

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

The New York Times  
Worms and Art? Go Ahead, Be Silly.  
Farah Nayeri  
28 November 2021

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### Worms and Art? Go Ahead, Be Silly.

The British artist David Shrigley makes creatures (real and virtual) that are both funny and subversive.



Image: Virtual worms by the British artist David Shrigley, inspired by his stay in Champagne country, can be viewed on smartphone screens via Acute Art. Credit: the artist and Maison Ruinart

Art Basel fairgoers who wander over to the Miami Beach Botanical Garden next door can expect to encounter four odd-looking outdoor sculptures: pink inflatable worms measuring as much as 10 feet long and made of

recycled nylon.

The worms, by David Shrigley, a British contemporary artist whose works straddle art and popular culture, are both funny and subversive.

Virtual worms, also by Mr. Shrigley will be on display around Miami as augmented reality sculptures to be viewed on smartphone screens via Acute Art, a digital art platform led by the curator Daniel Birnbaum, previously the director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

The worm artworks grew out of Mr. Shrigley's 2019 residency in the Champagne region of France, when he was commissioned by the Ruinart Champagne house to make works inspired by his stay. Among the drawings he produced was one of a squiggly pink worm that he inscribed with the words: "Worms work harder than us."

Mr. Birnbaum said: "David Shrigley's medium is a sort of very recognisable, universal silliness: the kind of humour that some people would say is British, but somehow seems pretty universal, and that people enjoy everywhere."

"It's a silliness that talks to us all, because we are all silly."



Image: Mr. Shrigley does not try to define his art. "Most of my work is quite oblique. There isn't one solution to the crossword puzzle." Credit: Jean Picon for Maison Ruinart

Mr. Birnbaum said that on a recent visit to his daughter in Stockholm, he saw Shrigley postcards on her walls. The works enjoy mainstream popularity and could be mistaken for marketing or advertising images, Mr.

Birnbaum said, but they're actually "light subversion," and "not totally benign."

Mr. Shrigley, 53, has been a well-known name in British art for at least a decade. He had a solo exhibition in 2012 at the Hayward Gallery in London, and in 2016 displayed a bronze sculpture of a tall extended thumb — titled "Really Good" — on Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth.

He recently opened a quirky new show at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London — a tennis-ball exchange, where visitors are invited to bring an old ball and trade it in for a new one taken from the wall-to-wall shelves. Over time, brand-new yellow balls will be replaced by used and faded ones, and the exchange will become more important than the objects involved.

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On a recent afternoon, moments after buying mountain boots and expensive pasta, Mr. Shrigley, who lives in Branscombe, an English village, spoke from his car in a video interview. This interview has been edited and condensed.



Image: The three-dimensional worms — pink, inflatable and made of recycled nylon — were at Copenhagen Contemporary in the summer. Credit: David Stjernholm

What message are you communicating with the worms?

I made this work when I was invited to investigate Champagne production and make artworks in response. What I was referencing at that time was that the soil is really essential for any kind of organic endeavour. The health of life on Earth has a lot to do with soil. The soil is important, ergo worms are important.

Most of my work is quite oblique. There isn't one solution to the crossword puzzle. The way I usually like to make the work is that it kind of means this, and how about this? It's a propositional thing.

When did you realise you wanted to be an artist?

It was very much a vocation. I was one of those kids who could be very easily amused by just being left alone with some art materials.

Were you good at drawing?

When I was 5 or 6 years old, I was the best at drawing dinosaurs in my entire class. But by the time I graduated from Glasgow School of Art, I was probably the worst at drawing. I subsequently built a career around not having great graphic skills, which is sort of an odd progression.

What did your parents do?

My father was electronics engineer and my mother was a computer programmer. They were very perplexed that I wanted to go to art school but were still pretty supportive of me.

Your work seems inspired by Dada and Surrealism.

It is. I read a Thames and Hudson book about Dada when I was about 14 or 15, and that was suddenly when I wanted to be an artist. I imagined that there was this other life where you could pursue ideas that were completely "other" to all the ones that I'd experienced growing up in the suburbs of Leicester. You could be a complete iconoclast, completely out with the thinking of the time, and do something transgressive, and other, and strange.

Dadaism really lit the fire for me, and made me want to study art.

What was your first success?

I had real overnight success. I was publishing my own books, and in 1995 applied for a commission with an organisation called Book Works, which makes artist books as a very niche thing. They said that what I was doing was artist books.

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The guy who ended up being their editor wrote for Frieze Magazine, and decided to write a big article about me. Suddenly, I was on the cover of Frieze Magazine, having never really done an exhibition before. The only thing I'd done was publish these funny little books. And everything sort of fell into place.

You somehow manage to be taken seriously as an artist who works a lot with humour.

When I was younger, I was trying to deny the fact that the work was funny or suggest that it was funny by accident. But I've realised that, actually, it's not funny by accident. I totally need comedy. I embrace it. And I want to find it, because for me, comedy is anarchy, comedy is punk rock. Without comedy, art is too conventional.

What will you do next?

I read a newspaper article a few years ago about how paperback copies of "The Da Vinci Code" and "Fifty Shades of Grey" were clogging up charity shops because they couldn't sell them anymore. They are given thousands of copies of them.

So I decided to buy all of the copies that I could find, and realized what I could do with them.

It's been more than 70 years since George Orwell died, which means that all of his works are now in the public domain. So I'm pulping all of the copies of "The Da Vinci Code" and making paper with a palimpsest aspect to it, where you can still see bits of the original text, then print a new version of George Orwell's "1984" on that paper. And do the same with Orwell's "Animal Farm" and "Fifty Shades of Grey."

I think "1984" is a really important text. It seems to have an ever darker resonance with every new generation somehow.