

“There I Belong: Hammershøi by Elmgreen&Dragset”

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COPENHAGEN

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF DENMARK

Through his unadorned portraits and interiors, Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916) brought the famous melancholic Nordic light of contemporary landscape paintings into the homes of the Danish bourgeoisie. While today his paintings may be commonly used to sell Scandinavian design, Hammershøi remains an artist’s artist. For “There I Belong: Hammershøi by Elmgreen & Dragset,” Hammershøi fans Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset offered a fresh take on the iconic painter. As in the Istanbul Biennial they organized in 2017, the artist duo displayed their mastery of curating with modesty and style, here bringing nine classic paintings by Hammershøi together with

their own work and that of nine other contemporary artists dealing with domesticity in a show that explored the problem of what it means to be framed by—or belong to—a house and all it contains: furniture, personal effects, memories, and fantasies.

Beneath the clean, prefunctional sheen of Hammershøi’s interiors, which somehow radiate both coziness and coldness, lies a twist of proto-surrealism. This effect was amplified through a pairing with Annika von Hausswolff’s *Philosophical Chair*, 2003, a C-print on acrylic that captures an off-white wooden chair levitating in an otherwise empty room. Elmgreen & Dragset’s installation *Powerless Structures (8 doors)*, 2000–2002, underlined the uncanniness of the many doors that appear through-

out Hammershøi’s oeuvre. For example, in *Interior, No. 30 Strandgade*, 1906–1908, a woman sits with her back to the viewer, so that one’s gaze falls instead on an open door that leads to a vestibule with other doors. Forgoing the white-painted wooden furniture of Nordic fin de siècle, Elmgreen & Dragset opted to line the gallery walls with modern, mass-produced doors of the kind you might find at IKEA. These doors seemed to be having a good time with each other, although none of them actually led to another room.

The psychoanalytic thrust of the exhibition did not end here, as the curators turned more and more toward a feminist appropriation of the normative gaze and the way it dictates what constitutes the domestic. This approach was perhaps most evident in two works that take on a woman’s “belonging” to the home: Louise Bourgeois’s photogravure *Femme maison (Woman House)*, 1990, which wittily plays with the contradiction of being seen naked, grafting an asymmetrically porticoed house atop a woman’s hips; and Monica Bonvicini’s *Hausfrau Swinging*, 1997/2019, a video installation centering on a female nude whose head is obscured by a mask shaped like a white house. Unable to see, the woman repeatedly attempts to break out from a corner that could just as well be the white cube.

If the quiet, often faceless women in Hammershøi’s paintings are not really in a safe space, Bonvicini’s work complicated the story by

presenting a female character who seems to resist her situation, even if by resisting she risks self-harm. A more contemplative mood dominated in Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s collage painting *In the Lavender Room*, 2019, which, like *Interior, No. 30 Strandgade*, features a seated woman with her back turned to face multiple open doorways. By blending different emotional registers, the exhibition underscored that the serene world of Hammershøi’s paintings is no utopia, at least not for the women trapped within it, who, while avoiding the objectifying gaze, are nevertheless captive to their circumstances.

In retrospect, it was almost as if the Hammershøi paintings were merging with the other works, as in the last moments of the video for Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” (1991), where the dancers morph into one another, their hairstyles, skin colors, and genders rapidly transitioning. In this sense, the relationship of Hammershøi to the contemporary artists mirrored the oscillation between the iconic painter as the departure point for everything else in the show, and a totally decentered national hero. This duality offers an ambiguous answer to the difficult question of where one belongs.

—Fredrik Svensk

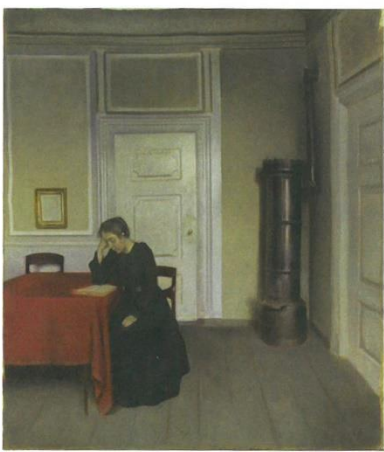
WARSAW

“Paint, also known as Blood”

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN WARSAW

The title “Paint, also known as Blood” was taken from a memoir by Zenon Kruczyński, a former hunter who at some point recognized the barbarism of killing and began campaigning against the practice. The phrase intimated that suffering, in this case an animal’s, can be eagerly and easily dismissed and rendered as something artificial. Natalia Siewlicz, a rising star in the Polish curatorial scene, who has been pushing a strictly feminist and progressive agenda into the already refreshing program of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, achieved a new level of insight with this show of recent painting by women, which featured mostly emerging painters from Poland and Central Europe, along with a few better-known artists from the region such as Agata Bogacka and Paulina Ołowska. Also included were several international stars, such as Dana Schutz, Tschabalala Self, and Amelie von Wulfen. The curatorial concept suggested that painting as practiced by women is both a sacrifice and a means of redemption. Dwelling on the scars left on female creativity under patriarchy, Siewlicz in her wall text invoked a poem by Marlene Dumas about how the artist finds the act of painting a sensual pleasure, even if it is underlined by suffering.

Poland has become an especially difficult country for women to live in since the 2015 clampdown on women’s reproductive and other rights by a far-right government. While the #MeToo movement has had some effect, Polish women exist in an increasingly intolerant environment. This has prompted a second-wave style of feminism, whose adherents do not shy away from being political. Women have been campaigning and demonstrating, and discovering that their subjectivity matters even after having been violated for years—in a country that has never experienced a mass women’s movement. Yet the painters Siewlicz chose are not



Vilhelm Hammershøi, *A Room in the Strandgade Home in Copenhagen, with the Artist's Wife*, 1902, oil on canvas, 25 × 23 1/2”.

Agata Słowak, *Love*, 2019, oil on canvas, 55 1/2 × 44 1/4”. From “Paint, also known as Blood.”

