subtle interventions, unexpectedly emerging within the existing displays.

“Stilleben mit Gemüse” is a tongue-in-cheek title that refers to a painting from the Städel collection. Neither still lives nor vegetables are typically associated with contemporary art and audience engagement, yet Elmgreen & Dragset propose that this might only be a matter of perspective. Across the museum, the works reflect on the role of the audience and the many dimensions of perception.

The Berlin-based Danish-Norwegian duo Elmgreen & Dragset have collaborated since the mid-1990s and are among the most influential contemporary artists working today. Their practice combines sculpture and installation, often in relation to architecture, to create charged environments that expose social power structures, institutional conventions, and everyday behavioural patterns. Their figurative sculptures are typically positioned to introduce narrative cues to the spaces they inhabit, inviting the audience to participate in an active game of storytelling.

*The Cloud*, 2026

*The Conversation*, 2024

Silicone figure, clothing, iPhone, Tables, chairs and lamps

*Berlin – New York*, 2025

*Toronto – Los Angeles*, 2025

*Frankfurt – Shanghai*, 2026

*Himmel über Frankfurt*, 2026

*The Sky Over Vancouver*, 2025

*Il Cielo Sopra Venezia*, 2025

Stainless steel, oil paint

The installation *The Cloud* marks a change of scene: instead of the familiar museum space, the audience finds itself in an elegant restaurant. The restaurant is empty of guests except for a realistic figure of a woman seated alone at a table, her gaze fixed on her smartphone. With a slightly absent, almost bored expression, she appears absorbed in a FaceTime conversation while her virtual companion on the screen animatedly recounts his work as an artist and a failed romantic relationship. Although the woman is sitting alone, the digital interaction generates a second layer beyond the spatial boundaries of the restaurant and the museum itself.

At the same time, the restaurant emerges as a contemporary social site. In uncertain times, it functions as a space of private luxury and, in the age of social media, of individual self-affirmation. Posts featuring meals in fashionable hotspots project the self-image one wishes to present publicly. Yet these places increasingly seem interchangeable: meticulously designed, globalised, and largely devoid of distinctive character. The *Sky Targets* on the walls, which use the imagery of air travel, reinforce the sense of being in a so-called nonplace. The restaurant could also resemble an airport lounge, a transient environment that could exist anywhere and nowhere. Personal identity and attachment to the site dissolve, leaving a smooth, uniform stage for consumption and digital presence.

*Garden of Eden*, 2022

Wood, aluminium, fabric, monitors, keyboards, computer mice, office chairs and miscellaneous

Private Collection

The installation *Garden of Eden* stands in striking contrast to *The Cloud* and is located directly beneath it in the entrance to the Contemporary Art Collection. While

the posh restaurant above represents a site of attained luxury, here the foundation upon which this promise rests is revealed. Elmgreen & Dragset transform the space into an expansive yet empty office landscape—a site for the “storage” of human labour. Endless rows of identical cubicles divide the space into a strict, symmetric grid.

It is in environments like these that much of society works, maybe with the hope of eventually moving upwards—symbolically into the restaurant, into a life of more comfort, leisure and visibility. Yet this ascent often proves illusory: instead of liberation, a treadmill of repetition and anonymity awaits. Occasional personal objects in the workstations point to individual lives that exist within this system but leave scarcely a trace. With its cramped, deserted workstations, *Garden of Eden* exposes the narratives of social progress and upward mobility as a false promise.

*Uncollected*, 2005

Aluminum, wood, rubber, travel bag and flight tag

Beneath the staircase that connects the two large-scale installations *The Cloud* and *Garden of Eden*, a single piece of luggage circles endlessly on a conveyor belt. The work animates the hidden in-between space while also drawing attention to the airport as a site of waiting and transition with no specific cultural signifiers. It could be anywhere in the world.

Positioned between the restaurant installation hinting to an exclusive airport lounge and the plain office landscape, the work unfolds within a field of tension. The abandoned travel bag becomes a symbol of suspended time: an object caught in an endless cycle, reminding us that vacation is often the goal of our labor—and that we ourselves frequently exist in a state of inbetweenness. Still, we might wonder what the personal story behind the uncollected piece of luggage might be.

*Social Media (Terrier)*, 2022

Brushed stainless steel, lacquer, motor, resin and faux fur

Elmgreen & Dragset often incorporate elements of everyday life into their art, here in the form of a playground carousel. Perched at the edge of its platform, a terrier perpetually rotates, gazing into the Garden Halls of the Städel Museum as if taking in the surrounding artworks while endlessly spinning. The carousel's spiral black-and-white pattern evokes Marcel Duchamp's Rotoreliefs, whose rotating discs produced optical illusions, as well as the illusionistic Op Art of the 1960s and movements such

as ZERO with their kinetic sculptures. These historical references also resonate within the Contemporary Art Collection, for example in a large *sand mill* by Günther Uecker from 1970 on display nearby. At the same time, as suggested by its title, the work reflects the mechanisms of social media: the everlasting cycles of both longing and despair, and our incessant search for affirmation and orientation, often culminating in an exhausting, seemingly never-ending algorithmic repetition. In this sense, the constantly rotating terrier becomes an emblem of the viral pet videos that populate our timelines.

*The Drawing, Fig. 2, 2022*

Silicone figure, clothing, paper and pencil

Courtesy of Massimodecarlo

A lifelike figure of a small boy kneels on the floor absorbed in drawing the artwork displayed above him: Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein's iconic painting *Goethe in the Roman Campagna* of 1787. With this arrangement, Elmgreen & Dragset play with our perception, so that only on closer inspection does the illusion reveal itself. They cite a familiar scene from everyday museum life and its educational program: a child drawing. In doing so, they address the theme of eye-deceiving imitation, a fundamental principle in the history of art. At the same time, the scene conveys a disarmingly direct and unprejudiced engagement with art and the museum as an institution.

*60 Minutes, 2025*

Bronze and Patina

Courtesy of Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin / Paris / London / Marfa

Like the surrounding sculptures, *60 Minutes* is a black-patinated bronze sculpture. In its immediate vicinity stands Auguste Rodin's sculpture *Eve* from 1881. Overcome with shame, she hides her body. The inward-looking aura of each sculpture intensifies that of the other. Beyond addressing discomfort and introspection, Elmgreen & Dragset also undermine the traditional mode of sculptural display: instead of a plinth, the figure is placed on a mundane washing machine. The work questions the usually unnoticed function of the pedestal as well as our habitual ways of seeing human sculpture, which throughout art history has often been presented with idealised naked bodies. This prompts the tongue-in-cheek thought that their missing clothes might be whirring away inside the machine.

*Forgotten Baby*, 2025

Carrycot, bedding, wax figure and baby clothes

A baby lies abandoned in a carrycot on the floor of the exhibition space. For many viewers, this scene might be challenging: a defenceless child—even if it is a work of art—might trigger a moment of emotional unease. The work is placed underneath Franz von Stuck's painting *Pietà* from 1891, depicting the body of Jesus mourned in deep sorrow by his mother Mary. In this context, the Christian iconographic dimension of the child in the basket becomes apparent, recalling the story of Baby Jesus or Moses, who was saved as a foundling drifting on the River Nile. This context reveals a profoundly human dimension of care and protection, life and loss—whether in a religious or a secular setting.

*Portrait of the Artists*, 1996/2026

White acrylic, charcoal and nail hole

Faded contours on the wall hint at the former presence of two paintings—portraits of the artists, as the work's title reveals. In these absent portraits, Elmgreen & Dragset, who have collaborated since 1995, playfully question their own roles and individual artistic identities. Who should be portrayed, and how, within a collaboration? By effectively erasing themselves from the image, they also deconstruct the genre of the self-portrait. In contemporary art, the self-portrait has increasingly become a conceptual enquiry, negotiating not identity itself but its construction, absence, or dissolution. Omission, substitution, or withdrawal of an image replace outward likeness, reflecting upon conditions of authorship and self-representation. In contrast to the current age of self-staging on social media, Elmgreen & Dragset present absence. Which image—and thus which reality—of the individual should be represented?

*The Examiner, Fig. 2*, 2023

Bronze, lacquer, stainless steel and aluminium

Courtesy of Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin / Paris / London / Marfa

At the balustrade in the stairwell leading to the Old Masters Collection stands a man with a camera. He thus occupies an in-between space within the museum and its epochs. Leaning his arms on the railing, he fixes his gaze on Marc Chagall's *Commedia dell'arte* from 1959. Yet his bare torso and casual shorts evoke a

sightseeing tour on vacation rather than a museum visit. Elmgreen & Dragset play with the central questions of art: What is original and what is reproduction? Who is the viewer and who is being viewed? By inserting a seemingly incidental, voyeuristic figure into the museum context, they shift the conventional roles. The man with the camera documents the painting—yet at the same time he is himself a work of art and part of a staging. The boundaries between artwork and reality, between staging and everyday life, begins to blur.

*Still Life (Bullfinch)*, 2024

Bronze, lacquer and animatronic bird

In *Still Life (Bullfinch)*, Elmgreen & Dragset juxtapose the greatest existing contrasts: life and death. Beside Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's still life depicting a dead partridge, two hands emerge from the wall, gently cupping a bird. On closer inspection, the creature seems to breathe, its heart faintly yet visibly pulsing. A still life—*nature morte* (dead nature)—is thus rendered unsettlingly animate. The white-lacquered bronze hands recall a child's first encounter with death: the moment of discovering a fallen bird and lifting it with care in the hope that it might be saved. The bird seems to address the viewer directly. Yet any intervention remains impossible. It is precisely in this helplessness that the work unfolds its power, making the fragility of life tangible while sharpening the eye for what is often overlooked.

*The Artist*, 2026

Silicone figure, clothing, wire rope and balancing pole

This hyperrealistic sculpture depicts a man in a moment of heightened instability—hanging mid-air from a trapeze and on the verge of losing his grip. Elmgreen & Dragset present action in an in-between state, where narrative conclusions remain open. Against the backdrop of Frankfurt's skyline, the fragile body contrasts with the monumental, economically defined urban landscape. The work addresses the tension between human vulnerability and the expectation to perform in contemporary society.

*The Visitor*, 2025

Bronze, lacquer

In *The Visitor*, Elmgreen & Dragset invert the familiar relationship between artwork and viewer. A life-sized bronze figure stands before a painting from the Städel Museum collection, occupying precisely the position normally reserved for museum visitors. The act of viewing itself thus becomes central: not the painting on the wall, but the audience and its behaviour become the actual subject. The figure's concentrated, contemplative posture points to an internalised ideal of viewing behaviour in museums and galleries—an attitude many visitors adopt almost unconsciously. At the same time, the work disrupts this order. By blocking the optimal vantage point, the sculpture forces actual visitors to reposition themselves. In this brief moment of friction, visitors might become aware of their own role as active observers with a physical presence in the space.

*Si par une nuit d'hiver un voyageur*, 2017

Bronze, stainless steel, black patina and wax

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main

A life-size vulture cast in black-patinated bronze perches on a bare tree. It peers downward, alert and ready to act. Tree and bird form a closed, organic whole, referencing the tradition of outdoor sculpture in public space. Since 2012, Elmgreen & Dragset have used the vulture as a recurring motif in their work, referring to it as “The Critic”. Positioned in front of the museum, the sculpture assumes an ambivalent role: the vulture appears to scrutinise visitors, while itself becoming an object of observation. As a scavenger, it opens up metaphorical perspectives on the art market and art world, on acts of looking, judgment, and power—raising the question of who is feeding off of whom.

*This Is How We Play Together, Fig. 3*, 2023

Bronze and lacquer

Courtesy of Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin / Paris / London / Marfa

In *This Is How We Play Together, Fig. 3* a boy wears a large VR headset that conceals the upper half of his face. He engages in a solitary experience, with his attention directed towards a virtual simulation invisible to outsiders. By combining traditional sculptural form with the depiction of cutting-edge technology, the work reflects on the consequences of our increasingly digitalised everyday lives and poses the question of what we understand as reality, interaction, and togetherness today.