

Stephen Friedman Gallery

TANK Magazine
The art of the bubble
Justin E.H. Smith
December 2020



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Ruinart is the oldest champagne house in the world. It also produces the world's best. This year, its longstanding association with the world of art continues with a partnership with the artist David Shrigley. Philosopher Justin E.H. Smith made the journey to the Champagne region to investigate the art of bubbles.



Image: Sculpture of Dom Thierry Ruinart at Maison Ruinart, Reims. Thierry Ruinart inspired his nephew Nicolas to create the very first Maison de Champagne in 1729. Courtesy Paul Hennebelle.

If a bubble could gain consciousness of its brief life, what would it think? Would it identify with its own taut surface, while taking what lies within as a mere emptiness? Or would it find pride in the unseen gassy element that gives its outer membrane the shape it has, as a spirit in a body? Would it experience its inevitable burst as ecstasy or as tragic annihilation?

Perhaps its self-conception would be shaped, in part, by whether or not it felt wanted. For centuries the bubbles generated in wine were considered an undesirable side-effect of the process of secondary fermentation. The alchemists had supposed the *spiritus vini* or spirit of wine to be distributed equally, itself

neither gas nor liquid, but coextensive with the liquid. At the turn of the 18th century, Dom Thierry Ruinart began to appreciate bubbles as an essential quality rather than as a defect, and began to locate the “spirit” of at least a certain class of wines in the gas, not yet called carbon dioxide, that formed at the bottom of a glass, travelled upward and burst, and in its passage and disappearance seemed also to partake somehow in the quality of light, even of the stars. The monk came to value what was once despised, and his nephew Nicolas Ruinart, textile merchant of Reims, sensitive to changing tastes and new export opportunities in England, took the methods for production of sparkling wine developed in the abbey of his uncle’s Congregation of Saint-Maur, and the wine became champagne.

Dom Ruinart was an erudite monk, a disciple of the great Dom Jean Mabillon. He was the author in 1709 of a long foreword to a new edition of his master’s great work of political theory, *On Diplomacy*†, and published a number of his own scholarly works on the subjects of martyrology and the history of the persecution of the Christians. The monk also wrote extensively on his travels throughout various regions of France, primarily with the aim of collecting documents for a history of the Benedictine order. He does not seem to have had any theoretical interest in scientific questions pertaining to viticulture or fermentation; his knowledge in this domain was mostly part of the oral tradition of the abbeys. But he could not have failed to develop a sensitivity to the wine cultures of the different regions of eastern France and the Rhineland to which his research brought him. In his *Literary Voyage in Alsace and Lorraine*, Ruinart describes with evident pleasure being led during a visit to the rector of the Académie de Strasbourg, a certain Monsieur Scheide, into “vast caverns ... with immense barrels filled with old and new wine”. He claims to have sampled a wine from the year 1472, which was by then “a little weakened”, but which “retained something of its primitive generosity”‡.

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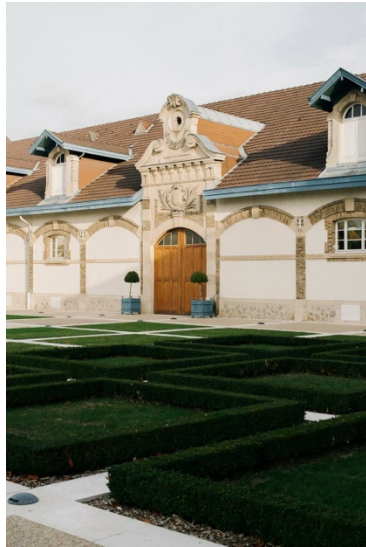


Image: Maison Ruinart, Reims † See Jean Mabillon, *De re diplomatica libri VI*, second edition, Paris: Charles Robustel, 1709. Courtesy Paul Hennebelle.

Nor could Ruinart have failed to appreciate the special symbolic power of wine in Rheims, in particular (the archaic h in the old form of the name testifying to the Germanic Frankish history of the place) – a place where Clovis, King of the Franks, converted from paganism in the sixth century, and where all the kings of France, from Louis VII in the 12th century to Louis XVI just before the Revolution, went to be anointed with the oil of the Holy Ampulla at the city's cathedral. However important the oil was, it seems that the tradition of royal pilgrimages to Reims in fact began two centuries earlier with the coronation of Hugh Capet in 987, and that it was the pinkish flat wine made from the pinot noir grape characteristic of the Champagne region that was the key spirituous substance of this local tradition, well before the Holy Spirit was also discovered in the cathedral's supply of chrism.

Some centuries before Clovis, the Gallo-Romans began to dig great subterranean caverns in the Champagne region's limestone strata just below the surface of the earth, taking the excavated chalk above ground and building up their cities with it; this is the "dove-coloured marl"† Pliny the Elder describes as characteristic of the architecture of Gaul. Nicolas Ruinart's properties near Reims happened to include such enormous chalk crayères‡ beneath them, and when he switched his principal business endeavour from textiles to vintnery, he soon found a use for the caverns as well, lining them with thick bottles of slow-aging wine. Since Maison Ruinart was founded in 1729, the process has evolved slightly – automated gyropalettes are now used, for example, where once labourers took care of the periodic turning of the bottles by hand, the "riddling" as it is called. The basic process remains the same, however. Following initial fermentation in a vat, a second fermentation begins after the addition of yeast and a small amount of sugar, and the bottle is installed in the caverns. Slowly, the yeast produces a residue known as lees, which the timed tilting of the bottle brings toward the cork. At some point there comes the delicate moment of disgorging, when the bottle is opened up, the lees are removed, and a secret dosage of sugar – known only to the chef de cave and determined by his sense of the minutest qualities of that season's grapes, the weather in the fields, the irreducible uniqueness of the initial cuvée – is added, before the bottle is sealed up one last time. Nor has champagne production been perfected in isolation, but in lockstep with advances in other arts and sciences, notably the manufacture of glass. In the early days, when glass was still too brittle, the explosion of a single bottle in the caverns, under pressure from its internal CO₂, could set off a chain reaction that destroyed an entire rack of magnums – as if the thing that gave champagne its soul also drove it to self-annihilation.



But that is true of bubbles in general: they are beautiful, then they burst; they are beautiful because they burst.

Image: *L'odeur des crayères, or The Smell of the Chalk Cellars* by David Shrigley. Photography by Paul Hennebelle.

A very different sort of bubble is known to form from time to time in the market for art and other luxury items. Such bubbles have no chemical properties, no visible membranes, and indeed the only thing they have in common with the tiny translucent globes we admire in champagne is that they, too, burst. In 2008, on the cusp of the Great Recession, Damien Hirst's *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* auction generated more than £110 million in sales. Two years later, his average price at auction was less than £200,000. The gradual build-up of enough subprime mortgages in the US can suddenly make a sublime art

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object in London appear suspect. Not that these were no longer real diamonds, but only that changes in the world as a whole shifted the firm ground on which Sotheby's previously stood in its determination of the worth of things, of what is to count as value in art.

David Shrigley, born in 1968, is a British artist, and was young roughly when Hirst was young. But this is where his affiliation ends to the so-called Young British Artists, a group Shrigley has called "vulgar". Shrigley works alone at his studio in Brighton, mostly without assistance from craftspeople with technical abilities he lacks (though he has relied on others to help realise his ceramics projects). He works in many different media, and across all of these his work is resolutely playful, cartoonish, naïf. Whatever you are supposed to "get" about it is its manifest content, its first-degree idea.

For years Shrigley has contributed a cartoon to the weekend magazine of the Guardian. One might in fact easily suppose that Shrigley is first and foremost a cartoonist, and that his work in other media is the merchandising of figures and themes that started out as black-and-white line drawings. But more sustained attention to his output reveals a prolific artist with an unmistakable signature that remains surprisingly constant across different media, including film and music video, and of which the cartooning is only one dimension. This is not to say that Shrigley's career looks nothing at all like, say, Jim Davis'. While not nearly as ubiquitous as Garfield's likeness, Shrigley's creations have by now entered into the commercial landscape at a magnitude sufficient to help shape the contours and experience of our urban environments. His characters have appeared on the doors of Chelsea cabs, and he has delivered a new mascot, named Kingsley, to Partick Thistle Football Club in Scotland.

And now Shrigley has brought his signature style to the Maison Ruinart, as the latest in a succession of artists in residence. In recent years, Ruinart has invited Brazilian artist Vik Muniz, who made representations of Chardonnay leaves out of natural elements found in Ruinart's vineyards, and Chinese photographer Liu Bolin, who made images of himself as if camouflaged among the same green leaves, or looming among the workers in front of their disgorging equipment.



Image: Maarten Baas, *Le bouquet de Champagne*, 2008. Photography by Paul Hennebelle.

The artists in residence at the Maison are selected in part for their engagement with questions of sustainability and conservation – questions of existential significance for the champagne industry, as the grape harvest comes earlier with each passing year, and as climate change threatens to alter irretrievably the particular qualities that tradition values in a given terroir. But long before the current awareness of our ecological predicament, and long before the current sequence of artist residencies, of which Shrigley's is the most recent, Ruinart has relied on prominent artists to convey, through their own distinctive interpretations, the essence of the old champagne house. A particularly high precedent was established when, in 1896, Alphonse Mucha created his iconic poster for the brand (featuring the archaic spelling of "Rheims"). Ruinart kept up with the fin-de-siècle look and spirit of the art-nouveau movement, and now, like many corporate entities looking to adapt, it is doing its best to keep up with the fin du monde spirit of early 21st-century ecological crisis. The world may be about to end, the thinking seems to be, but won't you trust us to be the provisioners of fine champagne for the big event?

Of course, that is not how they see it. The oil companies might have some inkling of their own bad faith when they resort to greenwashing in their ad campaigns, but we have every reason to believe that the Maison Ruinart, and perhaps even the LVMH Moët Hennessy-Louis Vuitton conglomerate that has owned Ruinart since 1962, would sincerely like to see the environment healthy and stable. And so they send their magnums to Tokyo and New York by boat rather than by plane, where presumably a good number of them are uncorked at black-tie

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fundraisers that are also organised around a sustainability theme. Throughout the world, the imperative is to keep partying, keep playing, keep popping the bubbly, but to do so consciously. By the year 2020, when the pandemic came and changed everything in ways we cannot yet adequately describe, a mentality had emerged in certain parts of the world, or in certain sectors of those parts of the world, that such an attitude of conscious playfulness might just save the world.

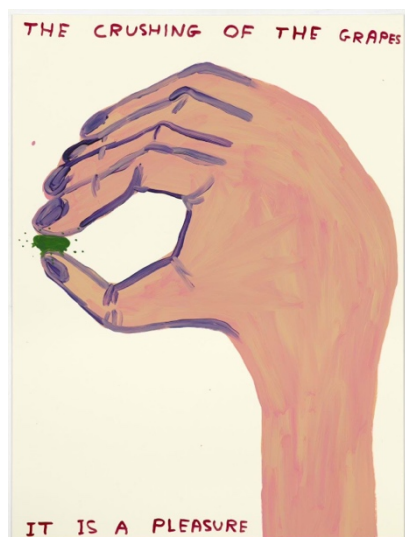


Image: Drawing by David Shrigley for Ruinart. Photography by Paul Hennebelle.

Thus did David Shrigley seem a natural fit for Maison Ruinart. His entire oeuvre is charged up with the spirit of “responsible fun”: almost, you might say, of the same type that alcohol advertisements are in many jurisdictions required to encourage their consumers to have. Shrigley appears, in his work and in his public statements, to be a resolutely nice guy, funny, unpretentious, humane, and singularly un-French. When Ruinart’s representatives trawled him up at the Frieze Art Fair in London a few years back, they hoped he might help the brand balance its rootedness in tradition, all that dank air of the abbeys and the crayères, with something much more of the moment, spontaneous, Instagrammable. Shrigley has said that he was most eager to accept the

invitation to go to Reims in order, afterwards, to return to the UK and explain to his countrymen how the name of that city is pronounced. The people at the Maison seem to love this sort of jesting, precisely because it is decidedly not their own speciality. Champagne is what they make, since 1729, but that does not prevent them from collaborating with an outside joke-maker.

Of particular value to the French brand is the straightforward quality of Shrigley’s jokes. One of my favourite cartoons of his shows two donkeys sitting upright at a bar. The caption, if we can call it that, consists of the words “Hee Haw” repeated several times. The joke, if I may venture an interpretation, is that if an anthropomorphic donkey could talk, it would still say just what it is in a donkey’s nature to say, and as it turns out that is exactly what donkeys already say. Shrigley is a lot like the donkeys in fact: whether helping to advertise football in Scotland or champagne in France, he has his own natural sound, less a bray and more a happy melody. As we toured the collection of artworks at the Maison Ruinart that Shrigley created during his residence, my hosts fell into the habit of reading out to me, in English, the words the artist had written accompanying his images, and then remarking with delight, in French: Oui, c’est David! C’est son style! One of his drawings features

rows of upside-down champagne bottles in the middle of their slow aging process. Instead of normal labels on the bottles, Shrigley has written the words “Not Ready Yet” †. Oui, c’est David! Another drawing features a curving pink earthworm, and the caption, “Worms Work Harder Than Us”, because, my hosts explain to me didactically, David thinks it important to recognise not just the role of humans in the champagne-making process, but all of nature. Oui, c’est son style!



Image: Drawing by David Shrigley for Ruinart. Photography by Paul Hennebelle.

At some point during the visit we descend down into the chalk caverns, which I am absolutely thrilled to see. The entire surface of the cavern walls, 40 metres down, is still marked with the traces of ancient picking and chiselling. There is also graffiti lining the lower parts of the walls, dating back at least to

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the 19th century. Inspired by this precedent, Shrigley decided to add some carvings of his own in addition to the 42 distinct works he contributed to Ruinart during his residency. The carvings are unlabelled and easy to miss, so much of my tour of the crayères was taken up with searching them out. One of them was an anatomically correct heart, inspired by the more familiar heart-shaped hearts that had been carved by unknown workers in the past. Oui, c'est David! Another was a carving of a forklift, because... my hosts struggled to find a reason, but then we noticed a forklift stationed some distance away in the tunnel, and suddenly everything became clear. David decided to carve a forklift because he saw a forklift! Oui, c'est tellement son style!

Image: Drawing by David Shrigley for Ruinart. Photography by Paul Hennebelle.

I admire Shrigley's style very much. It makes me happy to see his work. Yet I could not help but think, down there in the cool earth, in the strange orange light that is supposed to have no adverse effect on the champagne (our photographer was not permitted to turn his flash on the bottles), surrounded by endless rows of magnums of a sublime drink, in glorious chalk caverns carved out by an ancient people whose form of life and remarkable industry alone would have given me quite enough to contemplate: down there, in that setting, David Shrigley's carvings were far and away the least interesting thing on offer.



Image: A carving of a washing machine in the chalk cellars, by David Shrigley. Photography by Paul Hennebelle.

The Maison sought to breath some new life into its brand by inviting Shrigley to move incongruously between registers, to "mix things up", as they say. It may be interesting in this connection to draw a lesson from the study of techniques for the production of sparkling wine. At the lowest end of the market are those wines that get their bubbles through the so-called "soda method". The bubbles are spritzed into the wine at the end of the process, rather than forming aboriginally within the bottle. This is also a way to mix things up, but the result is something of which no winemaker can be proud.

When a soda bubble bursts, nothing ecstatic or tragic occurs, only mundane chemistry. When a bubble bursts in the art market, what was previously appeared charged with an aura of immeasurable genius is suddenly transfigured before our eyes into a "bad deal". When a champagne bubble rises toward the surface of a flute and waits to burst until it is on our tongue – as the Ruinart's competitor monk Dom Pérignon is held to have exclaimed on taking his first sip of the drink – we taste stars. It is hard to imagine that such a noble bubble as this does not experience its annihilation with something like pride – in its service to art, in the old sense of long, slow human endeavour. Such endeavour, the Maison Ruinart may discover, is difficult to transfer to Instagram.

David Shrigley, for his part, can take pride in his distinguished career as a franc-tireur, calling things as he sees them, learning to pronounce the names of new cities, making people smile as he goes from assignment to assignment. That's David! That's his style! May his bubble never burst.