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Waiting for Good Art in Elmgreen & Dragset's Star-Studded Performa Kickoff



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Last night, New York's lively Performa biennial kicked off with "Happy Days in the Art World" at NYU's Skirball Center, a theatrical mash-up of Samuel Beckett's "Happy Days" and Sarah Thornton's fluffy art-world primer "Seven Days in the Art World," conceived by Scandinavian art duo Elmgreen & Dragset. Say what you will about the piece, it did indeed demonstrate the power of performance in at least one way: A team of crack actors — notably Joseph Fiennes of "Shakespeare in Love" fame — almost managed, through sheer talent and force of will, to breathe some life into a project that was essentially a multimillion-dollar inside joke, covering up its hollow, self-congratulatory core with a veneer of class. Almost, but not quite.

The Beckettian setup of "Happy Days in the Art World" has two men, played by Fiennes and fellow thespian Charles Edwards, wake up sharing a bunk bed in a prison-like void, with no knowledge of

how or why they got there. It quickly becomes apparent that they are stand-ins for the artists Elmgreen & Dragset themselves — in the program, the characters are identified as “ID” and “ME,” the initials of Ingar Dragset and Michael Elmgreen, of course, as well as names laden with Freudian associations — and the scenario is evidently intended as some kind of allegory of the purgatory that is life as a globe-trotting mid-career artist duo.

Upon waking, one of the men declares that he has had a dream in which they were both successful artists “based in a city where everyone else was an artist — Berlin, I think!” In this dream, we hear, ID and ME had an appointment with a “Ukrainian oligarch” who was driving to meet them in a sports car “covered in butterflies.” The two then realize that they seem to have been deposited overnight in some sort of placeless dungeon, and they get down to investigating their situation. It seems grim — evidently they are not at “a yoga retreat, or a workshop with Marina!” Feeling hunger pangs, a member of the duo later moans, “Where’s that Thai soup kitchen when you need it?” As art-world satire, this is about as toothless as it gets. And it doesn’t get better.

I’ll spare you recounting the rest of the plot. Suffice it to say that it all leads up to a visit from a mysterious messenger who delivers a statement saying that ID and ME will receive a visit from... Guggenheim curator Nancy Spector — though, as with Beckett’s *Godot*, it is not certain when or if she might come (“Waiting for Spector” does have a nice ring to it, actually). All in all, the production values and direction of “Happy Days in the Art World” are first-rate, and Fiennes and Edwards give it their best, sometimes for whole minutes managing to infuse some sense of wit and human gravity into the material. Elmgreen & Dragset’s pastiche of Beckett is credible enough — but mainly it just makes you wish that these talented actors were actually performing Beckett.

What does this exercise, which is neither sharp enough to excuse its lack of laughs nor funny enough to excuse its lack of acuity, mean? If “Happy Days in the Art World” is significant at all, it is in the way that it illustrates the sad, intertwined terminus of certain recent art developments. Performance art began as a ragged, in-your-face discipline all about carving out a dangerous unmediated space of experience and reclaiming the body from imposed stereotypes. Institutional critique, meanwhile, was once a way for artists to inject some serious political juice into art’s native milieu. (The high point of both was roughly contemporaneous: Chris Burden’s “Shoot” and Hans Haacke’s “Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System” both are from the same year, 1971.)

However, both genres have mutated since — as genres tend to do — becoming their exact opposites in many cases. Contemporary performance has proved itself fully capable of becoming an appendage of celebrity “event” culture (though, to be fair, the capacious Performa program has many offerings that seem likely to illustrate its wilder, more untamed side as well). Meanwhile, self-referential “critique” of the art world often seems to be a substitute for thinking about real-world politics, rather than a way of thinking about the political stakes of art in any meaningful way. If any doubt remained about either of these development and their mutually reinforcing trajectories, Elmgreen & Dragset’s “Happy Days in the Art World” nails them both together into one neat point. That is indeed an accomplishment, though not one to be too proud about.

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