

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Elle Decor
For Artist David Shrigley, Every Work Is a Work In Progress
Sean Santiago
14 December 2021

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Image: Courtesy World Red Eye/Ruinart

Who knew British artist David Shrigley's contemplative trip to Maison Ruinart's Champagne caves in Reims, France, would result in an augmented-reality installation at Art Basel Miami Beach? Surely not Shrigley himself, who was tapped by the LVMH-owned company for its Carte Blanche artist series in 2019. The following year derailed the planned rollout for "Unconventional Bubbles," a suite of 36 works on paper, three neon installations, two ceramic sculptures, and even a door, all of which finally made their way to the fair's collector's lounge this year.

And while Champagne might connote the high life, Shrigley's work was responding to something much humbler: earthworms. In fact, the artist supplemented his installation with an augmented-reality earthworm roaming the IRL grounds of Miami's Bass museum (and elsewhere throughout the city), a dedicated online viewing platform suitably dubbed the Unconventional Gallery, and a star-studded takeover of the Miami Beach Botanical Garden.

Ruinart hosted ELLE DECOR in Miami to chat with Shrigley about ecology, context, and NFTs.



Image: David Shrigley, Worms Work Harder Than Us. Todd-White Art Photography

ELLE DECOR: You started this project in 2019. How much of this work had you created before the world went offline?

David Shrigley: I'd done everything, basically. And we had a plan for everything. And then we had to improvise. The augmented reality was a solution to the problem, where we could collaborate on something remotely and digitally.

ELLE DECOR: I like that the work is quite sardonic, but I'm curious what that was in response to, if not COVID-19?

DS: When I went [to Reims, France], I was really interested in the history of the brand and the nature of making Champagne. My work is so rooted in language but my knowledge of French is incredibly poor—I'm barely conversational—and I was interested in the slippages of meaning between their point of view and my own. A big part of what I did was to interpret and then invent my own statements that seemed appropriate to the ideas that they wanted to put across about Champagne production. Sustainability was a big talking point then, and it's become even more important now, so the worm evolved from that.

ELLE DECOR: So the worm became a mascot of sustainability, to some degree.

DS: What I find is that you make a work in response to a particular context, and then the context changes and everybody just projects the new context onto the work. So [the artwork] It Won't Be Like This Forever was a statement about the environment, and then it became a COVID statement. It's like, if you lived in the U.K., everything became a statement on Brexit for awhile whether you liked it or not.

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ELLE DECOR: Is that upsetting to you, that the work has this completely different meaning?

DS: No, not at all. That is the nature of it. Context is half the work, and you're not in control of the context. What I've realized in recent years is that every work is a work in progress. Once you embrace that, it's quite exciting. I'm not a control freak about my own work, otherwise I wouldn't make it.

ELLE DECOR: Whose idea was it, then, to render the worm in augmented reality?

DS: That came about in response to lockdown. We made that piece remotely. I made the painting of the worm for the Ruinart project, but I'd made a physical version of it for Copenhagen Contemporary. I made these giant inflatable worms to fill the space. That project got delayed, and [the worms] found their way back, as objects, into the Ruinart project. They're both sort of talking about the same thing: about worms being important and soil being important and our understanding of that importance continuing to evolve.



Image: David Shrigley, L'Odeur Des Crayères, 2019. The crayères are centuries-old manmade labyrinths in which bottles of Ruinart Champagne are aged. Todd-White Art Photography

ELLE DECOR: Were there other elements of your practice that changed during COVID?

DS: That's the first and only digital piece I've made, and like any technology, it's got to conform to the same rules as any artwork. There are good artworks and bad artworks—it doesn't matter if it's an oil painting or an AR piece or an NFT. There are works that are going to be just rubbish.

ELLE DECOR: Is it tempting to jump on the NFT bandwagon?

DS: Not really, no. I think there's a work to be made; I just haven't figured out what mine is. I suppose with any digital technology the interesting thing is the value of it. But in the world of contemporary art, we're well used to things that don't exist having a value.

ELLE DECOR: That's fair. But your ideas around social impact and sustainability—are those something you feel as capable of imparting using augmented reality as a tool?



Image: Todd-White Art Photography

DS: I suppose at the end of the day, if you're making a digital piece it's better than packing up and shipping a big sculpture from London to Miami.

ELLE DECOR: What happened to your giant worm sculptures?

DS: They got folded up and put in a box. They're quite sustainable, actually, because they fit into a box like that [presses his hands together].

ELLE DECOR: So they're flat-packed.

DS: Yeah. It's not like a sculpture that has to go into a shipping container. But that's not why I made it. The good thing about art, I suppose, is that it's valuable. It's not disposable.