

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Telegraph

David Shrigley warns NFTs attract 'nefarious' people after falling victim to digital forgery

Gabriella Swerling

31 December 2021

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Image: Julian Simmonds

A leading contemporary artist has warned that NFTs "attract people of nefarious intent" as he reveals that he has fallen victim to digital forgery.

David Shrigley OBE, 53, who is best known for his distinctive drawings which make satirical comments on the everyday, has become the latest mainstream artist to wade into the debate surrounding digital artworks and non-fungible tokens (NFTs).

He described the digital assets as "sinister" and "dangerous" and revealed that he - along with Sir Anish Kapoor and David Bailey - has also had his art "ripped off" and sold on the blockchain.

In an interview with The Telegraph, he said he appreciated the "absurdism" of owning something "that is purely notional" and likened NFTs to "conceptual art" itself. However, he also raised concerns, warning that despite using social media to promote his work, there is a dark side of combining technology and art.

"If you apply a value to anything, people are prepared to do bad things to each other in order to acquire anything that has a currency value to it," Shrigley said.

"The more valuable it is, somehow the more dangerous it is, and the more it attracts people of nefarious intent..."

"The value of it is the sinister thing," he added. "Because if something acquires a large value, and it's purely notional, it has the potential for abuse. Also, because it suddenly exists in the blockchain - when not a lot of people fully understand what the blockchain is - the mechanism of our economy is underpinned by technology that nobody really understands."

An NFT is a digital asset that represents real-world objects such as art, music and videos which are generally one-of-a-kind, and have unique identifying codes. They are bought and sold online - often with cryptocurrency - and have become increasingly popular in the art market. In total, £123 million has been spent on NFTs since November 2017, according to CoinDesk.

Shrigley added: "As soon as something has significant value, it attracts a lot of people who are only interested in their own enrichment - financial enrichment. And are quite prepared to not offer anything in return. So, I think, as soon as anything starts getting really really valuable, things turn nasty, things have the potential to turn nasty. It's been like that forever."

His comments come after it emerged in November that artworks by other leading artists, Sir Anish Kapoor and David Bailey had their work photographed, turned into NFTs and marketed for millions-of-pounds without their consent on the trading platform, OpenSea.

Ben Moore, a British curator pictured below, took photographs of helmets from a project called Art Wars, created by more than 300 artists since 2013, turned them into NFTs, and put them up for sale in cryptocurrency worth millions-of-pounds. The Art Wars NFT page has since been taken down from OpenSea after it said it had received a copyright infringement notice and complied with it.

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The dispute highlighted the controversy and debate surrounding ownership of NFTs. People who buy NFTs do not own the physical artwork, and, as a result, digital versions are sometimes sold without the original owners' permission, leading to conflict over intellectual property and opening the gateway for potential legal action.

At the time, Ben Moore said he "regrets that some of the artists were taken by surprise" by the online launch and that he has since removed works at their requests. However, Shrigley revealed that he has also had his work "fraudulently" copied, "ripped off" and sold as NFTs on the same OpenSea website - despite having never made an NFT himself.

"There's no point in legal action," he said. "My response is to post on social media 'these are not my NFTs - you're being ripped off if you buy them' and then they tend to disappear quite quickly, because you mention the website in question and they don't really want that. But yeah, I mean, I get ripped off all the time, it's part of what I do."

"I just accept that it's gonna happen," he added. "And in a way it's a form of flattery because you've reached a certain point where people will want to rip you off."

Despite his concerns regarding NFT's, Shrigley revealed that he is in talks with the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, where his current show, the Mayfair Tennis Ball Exchange about making an NFT himself - and "we're all trying to get our heads around what" they are.

"With NFTs, you're exchanging something that's notional for something that's equally notional, which is sort of interesting, and strange - but also there has to be some kind of sinister aspect to it as well, because we live in an advanced capitalist society, and interests are as a society are very well served by the complexities of the economic system".

"The jury's still out on NFTs, and I think you have to make one to realise whether they're pointless or not," he said, although, .

However, he's concerned "that just because it's a new technology doesn't mean it's good". In fact, he said, "the vast majority of NFs are going to be quite naff".

Shrigley has created art using technology before and mainly uses Instagram to promote his work where he keeps his 884,000 followers updated with almost daily new posts.

He has also made digital animations and as Augmented Reality {AR} collaborations with London restaurant, Sketch, and at this year's Frieze art fair, he collaborated with the Champagne company, Ruinart, as well as Acute Art, which presents VR (Virtual Reality) or AR Art.

Shrigley was appointed OBE in the 2020 New Year Honours for services to visual arts. He studied at Glasgow School of Art was nominated for the 2013 Turner Prize.

Among his best known works include the sculpture, Really Good, a giant out-of-proportion thumbs up which was installed on Trafalgar Square's Fourth plinth in September 2016.

His current show, The Mayfair Tennis Ball Exchange, is at the Stephen Friedman Gallery until January 82022.

A spokesperson for OpenSea said: "Infringement of intellectual property rights is a violation of our Terms of Service. We received a DMCA notice for the NFTs and acted in compliance with the DMCA, per our policy."