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## Painting, Tongue Firmly in Cheek: David Shrigley Gets Colorful at Anton Kern

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | APRIL 17, 2015



David Shrigley's "Untitled (My life is good)" 2015, currently on view at Anton Kern Gallery. (Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York/© David Shrigley/Photo by Mark Woods)

Perhaps the strangest thing about David Shrigley is how normal he is in person. The Scottish artist — very tall, rather soft-spoken — is best known for a prolific body of drawings that are alternately absurd, morbid, death-obsessed, confessional, and scatological. In them, animals tend to play key roles as often as humans. A typical Shrigley work is one in which we learn that a three-eyed squirrel named Timmy, sporting a smart little red coat, has had intercourse with pigeons named Spam, Fuckwing, Elaine, and Little-Miss Turd-Eater.

For his sixth outing with Anton Kern Gallery in New York, Shrigley has put aside his most recognizable format (small-scale ink sketches whose starkness makes for good tattoos) in favor of large acrylic-on-paper paintings. These are joined by two sculptures of common objects — a telephone and a calculator — enlarged to uncomfortable dimensions. The powder-coated steel calculator (dubbed "Subtractor," because that's all its keypad allows it to do) has a numerical typeface designed by Shrigley, and a functioning display. The artist, whose father was an electrical engineer for General Electric, conjured the retro design based on his own mid-1970s memories of a "very exciting, high-tech" LED calculator arriving at the family home.

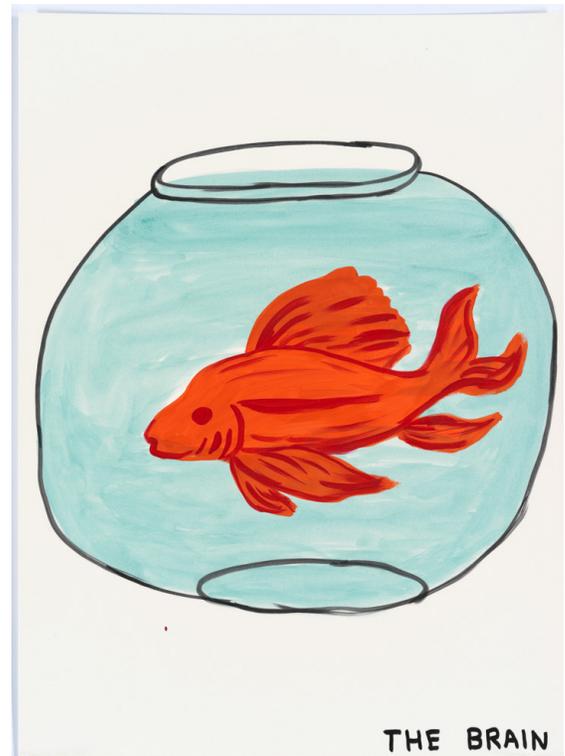
Shrigley's phone sculpture also works, to a degree — it's hooked into Anton Kern's main line, so that if you call the gallery, it rings. (Dialing out is trickier — Shrigley neglected to include a "0" on the keypad.) He made the plastic work in collaboration with his design-engineer brother in New Zealand, who organized to have it fabricated in China. The handpiece is awkwardly large. "It depends how big your head is," Shrigley admitted, pondering best usage practices. "It's better to put the earpiece by your ear, and then you just have to shout." The piece also comes with a caveat: "If somebody would like to purchase it, they have to do it over this telephone. The deal for the object is done utilizing the object."

Nearby there's a gridded selection of roughly 34 x 24 inch acrylic paintings. There are a number of works depicting animals — a horse, a purple lamb — cavorting beneath the optimistic assertion that "My Life Is Good." There's a cat, simply labeled "Friend." There are paintings of consciously Gustonian clocks and boots. One work includes the single word "Weed," claustrophobically crushed between encroaching gray smoke. What does that mean, I wondered? "If you smoke weed you know what that means," Shrigley said, slipping into an ironic stoner drawl. "It's all closing in on you. Getting fuzzy and difficult."

The artist described his working practice as a combination of overproduction and relentless culling: He claims to throw out nearly two-thirds of his finished drawings and paintings. (Either Shrigley does not smoke weed himself, or he's found a strain that favors manic production over sloth). Nearly all of the works here include text, although Shrigley noted that there's less verbiage than he's used to. Some paintings simply make statements or pose reflexive questions, like "It's ok," or "Is this ok?" ("The works assert or question their own value," Shrigley said. "It suggests a kind of neurosis.") The artist explained that, after completing 250 small ink drawings for a commission at London's Sketch restaurant, he was looking to switch gears. "This work was born of a desire to make something colorful and quite different from what I was doing before," he explained, adding that with these paintings, the entire composition is often birthed from a single straight-from-the-tube pigment.

The largest paintings in the show measure over 60 x 43 inches — they're a bit like Shrigley's tinier drawings blown up into shouting poster-size. Many of them are abstract compositions augmented with text: a grid of pinkish, uneven circles beneath the word "Balls"; the phrase "You Like This" floating over a massive black rectangle, a cartoon riff on Malevich's geometry. "I've always been really into painting," Shrigley said. "When I was at art school in the late '80s I wanted to be Basquiat. Or Sigmar Polke. Julian Schnabel I was very keen on, circa 1987." There's an interesting tension in this exhibition between earnestness and a certain wink-wink, nudge-nudge. A field of squiggly purple, Brice Mardenesque lines is offset with a smirking "You Like This" tucked into the drawing's bottom right corner. "I'm one of those people who really likes abstract painting," Shrigley said. "I liked that Chris Martin show here at Anton Kern, it was nice. If I had limitless resources I would buy one of his big paintings for my living room. But there's something that stops me from making abstract painting — it wouldn't be a part of my project if I did that."

Two of the larger paintings here are purely abstract, and don't include any textual commentary. One is an uneven, all-black shape (Shrigley cut the offending bits out of a partially ruined piece paper, and voila). Another is a depiction of a brick wall. Both include the artist's initials as prominent parts of the composition — a change of pace for Shrigley, who says that he rarely, if ever, signs works in this manner. "In a way, that has to be there," he explained, meaning the signature. "The question I'm interested in is: How much information can you leave out, and still have it be a piece that's about image and text? Somehow I figured that the signature is enough." In other words, that painted "D.S." functions as a kind of "J.K." — a subtle nod to the paradoxical unserious seriousness of Shrigley's entire enterprise.



David Shrigley; *Untitled (The brain)*, 2015; Acrylic on paper; 34 x 26 1/4 inches (framed) (86.4 x 66.7 cm); 29 7/8 x 22 1/16 inches (paper) (75.9 x 56 cm)