

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Telegraph

How David Shrigley's 'very British' sense of humour is shaking up the champagne world

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The French may understand 'maybe 80 per cent' of his whimsical work, but the British artist's latest project for Ruinart is as wry as ever.



Image: David Shrigley with some of his art at Maison Ruinart's Reims HQ Credit: Chris Tubbs

One day recently, the artist David Shrigley was to be found 130ft under the ground, in Reims, north-east France, wandering through a labyrinth of tunnels and caves, pointing out the most recent examples of his work.

Over the centuries, the tunnels and caves - or crayères to give them their proper name - have served as chalk quarries and, periodically, as refuge for people fleeing war. But their principal use for almost three centuries has been as a place of storage for the champagne producer Maison Ruinart.

Thousands of bottles of different vintages lie rack upon rack along the twisting tunnels where Shrigley, wrapped in an overcoat (it's cold in the crayères), was leading the way. Countless anonymous people have left their mark over the years, carving their initials and rough graffiti in the chalk walls.

Shrigley, in characteristic style, has left a series of more whimsical images: a dinosaur, a forklift truck; a diagram of the human heart; and several faces, peering out from the crevices in the rock like medieval gargoyles.

"Chalk is not the easiest stuff to carve, so I found," he says. "We were staying in quite a nice hotel nearby when I was doing the carving. I was wearing my working clothes and I got back to my hotel and I was coated in all this weird black dust, which covered the rather nice cream carpet in my room." He laughs. "I don't think they were very pleased."



Image: Untitled by David Shrigley (2019) Credit: Todd White Art Photography

An uncommonly tall (his website used to playfully state that he is '197cm tall - about 6'5"') and amiable man, whose default mode is quietly spoken self-effacement, Shrigley is known for his quirky cartoonish juxtapositions of images and text, rendered in a faux-naïve style that he describes as drawing "in a non-drawing way".

In one work, a group of stick figures gathered around a huge sculpture of the word 'CRAP' exclaim, 'It's brilliant.' In another, an image of Marilyn Monroe is captioned, 'Please forget about me.'

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Perhaps his most widely recognised work of art was the 23ft-high bronze cast of a human hand in a thumbs-up gesture, with the thumb elongated to absurdist length, entitled Really Good, which was the winning commission for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square in 2016. (Shrigley described it as "a work about making the world a better place... which obviously is a ridiculous proposition, but I think it's a good proposition".)



Image: Shrigley's 23ft-high bronze cast of a human hand in a thumbs-up gesture sits on Trafalgar Square Credit: Alamy

In 2018 he was approached by Maison Ruinart to produce art inspired by the process of making champagne. Over several visits, he roamed the company's vineyards, production facilities and crayères, absorbing every facet of the creation of champagne - and, of course, drinking it - producing an

extensive body of work.

Ruinart has a long and distinguished history of supporting art and artists. The oldest champagne house in France, it was founded by Nicolas Ruinart in 1729, the year after an edict of Louis XV which authorised the transport of wine in bottles.

In 1895 a descendant of the founder, André Ruinart, commissioned a young unknown Czech artist to produce a poster of a woman holding aloft a glass of bubbly, which created a sensation when it was displayed on the circular Morris advertising columns of Paris. The artist was Alphonse Mucha, who was to become one of the most significant figures in the art nouveau movement.



Image: Untitled, acrylic on paper (2019). This corresponds to Shrigley's interpretation of steps in Maison Ruinart's production process Credit: David Shrigley

Since 2008 the company has promoted what it calls the 'carte blanche' programme, inviting artists including the Dutch designer Maarten Baas, the Brazilian artist and photographer Vik Muniz and the Chinese artist Liu Bolin to produce commissions inspired by the champagne-making process.

Shrigley admits that when he was first approached by Ruinart pretty much all he knew about champagne was that he enjoyed drinking it. "I did know you shouldn't drink too much of it. And I know that some of it's better than others, and this is a very good one."

Shrigley has taken on commercial commissions before, but never one as extensive as this. "I make an awful lot of work," he says. "After a certain point you feel, like you've drawn a picture of everything in the world and I'm always always struggling to find something different to say. A project like this is a nice opportunity to do that - to draw pictures of grapes, champagne bottles, vineyards and caves.

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Image: Untitled, acrylic on paper (2019). This corresponds to Shrigley's interpretation of steps in Maison Ruinart's production process. Credit: Todd White Art Photography

"We tend to think of champagne as a luxury product, like a Bulgari watch, but it's a natural product, and there are so many variables that go into producing it. There's the nature of the soil, and how much the weather impacts on production.

"The vine needs rain and sun, and it doesn't want frost at a certain time of the year. The reality of it is about farming, and earth and worms and microorganisms and things that one doesn't associate with luxury. So that juxtaposition was very interesting to me."

Shrigley, who is 51, has produced more than 100 drawings and paintings - along with sculpture, stop-frame animations and those chalk carvings - for the project,

casting a characteristically idiosyncratic light on the production of champagne.

A row of bottles is labelled 'Not ready yet'; rain falls from a dark cloud, with the words 'I love it'; a childlike painting of a worm is captioned 'Worms work harder than us'; while a poster advises, 'See the truth, know the truth, drink the truth, but not too much.'

Frédéric Dufour, the president of Ruinart, says that it was Shrigley's "very British sense of humour - 80 per cent of which we understand" that inspired them to approach him in the first place.

"One could perceive Ruinart as a being more of a formal brand, a little bit classical. I saw that bringing this sense of humour would change the perception of people looking at Ruinart. With certain subjects it's easier to have a sense of humour.

"Other subjects - the planet, the environment, responsible consumption - a sense of humour can be badly perceived, so I think it's a little daring to do that in the champagne world. But that's what I wanted, to shake us up a bit."

Shrigley's introduction to art was through album covers. He was "obsessed" by the sinister depiction of a bleak landscape on The Fall's Live at the Witch Trials LP. "In my mind I figured, I have to have a job at some time, and my idea of a job was that I would design record covers."



Image: Limited Edition Jeroboam Ruinart

But it was the discovery of Marcel Duchamp and Dada that he describes as his "seminal" moment. "I thought this is everything that is in opposition to rational thought, and I became really excited about that. It was probably the most important moment in my understanding of what art was and what it could be."

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As a six-year-old at primary school, he says, he was the best artist in the class. Graduating from Glasgow School of Art in 1991, he was "almost the worst".

"But then again, it never really mattered to me. I saw drawing and painting as a craft skill and, for me, there was always a little bit of blag involved in it, in the sense that people would say, 'What do you do?'; 'I'm an artist,' and they'd expect to see that sort of craft skill in a drawing or painting; whereas, as we all know, art and craft are two different things and they can exist independently of one another.

"I'm not interested in style and I'm not really interested in illustration. I'm trying to make drawings that don't illustrate text, and text that doesn't describe an image, and I'm interested in the slippage between the two." His work is created, he says, through the process of making it. "That's just how I function. I adapt. I never have a plan."

His usual technique is to make a list of things to draw - a washing machine, a hot-air balloon, a poodle (or in the case of the Ruinart project, a bottle, a worm, a bunch of grapes) "and see what happens. And part of my assistant's job is to find images of washing machines on the iPad. And then I render them. And then I say, have I done a lot of pictures of washing machines? 'A few, but not that many.' OK, so we'll do another washing-machine..." He laughs.

He has a motto: "If you put the hours in, then the work takes care of itself." He explains, "A lot of the time the process of making artwork is that you spend eight hours in the studio, and as long as you're working and making something then you're filling the space somehow. The problem is if you just sit there thinking about doing things; that's not very helpful."

Shrigley has been married to his wife, Kim, for 24 years. They have houses in Brighton, where Shrigley has his studio, and Devon. The couple have no children, but they do have a black miniature schnauzer, which Shrigley says encouraged him to become vegetarian.

"Walking in the fields in Devon. I realised that the little black lambs are not that different from my little black dog."



Image: David Shrigley Credit: Chris Tubbs

By his own estimation, Shrigley has made several thousand pictures over the years - too many to remember, or even recognise, them all. "People send me things to be authenticated, and I'm, 'Well, it kind of looks like my work, but I don't really have any recollection of doing it.'" He laughs.

He resists too close an examination of his art and its meaning - as if he can't quite figure it out himself and analysing it might jeopardise the creative process. "I say stuff and then I figure out what it means afterwards," he says. "Sometimes I look back at the work and think, what the hell was I thinking? And I don't really know, I suppose."

Everybody has a different adjective for it: wry, subversive, grimly comic, absurdist. "I was in San Francisco once, being interviewed for a paper, and the guy was like, 'So you've kind of got that gonzo conceptualism dude ranch zen thing going on.' And I was like, what?" He laughs. "One doesn't describe oneself. But you do get some choice descriptions from other people."

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His books are filed under 'humour', but also under 'art'. His work is displayed in museums and galleries, but also on greetings cards, sweatshirts, water bottles, tea towels, scarves, tote bags...

"I do some merchandise," he says, "but some of it is not my idea. I made a model of a swan once, and a company made it into a floater, like little kids play with in a swimming pool. That wasn't my idea. But then I made a giant version of it, which inflated and deflated constantly, and showed that in a museum."

He smiles. Recognition is not something he ever expected - and is still rather perplexed by. "I mean, I've got an OBE... for doing this!" He pauses, still not quite believing it.

"But the privilege really is just being allowed to do what I do, to live every day as if I was at art school without having a tutor and I can do whatever I like. People say you should live every day as if it were your last. I want to live every day as if it were my first. I want to see things anew. That's where the excitement is."

David Shrigley's Ruinart Carte Blanche Contemporary Art Commission will be exhibited at Frieze London in October.