

ARTFORUM



DESPERATE LAUGHTER NERVOUS CHATTER AS THE LITTLE CREATURE DASHES ACROSS THE FLOOR / SOME CONFUSION PEOPLE ARE EMBARRASSED BUT FAINTLY AMUSED / THEN THE CREATURE'S PURPOSE BECOMES APPARENT AND PANIC SETS IN. CHAOS, SCREAMING.

David Shrigley, *Untitled (Serial Killer)*, 2002.
Ink on paper, 9 1/2 x 8 1/2".

DAVID SHRIGLEY

ANTON KERN GALLERY

The phrase "I've had a brilliant idea" might seem like a flash of ego, especially when inked over a picture of an electrical power station rather than above the more traditional lightbulbs. But taken in the context of the sixty works (all but one 2002) in David Shrigley's first solo show in New York, this altered photo read more as acknowledgment that the artist's ideas are neither rare nor precious but a constant source from which he churns out drawings, books, sculptures, photos, and public interventions.

Shrigley's drawings and texts show no signs of formal art training, though he attended the Glasgow School of Art. Deliberately abject, primitive, and low-tech, his work is, if not childlike, certainly stuff that a child could make. That doesn't make him a nouveau Dubuffet, however, absorbing "outsider" techniques into a faux-naïf style. Instead, reveling in human

foibles and revealing a calculated vulnerability through his emotional outpourings, Shrigley bears similarities to contemporaries like Sean Landers and Chris Johansen. But where Landers has hubris to deal with and Johansen hangs on to hope and good vibes, Shrigley slips and slides between horror and humor. In a text piece, he writes of showing up at his boss's house intending to kill her, but the ensuing fight turns into slapstick. Another piece pictures a diamond-shaped being with arms and legs and reads: DESPERATE LAUGHTER NERVOUS CHATTER AS THE LITTLE CREATURE DASHES ACROSS THE FLOOR / SOME CONFUSION PEOPLE ARE EMBARRASSED BUT FAINTLY AMUSED / THEN THE CREATURE'S PURPOSE BECOMES APPARENT AND PANIC SETS IN. CHAOS, SCREAMING.

Like *Bears and Butt-head*, Shrigley's work is so dumb it's smart. *Balloons* is a photo of a balloon amid rumpled bed sheets; embellished with a smiley face, the object conjures both dorky charm and loneliness. Some pieces read partly as underhanded comments on contemporary art, as in *Untitled (Totem)*, a painting whose abstract imagery is accompanied by a helpful diagram indicating that the piece depicts a PRIMITIVE PERSON hurling SPECIAL GOOP with a GIANT SPOON at a MOULDY STUMP. This was part of a display of relatively large, colorful works that was gently mocked by Shrigley's *Small Exhibition* on the same wall. Twenty-one pieces hung near the floor, as if on view for elves. Although none measured more than a few square inches, some encompassed sprawling subjects like the Internet, government, and the Amazon River. DON'T

MESS WITH GOD, noted one, which included a vaguely rainbowlike form, HE'S TOO BIG.

Indeed, Shrigley is thinking big, in his own small, comical way. The show opened with two photographic diptychs. *Doors* features two views: one out to sea through an arch in a rock formation and the other into an open barn. X-Ray shows a physician examining Shrigley, who stares blandly at the ceiling. Apparently he hasn't told the doctor that he's swallowed a troll doll—or so one infers from the lower image, a pictogram silhouetting a chubby figure with a big shock of hair, set inside a stomach shape. This quartet of pictures sums up a worldview—the world out there, the world in here—on both macroscopic and microscopic, anonymous and intimate levels. All the works that followed them, the non sequiturs, witticisms, and aphorisms, the revenge fantasies and paranoia and self-analysis, illustrate a creative process that may have more to do with art therapy than the production of art objects. Stripped of assumptions and pretensions, Shrigley's art becomes a kind of therapy-through-comedy for the viewer too.

—Julie Cagnilia