

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

Thumbs up to David Shrigley's fabulously feel-bad fourth plinth

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Image: 'Phallic, ungainly and hysterically strident'... Really Good. Photograph: Mark Blower

David Shrigley is a mordant and rueful artist. I have a postcard by him that says DEATH in letters that get smaller from left to right, pithily expressing our doom as a diminishing scribble. His take on existence veers between the grimly comic and the cynically absurdist. It is therefore hard to take him entirely at face value when he claims his colossal bronze sculpture of a hand with an elongated thumb jabbing the sky above Trafalgar Square is a simple

statement of optimism. I honestly can't see this gleefully ugly work of art spreading a lot of cheer.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan was heavily buying into the optimism line however when he launched Really Good, Shrigley's fourth plinth commission, on a dank and dark morning. He came on like a circus ringmaster, and even got the jaded hacks to count down to the unveiling of what he boasted was a beacon of London's readiness for a post-Brexit world, and joyous proof the capital is "Open. For. Business."

Then the sleek black bag covering the sculpture was smoothly zipped apart to reveal... A blacker blackness within.

Huh. As I suspected. The vaunted optimism of Shrigley's thumbs-up to Britain's glorious future is undermined by the deathly black hue of his appendage. Then there is the surreal monstrosity of the hugely deformed thumb. At seven metres high this is the tallest sculpture ever put on the plinth and, while that may seem the kind of statistic tour guides reel off, it has genuine relevance to how it works on a square that is also home to Nelson's Column.

Sculptures that work well here pay attention to the site, its surroundings and history. From Mark Wallinger's Christ humiliated on the vast equestrian plinth, to Hans Haacke's apocalyptic Gift Horse, the best works make sense of what can otherwise seem a gratuitous decision to put modern art – which long ago abandoned such Victorian things – on an empty plinth just because there happens to be one handy.

In quite old-fashioned ways, Really Good works well. The closed fingers of the massive hand fill the long rectangular plinth, while the stupendous vertical thumb offers a 21st century answer to Nelson's Column itself.

What a thumb it is. Like the giant thumbs of the hitchhiker in Tom Robbins's novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* or the enormous green thumb of the psychotic cockney Hitcher played by Noel Fielding in *The Mighty Boosh*, this thumb is seriously out of scale. It is also strangely thin, more like a finger flipped up by a pissed-off American than a jolly British symbol that everything is Really Good.

Is David Shrigley really saying everything is great? Even as the Mayor's confidence rang in our ears, there was an anticlimactic silence when the veiling fell off the feelgood colossus. Something was wrong. Well, of course it was. Of course it is.

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The problem with an art project as hyped and publicised as the Fourth Plinth is that the mainstream media reviews the PR icon, rather than the work itself that people will see in the coming months. As art, and without speeches to tell us what it's about, this is a weird and bizarre sculpture whose stark silhouette against the London sky is not affirmative or reassuring but aggressive, not to mention phallic, ungainly and hysterically strident.

I see it as a sly parody of the emptiness of public art. What do people want from art? How about uplift? There is huge pressure on public art to be celebratory. You can't get any gesture more celebratory than a big thumbs up. Yet this thumb is deformed by its striving for joy. It is disfigured by enforced cockiness.

Are we all modern Stalins, an inane public demanding that artists grin and smile and affirm that life in Britain is Really Good? David Shrigley's thumb is so pleased with the way things are that it wants to jab God in the eye.