

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail
DO NOT TOUCH THE WORMS
Claire Phillips
October 2020

BROOKLYN RAIL

David Shrigley: DO NOT TOUCH THE WORMS



Image: Installation view: David Shrigley, *DO NOT TOUCH THE WORMS*, Copenhagen Contemporary, 2020. Photo: David Stjernholm.

Life in 2020 is starting to feel like one big can of worms. That is how David Shrigley seems to think we might be feeling about it in any case. For his largest solo exhibition to date, *DO NOT TOUCH THE WORMS* (2020), the Turner Prize-nominee known for his distinctly wry British humor has filled a gallery of Copenhagen Contemporary's

industrial warehouse on Refshaleøen island with twenty, larger-than-life, inflatable replicas of the pink, writhing creatures.

In a programmed sequence of several minutes—tracked by the digital countdown of an LED clock—flaccid worms inflate and take shape from a chaotic mound of nylon. The clock on the wall governs the proceedings of the fleshy, faintly ridiculous, phallic protrusions and brings order to the worms' life cycle, counting down to the next puff of air that will reanimate them. Shrigley designed these limp serpents—which deflate and squirm in place on the floor between puffs of air—specifically for Copenhagen Contemporary. Never one to take himself or the world of contemporary art too seriously, Shrigley provides a dark metaphor for 2020 that is as ludicrous as it is unnerving and nauseating. Are these bloated maggots to be feared, revered, or mocked?



Image: Installation view: David Shrigley, *DO NOT TOUCH THE WORMS*, Copenhagen Contemporary, 2020. Photo: David Stjernholm.

Shrigley has made a recent habit of causing commotion in Denmark with his facetious intellect. In 2019, he graced the moat of Egeskov Castle on the island of Funen with a colossal inflatable swan that looked suspiciously like a hand with its middle finger raised in the air. At Copenhagen Contemporary, it seems Shrigley is still in

the business of making rude bodily gestures.

Shrigley gained recognition in 1995 with his first solo exhibition in Glasgow. His childlike drawing of a group of artists appeared on the cover of *frieze*, accompanied by several pithy captions, including, "I go around bars at [sic] the weekends and deliberately get into fights and get my head kicked in while a friend of mine videos it." Since then, Shrigley's crude scribble has become instantly recognizable, emblazoning t-shirts, books, record covers, and greeting cards with acerbic dictums and searing one-liners.

A philosopher of sorts, Shrigley highlights painful truths and absurdities of everyday life with macabre wit and vented frustration. In 2016, he erected another phallic double-entendre on the fourth plinth of London's Trafalgar Square. The giant bronze thumbs-up, titled *Really Good*, became a cynical gesture lampooning the EU referendum and the fallacy of the Brexit campaign, even as London eagerly announced it was still "open for

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business.” While everything might go to hell, Shrigley has admitted in the past, at least there is more food for satire. It’s fitting then at Copenhagen Contemporary that a worm should not simply be construed as a worm—the slippery larvae are left up to interpretation, and only accidentally could be seen as the embodiment of 2020’s challenges.

Over the years, earthworms have earned a less than dazzling reputation thanks to their slimy secretions and preference for the damp and dark, only to be squealed at and prodded with disdain. The worm is actually a humble hero in nature who transforms dead matter into the nourishing soil that will cultivate new life, including our own cold remains. Shrigley’s overseeing clock marks the inevitable countdown to oblivion—a stark reminder of the transience of life. The worm may not be the hero we thought we needed in a moment of global crises, but it’s apparently the hero we’ve got.

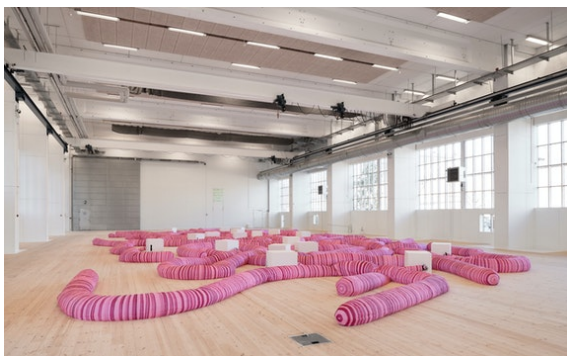


Image: Installation view: David Shrigley, *DO NOT TOUCH THE WORMS*, Copenhagen Contemporary, 2020. Photo: David Stjernholm.

“Opening up a can of worms” is synonymous with a tidal wave of unexpected problems or home truths, while in Danish the expression “a veritable snake pit” refers to a condemning situation that stems from the medieval punishment of death by poisonous snakes. So far this year, it seems someone has been opening a continual

assembly line of worm cans with no thought of the repercussions, and we’ve all come to face our very own “snake pits.”

A nearby sign fabricated in garish neon, “PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH THE WORMS,” attempts to dissuade the viewer from disturbing the worms and uncovering yet more turmoil. When Shrigley was invited to exhibit at Copenhagen Contemporary, he could not possibly have conceived of the biblical problems that lay ahead—apocalyptic wildfires, pandemics, and even plagues of locusts that scourged the Middle East and Africa. His sea of wriggling worms may never have been intended as a response to 2020, but Shrigley’s unsightly and absurd scene is just the tonic we needed to cleanse our palates, even while the taste of something bitter lingers at the back of the tongue. Shrigley acknowledges that one can only make art for oneself because someone else may not get the punchline; *DO NOT TOUCH THE WORMS* is a joke that we might all relate to in some capacity.