

David Shrigley

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You're down the pub, a few beers inside you, and you get talking to this odd bloke who claims to be an artist. Bit tongue-tied at first, but soon comes out of himself, and starts talking about his work. Some of which is quite funny. Flip-flops made of steel. A stuffed decapitated squirrel holding its own head in its hands, called *Nutless*. A digestive biscuit nailed to the gallery wall (well, it's not really a biscuit, have you tried putting a nail through a McVities without it cracking? It's made of an acrylic composite, like a lot of the stuff on show). Some ping-pong bats, written on them 'Your Parents' and 'The Social Services', and two balls labelled 'You' and 'Your Wee Sister', a joke and some clichéd if poignant social comment wrapped up together so you're not quite sure who the joke's on—maybe you because for a minute you felt sorry for the balls.

The bloke tells you that this show of funny objects is in quite a serious art gallery, alongside the work of some old-time, serious but humorous conceptual artist. Even so, he's better known for making books full of terrible drawings and eccentric remarks or

little jokes. The drawing is really bad, and even the writing has crossings-out and misspellings, but you can tell that the artist-bloke is quite well-educated, so you guess all that's part of the joke too. He's made a book of postcards called *Evil Thoughts*—one shows a super-hero type standing on the roof of an office building, cloak flying behind him and enormously long dick jutting out in front; 'Fuck the World' is all it says. Or another just reads in crude capitals: 'Sorry I painted the word "twat" on your garage door'. In the pub, these seem really funny (just as *Friends* is much funnier with a drink or two inside you), and you can imagine sending them to mates who'd be in on the joke, and having a warm feeling on getting them for being cool enough to be in on the joke.

After a while, you start to see that he uses some tricks over and over again. There's lots of incongruity—hierarchies of boxes, say, with the Oxo cube at the top and the box the tumble-dryer came in at the bottom. There's being a bit rude—a cute but bad drawing of 'Timmy', a squirrel in a coat, and below the pigeons Timmy has fucked, ending with 'Little Miss Turd-Eater'. A touch of recursion goes down well with art-types—a giant candle, the wick of which is another candle, or a drawing of big, blocky letters that say 'Twat' (he likes that word), and below some writing which starts 'Text had the power to confuse, to mislead and to promote falsehood', but it's text you are reading, so can you trust it? Or it's half drawing, half writing. Then there are visual puns and quips, like the metal flip-flops, or a postcard showing a field of mushrooms all but one of which are labelled 'Deadly Poison', the one exception being 'Cure for Acute Paranoia'. That's quite clever. And there are lots of severed bits of bodies including feet and hands, some just made of that acrylic stuff, some (in photos) looking creepily real. Some of it reminds you a bit of Magritte.

Anyhow, you've had quite an amusing evening, and drunk quite a bit. You wake up feeling somewhat thick-headed but still set to thinking about it all. In the morning, the word 'twat' doesn't seem particularly funny. In fact, most of that stuff seems slight and puerile—and yes, you know that's the point, but it doesn't mean that it isn't still slight and puerile. It nods at Surrealism but only at the most degenerate part, the pieces seized on by advertisers and other thieves. Bits of it wouldn't be possible without Conceptual art, but again it's the jokes that are used, torn from their once serious purpose. You get to wondering why this stuff is popular with a certain slice of the art crowd. They are a drunken lot, it's true. Maybe that's it—that these books and objects evolved to propagate themselves within that alcoholic ecosystem, a fungal growth springing from saturated beer-mats. So, you get to thinking, perhaps it does have a deeper significance after all, because you can tell a lot about a place and a time from what thrives there and (of course) what doesn't.