David Shrigley: interviewed by Dave Eggers

Author Dave eggers interviews David Shrigley ahead of his latest exhibition

David Shrigley's line drawings take a darkly sardonic mirror to his everyday thoughts, decisions and problems, so that a typical refrain goes something like: 'What does your future hold? Arthritis.' Two decades of similarly tragicomic art – from his signature, scratchy loose-leaf drawings to surreal photos and even the occasional taxidermied object, such as a dog waving a placard that says, 'I'm Dead' – are about to go on display at the Hayward for Shrigley's first museum survey, 'Brain Activity'. American author and publisher of both graphic and literary novels, Dave Eggers, conducted an interview over Skype with Shrigley in which they break down the Glaswegian's working process, his studied lack of sophistication and his ongoing two-fingered salute to the stuffy art world.

Dave Eggers: 'You've said before that when you're drawing, you're taking on a role. That is, that there's a persona, almost, that you've generated who is behind your work. But I wonder how you get to the place where you create. The drawings, at their best, I think, have a desperateness to them that I like to assume you're only reaching after drinking heavily, or being depressed, or being alone at 4 am.'

David Shrigley: 'Well, I'm quite disciplined and always totally sober. There's a specific amount of caffeine and sugar and nutrition to get stuff done – you get to your forties and realize you've got to eat stuff otherwise you get really grumpy. There's a certain zone that you get into that you're kind of almost not really thinking anymore, but it just feels like it's all pouring out of you like water out of a jug. But it's not necessarily any good. Sometimes it's terrible. So yeah, I do have those moments, but if I had a glass of wine, that's it, game over. I'm going upstairs to watch CSI: Miami.'

DE: 'I think, though, that the viewer gets the experience that you *are* having fun, and that's fairly rare. It seems like a train of thought that actually reflects what goes through our minds — and that you're not self-censoring. But you must edit.'

DS: 'I throw a lot away. My attitude towards it is very free, because I know there's only a one in four chance that I'll keep the drawing in question. And at that point you're not really worried too much about making a mess of it.'

DE: 'But the mess of it is part of what works with what you do. The drawings are somehow funnier because of the awkwardness or the crudeness, and the crossings-out. You can't improve upon how sort of perfect that mix is, between the text and these awkward figures, with their terrible hair, and their bones that don't go in the right direction, the overlapping lines. Do you remember the moment when you arrived at your style?'

DS: 'I've always drawn in that way. It's not the kind of drawing where you're trying to get their eyes in the right place, you're just trying to tell somebody something as directly as possible. It's non-drawing, in a way. It's somewhere between handwriting and drawing. But then again there are also certain rules to what I do, like I'm not allowed to re-draw or anything and it just is what it is.'

DE: 'Between the casualness of the work, and the fact that it's funny – these are art-world no-nos.'

DS: 'I know a lot of people still don't see my work as serious, because it's funny. But then again, I've come to realise that the opposite of seriousness is not humour. The opposite of seriousness is incompetence. It's somebody who isn't really engaged with what they're doing. And

the opposite of humour is maybe sadness.'

DE: 'The art world does tend to attract a very self-serious type of person. I noticed that when I was in art school myself, and then when I worked at an art gallery. I tend to think that there's a fear of acknowledging the inherent absurdity of, say, sticking a urinal on a plinth and calling it art. Duchamp knew it was absurd, and very funny, but I've been around a lot of art-world people who treat Duchamp with great seriousness, when that's sort of the opposite of his purpose as an artist. It's as if to crack a smile would be to diminish the importance of the work.'

DS: 'For me, humour is kind of volatile. I don't think you'd ever judge a writer any differently according to the humour in their work, but they do that with fine artists. Quite obviously I don't really agree with that.'

DE: 'It's a weird no-humour zone, right? But it's a strange thing to remove humour completely from all visual art, but it has been removed from 95 per cent of it, as if humour was some very tangential or superfluous part of the human experience as opposed to being very central.'

DS: 'I agree. The odd thing for me is that I am kind of a real cartoonist, as well as being a real fine artist, in the sense that my work is filed under humour in the bookshop, sometimes as well as being filed under art. And also a lot of people who look at the work think I'm just one of those comic-book type dudes. Which is nice, but I've got a foot in either camp, as it were. To be honest, in terms of the way my work is received, I feel like I'm taken far more seriously than I should be anyway.'

DE: 'In your last few books, though, there's a real clear mix of the outright funny stuff and there's a lot of stuff that's I think much more pained and political. Humour that I like comes from a place of anger, exasperation. I was re-reading a lot of Vonnegut recently, and then I was looking through your drawings and there was a similar sense of humour — a very dark humour that comes from a place of frustration, of wanting better for humanity.'

DS: 'Well, I suppose it's a cathartic thing. It enables you to say what you want to say, and vent your anger about just the lunatic, idiot world we live in. I think I'm a much saner person because I'm able to make work about how horrible people are, and how unacceptable it is that they are so horrible and how unacceptable it is that people accept how horrible

these people are. I kind of assume that's a given for everybody, that everybody feels that there are aspects of contemporary life in an advanced capitalist society that are really unacceptable, but what can we do to change it? Make stupid drawings I suppose.'

DS: 'My experience of art school in Glasgow, where I studied, was that in the end, people didn't really get what I did. I think that they thought I was doing something inappropriate, or maybe that I wasn't a serious artist. I left with quite a poor mark, the kind of mark you get for turning up. I didn't get the mark that you get if you're actually talented. So when I left I was pretty pissed off with the establishment as I saw it, which was basically my teachers at art school. But I'm not really angry with them, I just think they didn't really know anything about art. But I was really quite arrogant, anyway, I felt that I knew better than they did. That's why I made the real decision to become a cartoonist, I suppose, because it was quite a gesture, a games of fine art as I saw it.'

DE: 'And that interaction with the world of fine art is important in your stuff. I don't think I've ever seen your originals in a gallery, come to think of it. Do you think that the book medium sort of gets around some of the exclusivity that's inherent in the art world?'

DS: 'I think it does. Everybody knows how to read a book, but not everybody knows how to walk around an art gallery. When you're in Chelsea in New York, when you're walking around Phillips auction house, it's an intimidating experience for people who might like art, but don't feel very welcomed there. Whereas, if you take a book off of a bookshelf in a bookstore then obviously you know what to do with it. You're not really sure whether you should smile or laugh in the art gallery, or whether you're allowed to rub your chin, or scratch your head, or whatever. For the likes of my sister, for example, she wouldn't feel very comfortable at some fancy gallery in New York, and wouldn't really know what to do. She'd sort of look around and look at her watch and fiddle with her Blackberry. But books are accessible.'

DE: 'But galleries are part of it for you.'

DS: 'I guess, because that's what pays my mortgage. That's why I don't have to teach at the art school, because the original drawings sell and I don't have to have a job. I think I'd rather be judged by a book than some exhibitions. But if I never had any exhibitions and just made books, I probably wouldn't make any sculptures.'

DE: 'How long have you been doing the sculptures?'

DS: 'Ever since I was at art school. I've been making some ceramics in my studio, like casts and primitive moulds but then glazed. I make ceramics because it's a bit crafty and it sort of seems to fit somehow aesthetically with my graphic work. And ceramics are somehow a little bit unsophisticated, which I sort of feel is my style.'

DE: 'That unsophisticated aspect of your work is a nice place to be, I would think. It seems really liberating. I know you identify with cartoonists, but then again, cartoonists actually are expected to polish their work. Most cartoonists are very tidy, very practiced and professional.'

DS: 'Yeah, I'm always interested in real cartoonists. I identify with them I guess. Maybe it's about nihilism or something. When I meet fine artists, I never really feel like… you know, you meet people and some of them you get on with and some of them you don't. I don't generally feel very sympathetic with gallery artists, even though I might like them. But then when I'm in a show about comic books and cartoons, I feel very sympathetic with all these people because their work is about exactly what I'm interested in, which is usually just violence and sexual beings that kind of thing. Most times people ask "Who are your favorite artists?" and one or two cartoonists would come to mind. But in a way, I feel like I have a lot more fun than they do, because I can do whatever I like, and it doesn't have to be anything. The rules are that I don't have to do it again, I can do it once, and in that way I am totally free. I feel lucky in that respect.'