

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Forbes

David Shrigley On 'Unconventional Bubbles,' The Environment, And How Art Can Save The World

Katie Chang

18 March 2020

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When Maison Ruinart tapped David Shrigley for this year's artist collaboration, little did the oldest Champagne house know how deeply the resulting collection titled "Unconventional Bubbles" (unveiled in Paris on March 5) would resonate with the global community – especially in light of these highly uncertain times.



Image: David Shrigley, Ruinart

Renowned for his deceptively simple-looking, almost childlike drawings and sculptures, the British visual artist's take on the world is refreshingly egalitarian, direct, and crackling with subversive humor. After a five-day residency in Reims in July 2019 – where Shrigley explored the vineyards and cellars, and observed the people who help produce Ruinart Champagne – and a followup visit in

October, he created over 100 drawings depicting the house's intrinsic relationship to nature; carved faces of workers from Ruinart's past and present on the chalk walls of the crayères; and sculpted bottles with hidden meanings. But upon first glance of some pieces from "Unconventional Bubbles," it's clear there's an underlying broader message beyond the intricate Champagne-making process. Ahead, Shrigley discusses what he learned during his visits to Maison Ruinart, why he's so committed to environmental causes, and how art will save the world.



Image: Ruinart

To start: I'm a big fan. I keep a set of your Cocaine and Heroin Shakers at my desk, and sold some of your items at my old shop in Brooklyn. And a confession: I was surprised – in the best way possible – that you were the latest artist tapped for the Ruinart collaboration. Why did you decide to do it?

Shrigley: I wanted to do the project because I like making art, and I like drinking champagne. I have always wanted to do a job where I am compelled to drink champagne, so at last I am happy. Also, the life of an artist is often quite a solitary one. I spend most of my time alone in the studio, so embarking on a project that requires me to do something completely different is a gift. Every collaboration is an opportunity to learn something, to see your work through someone else's eyes and to see your work differently.

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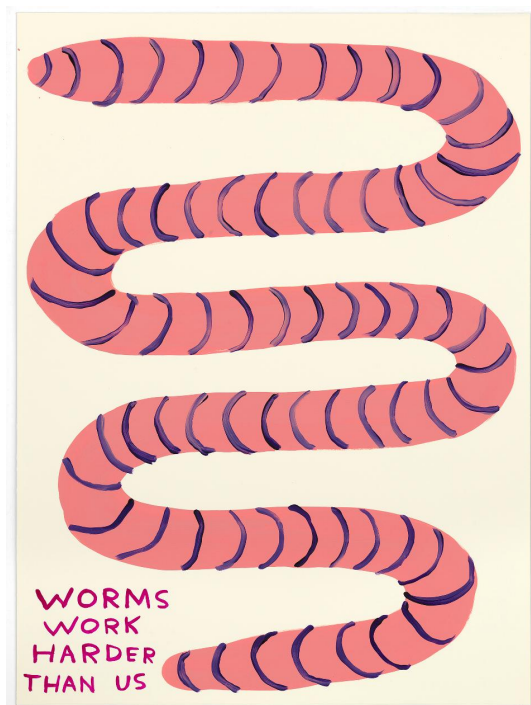


Image: David Shrigley, Ruinart

What were the most surprising things you learned during this commission?

Shrigley: Before I visited Reims, I knew I liked champagne. But I didn't know an awful lot about champagne. I learned that champagne is a living product. It is made from a plant that grows in the ground; that it is subject to the elements; that it is subject to the soil and to the sky, to weather conditions, to the bugs that fly around it – which either destroy it or facilitate pollination. For me there is a lot of interesting metaphor there. There is also a certain magic to it – in which the microorganisms that make the bubbles create the critical element of the champagne. I like the idea that it is something from nothing, that it has to be kept in darkness and all these things have to happen in darkness in a cave which under the ground.

Now, I feel I'm one of the few educated people in Britain who knows how champagne is made.



Image: David Shrigley, Ruinart

One drawing, titled "News It Won't Be Like This Forever," really made me pause. So what can people do today, right now, to help our environment? I also read that you became vegetarian in the past couple years. Was that for environmental reasons?

Shrigley: We all have to be environmentally aware, and we have to take responsibility. There are some of us who seem not to want to take that responsibility, or not to be honest about what's going on. It's the job of the artist to try to tell the truth, and not hide behind bad politics. I don't really think of myself as a particularly political artist. But then again, we're all political to some extent because we live together. The definition of politics is having to compromise because you live with other people. We also have to compromise because of the needs of the planet. It's always

going to be like that from now on, I think.

I stopped eating meat as a result of living in the countryside. You know, the little black lamb I saw there and my little black dog looked so similar that I suddenly felt very uncomfortable. That had a very direct impact on me, on my life, and on the things that I do. More people should consider this.

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I'd like to reference one of your works from 2019: do you really believe art will save the world? If so, how?

Shrigley: It's not the objective of art, but yes. I like the idea that I can increase mindfulness and consciousness about the global issues. Art makes people react. But when I make art, sometimes I think you don't really know what a work means – even when it's finished. That meaning changes as you go along. In that way, all work is a kind of “work in progress,” because you always project your own meaning onto work. Obviously, things happen in the world and suddenly things become profound that weren't profound before and vice versa. That's what's exciting for me.

The conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.