

Doodle Unto Others

by Elizabeth Fullerton

For an artist best known for his zany doodles depicting life in its brutal absurdity, David Shrigley leads a surprisingly disciplined existence, involving a strict work routine, jogging, and yoga. "You can't just lie on the roof and smoke joints naked, because that's not going to get the work done, is it? You've got to be down here, fully clothed, sober, and wandering amongst paper, paint, and pens," he says.

This month, London's Hayward Gallery is launching the first major retrospective in Britain of works by Shrigley, whose cartoons in newspapers and books have gained him a cult following. Up through May 13, "David Shrigley: Brain Activity" features over 175 drawings, paintings, sculpture, photographs, and animations—with many new works in the mix.

The Glasgow-based artist confesses that he came up with the show's title at a yoga class: "The teacher was saying something about extending your spine to . . . lessen the brain activity." This exemplifies the way Shrigley uses out-of-context axioms, aphorisms, and clichés in his work, often making them seem nonsensical or comically doom laden. "I'm interested in the slippage of meaning when one speaks metaphorically or idiomatically," he says.

Shrigley's characters often spout existential truths that would be at home in a Samuel Beckett play, and he says writers have probably influenced him more than visual artists. Particular heroes are Franz Kafka and William S. Burroughs.

Classic pieces appearing in the exhibition include a sculpture of a taxidermied dog brandishing a sign that reads "I'm Dead"; Grave-stone (2008), a granite slab with a shopping list in gold lettering; and Lost (1996), a photo of a note pinned to a tree requesting the return of a lost pigeon.

An underlying trait in much of Shrigley's artwork is his dry sense of humor. "He's really good at picking out the various oddities and uncanny moments of the everyday," says the exhibition's curator, Cliff Lauson.

"You stand there at a David Shrigley show . . . and you burst out laughing," says fellow artist Tracey Emin, who had her own show at the Hayward last year. "People say he's not an artist and he's like a cartoonist. He's an absolute artist! He's broken through all these other barriers, but he's not commercial."

Since graduating from the Glasgow School of Art in 1991, where he majored in environmental art, Shrigley has produced over 7,000 works, including drawings, sculptures, films, and spoken-word albums. There's even a 2007 compilation of songs, called *Worried Noodles*, with musicians like David Byrne and the band Franz Ferdinand putting Shrigley's words to melodies. And his work has graced T-shirts, mugs, and greeting cards.

Such is his popular appeal that fans have asked him to design tattoos, which he does for free to alleviate his qualms about the practice. "I feel really quite uncomfortable," he says, "with the fact that these quite often beautiful young people sully their virgin skin with my horrible drawings."

I HATE BALLOONS



Untitled drawing appearing in David Shrigley's retrospective at the Hayward Gallery in London; all works 2011.