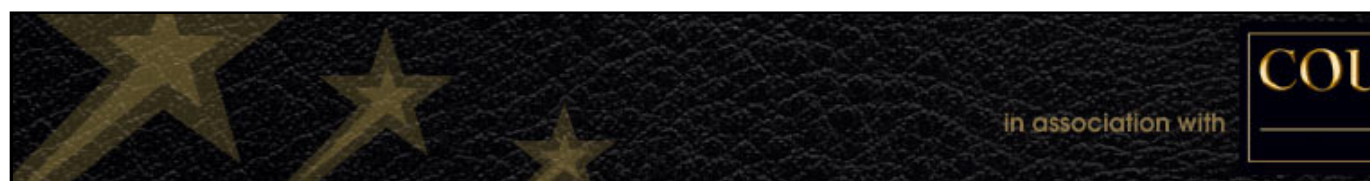


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Interview: Benjamin Shine

The award-winning artist and designer talks to guardian.co.uk about his Obama portrait and the benefits of being a Courvoisier The Future 500 member



Benjamin Shine with his Barack Obama portrait Photograph: Jennifer Nagy/guardian.co.uk

To say that Benjamin Shine has "been busy" over the last 12 months is putting it incredibly lightly. Best described as a visionary artist and designer (a label for the sake of introductory brevity, as it doesn't nearly do him justice), Shine skilfully straddles product development and artistic innovation.

With a Red Dot design award under his belt, a timely depiction of President Obama on T-shirts and coffee mugs across America, and a commission to render an image of Prince Albert of Monaco from recycled material, this young British prodigy is hot property.

Recognised for his multi-dimensional business sense, as well as creative talent, Shine

joined Courvoisier The Future 500 network in November 2007.

His career was sky-rocketing; Mega Brands America signed the US license rights for his Cordz range (a mess-free way for kids to create colourful artworks); his limited-edition furniture piece, ChairMan, launched to great acclaim at London Design Week; he won Best Visual Presentation at Make Your Mark with a Ball 2008, a national fundraising campaign for Sport Relief.

Shine's name really came to the fore at the end of 2008, when Barack Obama's election captivated his fertile imagination. "I was in New York at the tail end of Obama's campaign," he recalls. "I got sucked into Obama-mania and was mesmerised by this intellectual guy going for that position. I started work on a portrait. It wasn't commissioned, just something I wanted to do. I used an old flag, ripping it up to create something new, which is what Obama represents; drawing a line under what has gone before.

"I sent the portrait to the Museum of Art & Design, because they're interested in 'second life' artwork. They displayed it in their foyer until President's Day in February."

The popularity of Changing States was the springboard for another brand triumph. "Barnes & Noble contacted me in December," Shine explains. "They'd seen Changing States and wanted to use the image on their official commemorative 'Obama inauguration' range. My Christmas plans went out the window, but it was well worth it."

Shine's next major project was unveiled at the Courvoisier The Future 500 Art Show in June. "I was keen to get involved as The Future 500 network has been really worthwhile," says Shine, "and their permanent exhibition space on Great Newport Street is fantastic.



Benjamin Shine's depiction of Rembrandt made entirely from one piece of black tulle netting Photograph: Jamie Baker/guardian.co.uk

"As well as bringing Changing States to the UK, I showed a new concept in portraiture. My idea is to 'paint' entirely with fabric. Like most fledgling projects, I had no idea if it would work. I wanted to depict Rembrandt, because he was the master of light and shade, so I scrunched, pleated and pressed a piece of black tulle to form the portrait. After about 200 hours of hard work I was massively relieved to see it come to fruition. It was a big hit at the show and now I'm working on a series of similar commissions."

In addition to the art show, Shine made "great connections" this year, with other members of Courvoisier The Future 500 network. "I'm working with Lucy Johnston at GDR Creative Intelligence. Lucy forecasts international visual trends, from shop window design to brand packaging. She was involved in curating the Courvoisier The Future 500 Art Show and although our connection isn't immediately obvious, we discovered a synergy in our work.

"I'm also working with Worn Again, an upcycled fashion company, on brand development projects using recycled materials. I met the guys from Worn Again through Courvoisier The Future 500 network, and they connect with me on everything I'm doing, from fashion through to art."

Shine's work with Worn Again is particularly opportune given his work on Prince Albert of Monaco's portrait. "Prince Albert is into sustainable projects and encouraging people to consider ecological issues," Shine explains, "so I suggested making his portrait entirely with recycled products. Children at the International School of Monaco got involved and in the space of ten days collected 1,000 different coloured plastic bottles to be granulated and turned into the board I will use as the backdrop for the portrait."

With his fingers in so many pies (two brand new product ranges are currently being patented in the US, including a fun product for aspiring fashion designers), it's no wonder that Shine relies on an intricate, vertical filing system to store his diverse ideas. "I absolutely love the fact that everything I do is so different," he admits. "Most days I can choose what to work on, and that's a real privilege."

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