

THE EVOLUTION OF PRADA MARFA FROM SCULPTURE TO POP CULTURE LANDMARK

Like any popular work of public art, Prada Marfa has become something of a cultural landmark. After the devastating vandalism of the living sculpture, we visit the site and speak to the artists, Elmgreen & Dragset.

By Thessaly La Force — April 22, 2014



“One request: no jumping!” asked our Marfan host, Alec Friedman, on our pilgrimage to Prada Marfa. I was with *Vogue.com*’s Katherine Bernard and a friend of Alec’s—a filmmaker named Bryn who wore an eye patch and had rolled into town the other day in a Brooklyn band’s discarded RV. The Texan desert stretched wide on either side of Highway 90 as we rumbled along in our rental car at 70 miles per hour. Alec had been before, but the rest of us hadn’t yet seen the living sculpture created in 2005 by the artist duo Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset.

Prada Marfa, for the uninitiated, is a one-room white-stucco-wall replica of the kind of real Prada stores one can find in select and, well, more populated parts of the world—everywhere from Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue to Tokyo’s Shinjuku. Except this one is outside

the town of Valentine, which has a reported population of 132, and a median household income of \$45,670 (that’s approximately seventeen Prada bags). And this Prada features a handful of lifeless handbags, covered in a light film of desert dust, along with three spartan rows of only right-footed size-37 Prada shoes. It isn’t open for business. And it never will be. Originally it was meant to simply be.

Like any popular work of public art, Prada Marfa has become something of a cultural landmark in recent years. Beyoncé passed through the town in 2012, and shared a picture on her Tumblr of herself jumping in front of the sculpture (she Instagrammed the same photograph yesterday). And in that way that art and fashion like to mingle, Prada Marfa evolved into a destination for more than just the art curious. “Always dreamed about heading down to Marfa, Texas, and posing outside the famous Prada ‘store,’ à la Beyoncé?” asked one style blog last year. Call it the fashion girl’s Statue of Liberty.

The genesis of Prada Marfa came about years back while Elmgreen & Dragset were in Chelsea, where the art world had decamped after SoHo was overrun with luxury boutiques. The two affixed signs to the windows of a Chelsea gallery that read Prada, Coming Soon—a playful wink at the ways in which gentrification transforms neighborhoods into meccas for consumerism. Their signage caught the eye of Yvonne Force Villareal and Doreen Remen, who, with their nonprofit the Art Production



Fund and its Texan satellite, Ballroom Marfa, helped bring Prada Marfa into existence. Miuccia Prada got involved, approving the use of her label's trademarked logo and selecting the proper merchandise to be used on location. "The installation was initially meant as a sort of an experiment," Elmgreen & Dragset explained recently (the two were in Hong Kong for the opening of a new show at Perrotin). "We really wanted to see what could happen if one would make a fusion of pop and Land art. It was also meant as a comment on branding and consumerist culture." The sculpture was announced in the fall in *The New York Times*. "We loved the idea of the piece being born on October 1 and that it will never again be maintained," Villareal told Eric Wilson of the *Times*. "If someone spray-paints graffiti or a cowboy decides to use it as target practice or maybe a mouse or a muskrat makes a home in it, 50 years from now it will be a ruin that is a reflection of the time it was made."

But since then, Prada Marfa has become such a target for vandalism that the spirit of the sculpture has changed. Within days of its unveiling

in 2005, a thief broke the windows and ran off with the loot. The bags were replaced with GPS trackers, and their bottoms were cut out to discourage further theft. Stricter security measures were added, such a camera and an alarm. The sculpture's safety was entrusted to a local in the nearby town of Valentine named Boyd Elders, and the local sheriff was asked to keep his eye out for any trouble. "One contractor suggested rattlesnakes inside," said Villareal and Remen. "But we decided that was certainly overkill!" And as the years have passed, the back of the building has slowly been covered in the tags of various graffiti artists and punks who have passed through West Texas.

In a way, this all seemed manageable until earlier this March, when a serious act of vandalism wrecked the sculpture. Prada Marfa was haphazardly splashed in blue paint on either sides; its awning was slashed; and the vandal tacked on incomprehensible signs with a strong adhesive glue that ruined the storefront's Plexiglas. "We had just read about the artist who destroyed **Ai Weiwei's** vases in Miami so we were not totally surprised by the news," El-

Elmgreen & Dragset said. “It seems to be some kind of a syndrome potentially caused by the power of social media. Artists who are seemingly so eager to promote themselves, to get some mentioning at any costs, are willing to even smash up fellow artists’ works in order to appear in the spotlight for a little while.”

The vandal gave an interview to the blog *HyperAllergic*, where he admitted he was unfamiliar with Elmgreen & Dragset’s body of work, and that the “the true vision of allowing” Prada Marfa “to decay wasn’t living up.” When asked if they would consider a dialogue with the vandal, Elmgreen & Dragset responded: “It is totally fine not to agree with other artists’ aesthetics or concepts but a basic rule for any social behavior is to accept that there are other points of view than one’s own which means that you don’t just attempt to destroy everything around you that you might not like. . . . Our plan was to let nature gradually decide the destiny of the piece and not random vandals.”

Recently, too, the sculpture experienced another setback when the Texas Department of Transportation classified Prada Marfa as an illegal roadside advertising. The Art Production Fund and the artists had recently come to a solution—planning to offer Prada Marfa as a “civic gift” to the public. “It was quite a blow that this person damaged the structure so badly right after,” Elmgreen & Dragset said. “Throughout its nine years of existence there have been several minor attacks on the installation—like tagging, bullet holes, and even burglary—but never before did anyone try to destroy the piece in this way.

The materials used to deface the artwork cannot just be painted over and the glue splashed on the windows is also not removable. It will take a lot of resources to repair it.”

When we arrived at Prada Marfa, it was disappointing to behold the damage. The slashed awning and the smears of brown glue on the windows diminished the elegant spectacle it had once been—we walked past the blue-painted adobe walls and peered at the preserved handbags and the shoes. But it was still, in a way, strange beauty in the middle of the desert. And so we posed, like everyone before us, and hopefully everyone after. Later, I would find this quote from Miuccia Prada: “Nostalgia is a very complicated subject for me. I’m attracted by nostalgia but I refuse it intellectually.” But whatever it is—Prada Marfa has its own life now. “It has turned into something beyond our control,” Elmgreen & Dragset said. “And that is the best thing an artist can experience. As artists we are only here in order to trigger a debate, to provide platforms for other people’s interpretations.”