

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Quill & Pad

French Champagne House Ruinart Collaborates With British Artist David Shrigley

Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle

11 April 2020



French Champagne House Ruinart Collaborates With British Artist David Shrigley For Its Annual Carte Blanche Art Commission

David Shrigley is not your conventional artist. He says what's on his mind without beating around the bush and addresses major problems including global warming, child welfare, or unemployment using his trademark black humor.

"The memory is the first thing to go," announces one artwork. "Art irritates the eye," proclaims another.

An image of a vulture is accompanied by the words "old friend, reliable and steadfast," while a newspaper headline reads, "nobody likes you."

Not taking himself seriously while opening our eyes to the bigger picture is why Ruinart commissioned the 51-year-old artist to present the champagne house in a new light as its 2020 carte blanche artist, following on from world-renowned talents including Vik Muniz, Liu Bolin, and Erwin Olaf.

First invited to visit Reims in February 2019, Shrigley returned to the Ruinart vineyards, cellars, and manufacturing facilities in July of that year to spend time with cellar master Frédéric Panaïotis and the production and marketing teams before traveling back to his studio in Brighton to make the artworks.



Image: Ruinart limited edition jeroboam of Blanc de Blancs champagne and art by carte blanche artist David Shrigley

Giving his take on the brand in a collaboration dubbed "Unconventional Bubbles," Shrigley created 36 color and black-and-white drawings in acrylic or ink on paper, two large glazed ceramic jars filled with ideas and smells instead of liquid, three neon signs, a doorway in wood and plaster for the viewer to crawl through awkwardly, and a 30-piece limited-edition, numbered, and signed gift box printed with statements characteristic of his work that house a jeroboam of Ruinart Blanc de Blancs.

To mark the occasion, Ruinart invited a group of international journalists to dine in its celebrated chalk cellars, signifying the first time ever that guests were treated to a meal in this UNESCO World Heritage Site located 30 meters below ground with no natural light, no vibrations, and a year-round temperature of approximately 10°C after a tour of areas usually off limits to visitors.

Here, Shrigley added his graffiti to the hundreds of already existing drawings that had been left by unknown authors over the centuries. We discovered 19 illustrations he had hand-carved onto the soft chalk walls: a broken bottle, forklift truck, origami swan, dinosaur, heart, mushroom, washing machine, workers' faces, and the word "metamorphosis."

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David Shrigley adds his graffiti in the historic chalk cellars as part of his 'Unconventional Bubbles' art for Ruinart's 2020 Carte Blanche Art Commission

Through his artworks, Shrigley highlights the hidden side of champagne production and consumption, the importance of traditions transmitted from one generation to another, respect for nature, and the environmental challenges faced in winemaking.

Amidst drawings of a giant blue bird with a grape in its beak, a distorted planet, rain clouds, a robot unable to pick grapes, a man peering down into the depths of the caves, bottles being riddled, and champagne aging are thought-provoking messages including the following: "The world is very beautiful and precious," "Worms work harder than us," "The grapes must be protected from frost and from witchcraft," "Each bottle is the same and each bottle is different," "Not ready yet," and "You can judge the product by the label. Totally fine to do this."

To encourage creative dialogue and deepen the ties between gastronomy and art, Ruinart also invites a chef to team up with the artist and the cellar master as part of the annual carte blanche commission. This year, the menu was concocted by French chef Alexandre Gauthier, known for his bold and intuitive cuisine, as a six-hand dinner together with Panaïotis and Shrigley in response to his artworks.

We were treated to surprising dishes such as an ethereal onion peel soufflé, delicately smoked chervil roots and shoots, turnip and langoustine served in a leaf, chalk powder on black ravioli, and quail with crayfish, which were paired with sensational cuvées including the Dom Ruinart Rosé 2004 magnum and Dom Ruinart Blanc de Blancs 2006 magnum.

The menu will be available upon request at Gauthier's two Michelin-star restaurant La Grenouillère in northern France until the end of the year, and six international chefs will offer the Food For Art program locally.



Image: David Shrigley creating his 'Unconventional Bubbles' art for Ruinart's 2020 Carte Blanche Art Commission

I sat down with Shrigley to discuss the unique collaboration.

Quill & Pad: What was your perception of champagne before you started the collaboration, and what did you learn during your visits to the

Ruinart vineyards and cellars in Reims?

David Shrigley: Well, before I came here, I knew that I liked champagne. I didn't really know an awful lot about it, but obviously when you speak to somebody like Frédéric Panaïotis, you learn a lot very quickly. I think that a lot of English people are quite intimidated by wine, by French wine, and by the French and their wine because we drink an awful lot of it.

But most of us certainly don't know a lot about it, and I think that having an education from somebody who's directly involved in making wine, in growing grapes and understanding what that means, was a real privilege. So,

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yeah, I feel I'm one of the few educated people in Britain who knows how champagne is made and I'm very proud, but I must thank Frédéric for that knowledge.

Q&P: What is your connection to nature and what did you learn during this collaboration with Ruinart?

DS: I lived all my life pretty much in the suburbs or in the city itself. Seven years ago, my wife and I bought a little house in the countryside in Devon and we spent a lot of time there. I think it's had a big impact on me just understanding about life outside the city and about nature.

We have a dog, so we do a lot of dog walking on the beach and in the fields, but I also stopped eating meat as a result of living in the countryside because the little black lamb and my little black dog were so similar that suddenly I couldn't eat lamb. So it had a very direct impact on my life, on the things that I do, but I think coming to Reims and speaking with Frédéric and his team about the production of champagne, I'm really aware of how tiny variations within nature and within the weather particularly can have such a massive impact on the champagne that we drink and how difficult it is to deal with those things.

Going to the vineyards, you don't realize that even within half a kilometer, some grapes can be ruined in one evening, one night, one frost, and some can survive. I'm glad that it's Frédéric and his team that have to deal with that kind of stuff and not me because it seems like you have so little control over things. Obviously, we have a big problem right now that the world has presented us with, but you just have to deal with what you get. And I'm really impressed and fascinated by somebody who has to work with nature and somehow fight against it.



Image: David Shrigley creating his 'Unconventional Bubbles' art for Ruinart Champagne's 2020 Carte Blanche Art Commission

Q&P: Do you consider yourself a socially or environmentally engaged artist?

DS: Yes, I do. I mean I think we all have to be really environmentally aware and take responsibility. There are some of us who seem not to want to take that responsibility or not to be advised about what's going on, but I think 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 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, and we also have to compromise because of the needs of the planet.

Q&P: You titled this collaboration "Unconventional Bubbles." What does it mean to you and what is unconventional about Ruinart?

DS: Well initially, we had to come up with a title together to satisfy my peculiar sense of humor and Ruinart's message about its wine. When you think about it, you're thinking about what is conventional and what is unconventional, what is convention and what is a lack of convention. It's a difficult question to answer, but I guess when you think about what convention is and what unconventionality is, it's really just about change because what is conventional and what is unconventional one time changes throughout time.

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So as an artist, maybe you're just proposing change or a different way of looking at things, and that's perhaps what the job of an artist is. For me, unconventionality is just the amount of change, and Ruinart has been around since 1729, so there have been centuries of change. You think about changes in the world in that time – it's too much to list, I guess, so that's unconventionality which has then become convention.



Image: A view inside Ruinart's historic cellars in celebration of David Shrigley's 'Unconventional Bubbles' 2020 Carte Blanche Art Commission

Q&P: What would be an unconventional way to drink Ruinart for you?

DS: We had quite an unconventional tasting when Fabien Vallerian and Jean-Baptiste Duquesne of

Ruinart visited me in Brighton and brought a bottle of 2011 Dom Ruinart, which we can't buy in the UK, so that's pretty amazing. We took it to the restaurant where we had lunch, and I was talking about the wine that we make in East Sussex, which is the same kind of wine as champagne, geologically speaking.

However, it's really not very good compared to Dom Ruinart 2011. Fabien insisted on doing a blind tasting with the East Sussex sparkling wine and the Dom Ruinart 2011, and needless to say, even I could tell the difference. Well, it's unfair really because the East Sussex wines aren't pretending to be from a producer from 1729, but they're very young vines, so it was an unconventional comparison.

Q&P: What message are you trying to convey through the artworks you created for Ruinart?

DS: I think that the project was to make a synthesis between the message of Ruinart – the story you want to tell about the brand and how you make champagne – and also to see it through my own eyes and to make it my own artwork through thinking about all the things that I learned while I was here. The way I make art is that the work gets created as part of the process, so it's thinking about what I learned and making a lot of drawings and also some objects along the way.

Sometimes I think that I don't really know what a work means even when it's finished, and that meaning changes as I go along. All work is a kind of work in progress because you project your own meaning onto it, so in a way, as an artist, you're not always in control of that, and obviously things happen in the world and suddenly things become profound that weren't profound before, and vice versa. That's part of what art is, I think, in the way that I approach making art, and that's what's exciting for me.