

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Paper

Artist David Shrigley on His Ruinart Collab and Worm Obsession

Justin Moran

13 December 2021

PAPER®

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Image: David Shrigley

This year, Maison Ruinart continued its storied relationship with the art community by collaborating with David Shrigley, the contemporary British artist whose work translates everyday occurrences into satirical, text-heavy illustrations. The 300-year-old champagne house has previously recruited names like Liu Bolin (2018) or Vik Muniz (2019), and their latest endeavour sees Shrigley tell Ruinart's story through 36 drawings and gouache paintings, as well as three neon installations, two ceramics and one door.

Titled "Unconventional Bubbles," Shrigley's series steps inside Ruinart, having visited the Champagne region first-hand with its historic vineyard and centuries-old wine cellars. Like all the artist's work, the complicated process of creating Ruinart products is distilled into direct messages that are easily understood and, most importantly, humorous. "Keep your filthy hands off our grapes," reads one piece, while another makes the bold declaration, "Worms work harder than us."

Ruinart recently brought "Unconventional Bubbles" to Art Basel in Miami, celebrating their partnership with a private, star-studded garden party alongside guests like Jemima Kirke, Hari Nef, Jacob Bixenman and Chloe Wise. Set to the sounds of DJ Timo Weiland, the special fête saw attendees eating bites courtesy of Chef Flynn McGarry and sipping champagne around life-size interpretations of Shrigley's tongue-in-cheek creations.

For those unable to see "Unconventional Bubbles" in person, Ruinart has launched a digital viewing experience for the post-pandemic world, called "The Unconventional Gallery." On it, Shrigley's iconic pink worm takes viewers through the individual works to mimic the experience of a physical art fair like Basel, complete with downloadable wallpapers for your phone and more.

PAPER sat down with Shrigley at The Edition during Basel to talk about his process for arriving at a series like "Unconventional Bubbles." As a man whose wit isn't limited to the art he creates, our conversation twisted and turned — quite like a worm — as we dove deep into his niche musical past, new electric guitar obsession and recent shift to vegetarian, countryside living.

What was the process like, for you, making these different statements alongside Ruinart?

My method of making artwork is that you just say things and try to figure out what they mean afterwards. I feel like a child learning to speak. I really enjoy that process and once you apply that to some kind of marketing, advertising statement the way you want to talk about a product or an activity, it's really interesting. So [for Ruinart], I came up with these words which became slogans in my mind. I don't know if everyone else sees them as such: It won't be like this forever; Worms work harder than us.

I felt like we arrived at something that, for me, was quite interesting. I enjoy that use of language and trying to deliver a message in a very direct way, which is what my work is about. But the way I come to it is through experimenting — making 100 statements and finding a few that work. That's my thing, I've been doing it for 20 years.

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What do you think makes a really effective slogan?

I don't actually get to make those choices, I just make the work. Particularly in this case, it's really important that somebody else edits and that's my method, anyway: to make an exhibition where you make 100 works and maybe only 30 or 40 make it through the editing process. Increasingly, other people do the editing because I realize nobody likes the decisions I make [laughs].

Why do you say that?

Well, because I know they don't. The works I think are brilliant, nobody seems to like, and the ones I think are trite, everyone seems to love [laughs]. I don't know why and I don't really know what to do about that, but that's just the way it is. Now in my mind, I'm thinking: I don't like this, so everybody else is going to like it. And vice versa.

Having done so many of these works over time, I'd imagine you see what people are responding to — and especially on the internet, where you can quickly tell what's hitting or not. Does that affect, at least, the beginning stages?

I have no idea, it's not that I don't care. The work is made in the studio, so I just focus on the process. And what happens to it afterward, there's an element of collaboration, an element of delegating decisions and that's just sort of the way it is. That next thing is something I'm puzzled about a bit, but I don't dwell on it, because that's not very helpful. It's sort of hilarious in a way that I don't like my own work, but other people do. I just can't see the work as other people see it, obviously, and you have a deeper understanding of that because of social media where you have this quantified response. I didn't have that before, you were just in blissful ignorance.

You can immediately tell if something's been a success or not, but it sounds like that doesn't really impact your decision-making.

Success for me has always been not having to have a job, and I achieved that a long time ago [laughs]. That's all I've ever wanted: to not have a job. The rest, I'm not too concerned about. Beyond that, I have a lot of freedom, as well. I sell a lot of work, so I don't really have to worry so much about the commercial impressions. I'm allowed to make art that's unsellable, basically, as long as I make the other stuff, which I like making, anyway. Sell some things, so you're allowed to do something else. That really is my artistic practice at the moment.

I made a piece in London [at Stephen Friedman Gallery], called Mayfair Tennis Ball Exchange, which is the neighborhood of London. Mayfair, it's kind of a shi-shi place where you go to buy Savile Row suits and Bulgari watches. This piece is like 12,166 tennis balls on 1.4 meters of shelving all regularly presented, so it's enormous and was filled with brand new tennis balls. People are invited to bring an old tennis ball in exchange for a new one, or exchange for one that's already there, not necessarily a new one. The gallery was like, "What's for sale?" And I said, "Well, I've done 100 paintings and they're for sale. The 100 frames would probably cost about the same amount of money as tennis balls plus shelves. Can I do the tennis balls?" So that's the trade.

How long did it take for you to learn that this is a good model for you?

Not until very recently. But I've made a lot of things more recently where their status as artwork is to be determined. I started making guitars a few years ago, electric guitars. I really like them as sculptural objects. I'd much rather make an electric guitar than a figurative sculpture, sometimes. I've made eight of them now from scratch in collaboration with artisans. Some are more conventional and others have just one string. The gallery is like, "What's that for?" I'm like, "It's to play." They're like, "Can we sell it?" I'm like, "No, actually not at the moment." And I paid for it, so we made events with these things where we invite musicians and I've written music and other people have written music for it as an ongoing project. I guess the headline there is that I've become

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less interested in making figurative sculpture, so what I make now has a function in the real world, somehow — an interactive thing. That's part of the privilege of what I do, just play around.



Image: David Shrigley/Ruinart

Do you have a music background?

I used to play in a band in the '90s — a rubbish band, but we played a few gigs.

Rubbish in a cool way?

I really don't know if it was cool. My wife would say, "How do you get groupies?" I'd say, "Out of sympathy." I wasn't very good, but I actually sort of wrote the songs and sang. I couldn't really sing, couldn't really write a song, but I had these three other guys who were quite good: really good drummer, really good bass player and another guy who played the banjo. I'm really glad it was pre-digital music. We never recorded anything, just played gigs. It was fun, I enjoyed it. I sort of stopped doing it and that coincided with my success as a visual artist. I've gone back to it and have actually made quite a number of records and musical projects in collaboration with other artists over the years since then.

I wonder if there's an intersection between songwriting and your word play?

I've done some lyric projects, which happened by accident. In 2006, it was called Worried Noodles. I was invited to design a record cover for a record label. I didn't like any of the bands on the label, so they said, "Let's make a record cover, anyway." It's a conceptual art piece, but I didn't think anyone would buy it if it was just a record sleeve, so I made a book with handwritten lyrics that are purported to be lyrics [for songs]. And there's an empty dust sleeve with an apology for there not being a record. All these songs ended up being a bit like concrete poetry.

Inevitably, the label gave this thing to loads of different bands and said, "Would you like to make this into a song, so then it became like 40 different bands, some of which were quite well-known at the time. It was really strange, it wasn't even my idea. Every so often they'd send me an mp3 and say, "David Byrne has written a song." It was such a strange thing, but so wonderful and bizarre. The lyrics I wrote ended up being a proposition to something else. So a lot of the sculptural work I make that isn't to do with music is sort of musical in the real world.

Are you on TikTok? If you think about the most contemporary form of communication and a rapid consumption of words and ideas, TikTok is the platform.

I don't really know what I could do. I'm not the art and I don't want to be. I don't want people looking at me, I'm not the personality. But it is something I've thought about. It's there and you've got to use it. I've always been a bit late to everything. I guess the answer is that I haven't really figured it out, but I am aware that it's there and important. Everybody sees you [on TikTok], but it's not a means to an end for me. My end has already been met by making the work, which sort of works on Instagram. I've got reasons not to be [on TikTok], I'm just trying to find reasons to be there. I make animations, so maybe I need to make puppets.

Do you think good art has to be funny?

No, I think a good life has to have some comedy in it, but I don't think good art has to be funny. I think my art requires comedy and comedy is something very special. It's a sublime element of humanity that is just a joyful gift. Increasingly, I've had this conversation for decades that, "Is comic art valid?" Or, "Does comedy diminish it somehow?" There's only two types of art: good and bad. Some of it is funny and some of it isn't. But for me, I need comedy and I cherish it. I used to say that the work was comic by accident — that it ended up being comic.

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But now I realize that comedy is really important. When you're so close to it, it ceases to be funny, but somehow ends up having profundity to it. Lots of the artists I love aren't funny, though. Willem de Kooning paintings weren't funny, but I still like those works from the '60s and '70s.



Image: David Shrigley/Ruinart

It's interesting how comedy is often associated with being cheap or less thoughtful.

Comedy isn't the antonym of seriousness, it's not the opposite. The opposite of seriousness is incompetence and the opposite of comedy isn't seriousness. The opposite of comedy is sadness, misery. Maybe people would argue with that, but that's my understanding. Seriousness is about your intent, it doesn't negate comedy.

How do you personally relate to the worm and why do you think people have taken a liking to that, especially?

I love worms. I always used to live in the city, but more recently I moved to the countryside and I got a garden for the first time and became a vegetarian. I've increasingly become interested in what happens in the garden. I'm a lazy gardener, but I've started growing things. I'm very aware of the soil and think we have to be attentive to the natural world in a way that we haven't been. So I rescue worms and I rescue snails, much to the disappointment of my wife. "What are you doing? Those snails are going to eat the strawberries," but no reason to kill them. I feel bad about it.

I've lived in the city for so long and you forget about worms, so it's interesting that–

They're there [laughs].