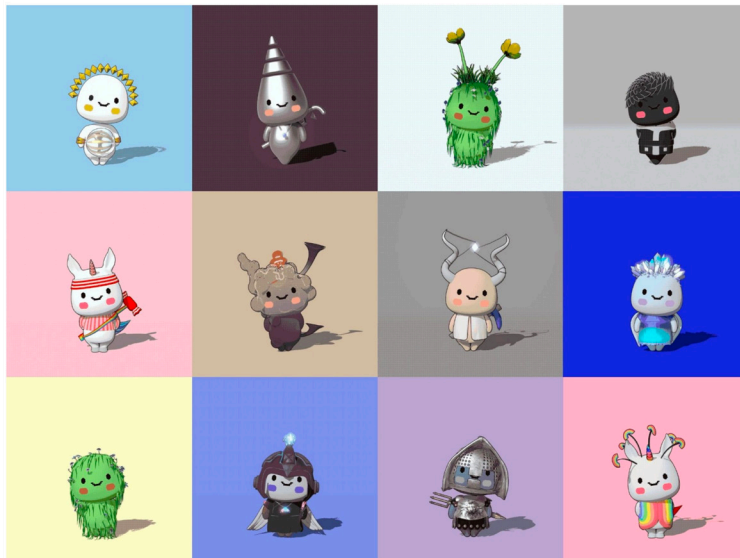


INTERVIEW

ED FORNIELES

by Emmanuel Olunkwa

Ed Fornieles (b. 1983) is an English artist based in London whose work addresses the dynamics of families, interpersonal relationships, and popular culture through a variety of media. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Oxford's Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art and his Master of Art from the Royal College of Art. Fornieles has always prioritized making time-based media, which is often rendered ephemeral through changes in hosting networks. In recent years, he has been able to rethink how his work is situated within the architecture of the internet. In this conversation, we talk about his latest venture and most collaborative project to date, *Finiliars*, which he conceived while attending a residency program in Montreal in 2016. We spoke about the psychological effects of money, the internet as a garden, DAOs (Decentralized Autonomous Organizations), cuteness, and the limits of innovation.

Ed Fornieles, *Finiliars*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.

EO: Let's start. How did you find art?

EF: It took me a while to realize that I had internalized my parents' desires. Both my parents wanted to be artists and kind of gave up on that dream, a dream that me and my two sisters would end up performing for them. It's odd to realize you have absorbed something as foundational as a desire from someone else, but then again you inevitably make it your own.

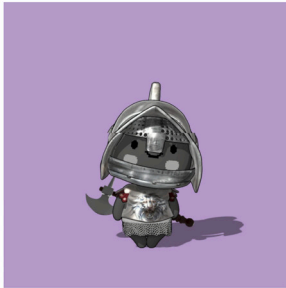
EO: That resonates with me. College was totally synonymous with my mom in my mind. I was the first in my family to go to college and I didn't really feel like I had autonomy to actualize my own ideas because the path had been developed by someone else's desires. It wasn't until graduate school that I felt like I could stretch out parts of myself that I neglected because I was focusing on things that were priorities for someone else that weren't that interesting to me personally. It was psychologically draining.

EF: Same here! My father would repeat this mantra, "I don't care what you do as long as you get a degree." So if I had to go to art school it seemed like the best way to be free. I was enthralled by this television program called "Hello Culture," by Matthew Collings, that meandered through the story of art of the last 100 years, rendering it in terms of groups of people who resonated with each other, who were driven by ideas, who were constantly experimenting by playing with different ways of being. It all felt very electric.

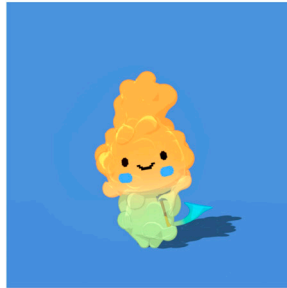
EO: What about it did you specifically gravitate to?

EF: At the time I was most excited by performance art, by people like Yves Klein, Carolee Schneemann, and Fluxus. People who were mixing things up, trying to play with or disrupt reality. For some reason my mind is going now to the Beats, as a teenager I read *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac and was convinced that this kind of life was the most exciting thing in the world. [Laughter.]

EO: [Laughs.] I was thinking about how I was an avid reader of Joan Didion, with Jack Kerouac and Charles Bukowski heavily in rotation. I don't know who or what I would be if I didn't encounter those types of thoughts at that age.



Ed Fornieles, Pinball, 2022. Courtesy the artist.



Ed Fornieles, Pinball, 2022. Courtesy the artist.

EF: It's funny, you are what you eat! And I sense a lot of people who ended up going to art school probably shared this diet and these interests, where they were able to absorb certain attitudes and ideas that would help them all get along on the first day of school. To me, this culture became a ticket out of the place I grew up, out of rural England and into London.

EO: What about the Young British Artists?

EF: Yes, I definitely came up during a prominent moment of the YBAs in the UK, it can feel a little cringe looking back, but at the time it seemingly embodied this punky 'fuck you' attitude that appealed to my teenage brain. I took classes with Richard Wentworth who had taught those guys at Goldsmiths, I remember him speaking about a movement that occurred in which art shifted its place in the world or at least in the UK. That group of artists were on the front cover of newspapers constantly, there was a lot of conversation about the price of art, which became something people discussed on the weekends.

EO: It's funny you mention this. I was talking about this with Thelma Golden recently, about how art has changed for her generation in terms of its reception and place. There aren't enough people talking about the actual change in reception and form of art. It's not only that the markets have changed, but the presence of institutions and the message has greatly changed. I love Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst, admittedly. When I think about the YBAs, it makes me think of New York in the 1970s and the wealth that certain people were able to seemingly amass so quickly. I think it's cringe now because we can't recreate or replicate those social and infrastructural structures for ourselves now.

EF: Yeah, I only said it's cringe because of what it became. It's hard to engage with a lot of them now as most seem to have stopped growing as artists. There was a moment where there was an experimental energy, a willingness to fail, and to play. I'm glad you brought up 1970s New York, because for me, it has somehow been imprinted on my brain as a golden era for art and music. I'm thinking of Suicide, Vito Acconci, I'm thinking of cheap warehouse apartments and am thinking about a Warhol who is also getting older.

EO: Andy Warhol getting older? [Laughter.] That's a statement.

EF: He disguised it so well with that hair.

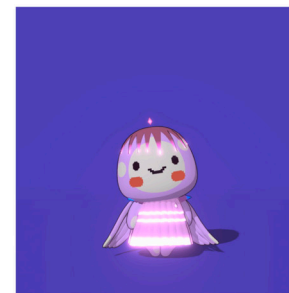
EO: He doesn't register as someone who could age. How do you feel like it manifested in the work? Paint the scene.

EF: In the 1960s, when he emerged, he suffered from the syndrome that all artists do when they first drop onto the scene, they have this newness that is sparkling and too much to comprehend and it might be fair to say that there weren't really words to describe what he was doing and why he was doing it. He embodies a radical new way of thinking, he becomes the hottest thing in town, and then slowly but surely that bright light starts to fade. What I like about him is that he keeps struggling through varying degrees of success. Whereas with many artists there is the point where they stop innovating, and are caught in a prison of their own success, caught in an aesthetic feedback loop, in which they are only positioned to make variations of the same work.

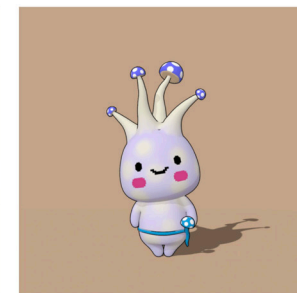
By the late 80s, he's doing portraits of German businessmen and he kind of accepted to himself, like Damien Hirst, that he's at a point where he stops innovating and continues to do the same thing over and over again – which is part of the point of the work. He just becomes part of the furniture, and I think that's the hardest place for an artist to arrive, and obviously that's where the majority of us end up.

EO: It's funny that you mention this. The idea of innovation has been on my mind lately. Specifically, Apple and technology – we're really in this place where these devices have become the proverbial furniture, so to speak, right? They make up the fabric of our daily life and their functions as tools largely escape us.

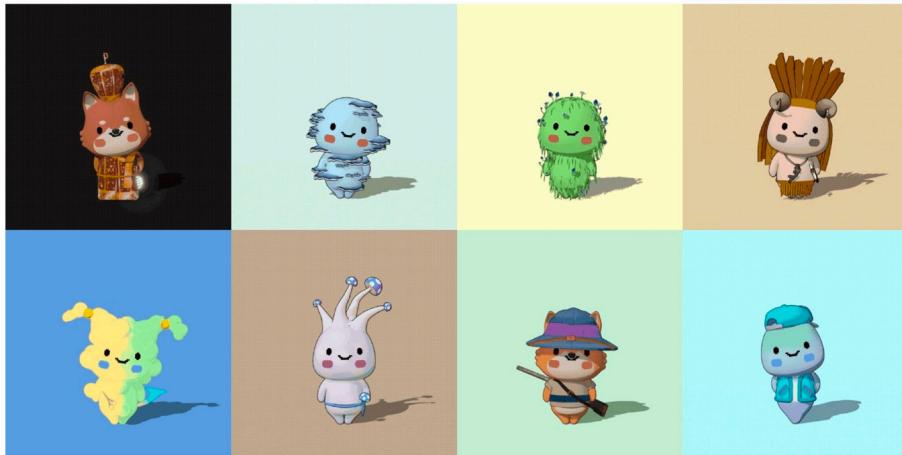
EF: I think this is where art can come in, pointing to the forces that surround us, being this special fabric that is so prevalent it remains largely unseen. New technology can shift what art can be, whether that be the possibilities of exploring a new medium, platform, or engaging the technology itself.



Ed Fornieles, Pinball, 2022. Courtesy the artist.



Ed Fornieles, Pinball, 2022. Courtesy the artist.



Ed Fornieles. *Finiliars*. 2022. Courtesy the artist.

EO: Yes. Web3 offers this chance to technologically innovate in a meaningful way, but it feels like the main concern of most people is its profitability. Innovation begets wealth; people still don't know how to talk about the internet as this tool itself, which has become invisible to us. I think art is important because with the demands and constraints of the market, people historically have had to figure out how to present problems of the world in relatively simple terms. Within the context of art, there has been a kind of performance of a moment of resolution with regards to questions about time, space, body, and gender quickly because of the demand for relevancy and impact.

EF: Web3 definitely marks a shift. Something has changed but it's still unknown territory, even to those deeply embedded in the culture. And this emergent quality is very exciting, it means it's all up for play, and can all still be shaped. We are seeing some great experiments and interesting languages emerging and being developed. For instance, there is a book that has just come out that was edited by Ruth Catlow and Penny Rafferty called, *Radical Friends: Decentralized Autonomous Organizations and the Arts*, that maps out what the significance of DAOs might be in the art space.

EO: I've been thinking a lot about the difference between theme and concept and think a lot of people mistake the two for each other. Just because something is dressed up in aesthetics, doesn't mean it's conceptually rigorous in thought.

EF: The form should be dictated by the idea, I'm not interested in aesthetics for their own sake. For instance, with Finiliar, it's designed to elicit a sense of paternal connection within the viewer and a cute form seemed to be the best way to communicate the idea. A form or aesthetic that might be considered distasteful in some quarters of the art establishment.

EO: How did the project start?

EF: In 2016-17, I was doing a residency in Montreal and found myself making work about money because I didn't have much at that moment. You know, at times, it can feel like your mental state is directly influenced by the amount of money in your bank account, if you don't have much. I think it's something that people don't talk about as it's so much harder to change those material circumstances quickly, instead we opt out and the emphasis ends up being put on the interiority of the individual. I became interested in making these feelings visible by having them manifest in a visual and situational context: art. By finding a way to give this feeling a body, I was able to actualize the relationship to structures that are hugely influential over our lives that remain invisible.

EO: How did the design process work?

EF: I worked with a designer in Montreal, and we tried to figure out what triggered an empathic response in the viewer. We began to look at the power of 'cuteness'; how certain cute forms echo the qualities of a human baby. Large head to body ratio, widened eyes, attributes that appeal to the viewer on a biological level. Its fascinating to watch, I have a chihuahua and he's very cute, and sometimes when I'm in the street and people see him, they make an audible noise, an 'ahhh', which feels like something people aren't necessarily in control of, it's an innate responsiveness for some people.

EO: The Finiliars obviously take after humans by the typology of their clothes and presentation. They don't read as a video game or simulation but register as reality. They're specifically tethered to their worth and their positioning in the market, right?

EF: Yeah, these NFTs' emotional and physical state is based on the currencies they are connected to (Bitcoin, Ethereum, etc.) but they could be tethered to anything, and positive and negative aspects of the project could be framed in any direction. When you birth a Finiliar, you need to be aware that you are subjecting yourself to a set of values, and are forced to submit to a larger network or meaning where your worth is based on your standing in the market. In this way, Finiliar can be seen to be in competition with each other, one fini's success might spell death to another, in their respective currency.

EO: And these instances, these relations can't help but be internalized, play out across the body.

EF: Totally, a GDP Fini vomiting might be felt in the pit of your stomach in the loss of a job. These flows of data are contorting and shaping our bodies all the time.



Ed Fornieles, *Propose, test and seed an alternative image of the future*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 47 1/4 x 67 x 1 3/8 inches (120 x 170 x 3.5 cm).

EO: I want to talk about this idea of cuteness. You made a fake book cover with a Finiliar for a Sianne Ngai book. What's the parallel?

EF: She has a forthcoming book of collected essays, *The Cute (Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art)*, which addresses the aesthetic vernacular of art and cuteness. I think it's important this subject is being taken seriously, because it's small and diminutive it can often go under the radar. There is a lot to speak about in terms of prevalence in globalised relations of production and consumption. "Cute" can be seen as both having the capacity to empower the subject as caregiver as well as lull them into the infantilised zone of the cozy. It's a big subject and I'm glad it's being given the attention that it deserves.

EO: And then there's blockchain technology. I don't think we're talking enough about the potential of the infrastructure and what it's capable of doing aside from the kind of judgement that has been projected onto it as a market and movement. There is the potential to reshape standards and systems of accountability – on a personal and institutional level. I only want to think about where we can go and what we can do. We're overdue for a new context and how we think and examine things.

EF: I encountered someone using the phrase 'legacy art world' the other day, drawing a line between here and there, before the inevitable merge. But of course it's complicated, both legacy and this current new thing are full of different problems. This moment forces us to confront the continued questionable gatekeeping, hustlers, rug pullers, land grabbers and a general asymmetry of power. But with this emerging technological context, we can at least play and imagine how things might function differently.

EO: What have you learned through the process of making in this new space?

EF: The process is fascinating because the [Finiliars] project has lasted a long time as a conceptual gesture in the art world, then NFTs come along, and the technology allows it to move from the realm of fantasy to reality, where these things will have a relationship with the thousands of people who possess them in their wallets. Advanced technology makes making in this context a lot more robust. Ian Cheng talks about the *net* being like a *garden*, it's something you need to maintain, keep an eye on or it becomes fallow, links break, and data is lost. I have lost the majority of my past net art works to tides of previous architectures of the internet, but even though we're working with Web3, it's not free of these problems, but its distributed disposition is a little more resilient.

EO: Who did you conceptualize the Finiliars with?

EF: The main team is Sam Spike who was a part of this .jpeg DAO, who I think is an important voice bridging Web3 with the established art world. Jake Allen a very talented programmer and Dollar Monopoly, someone with an innate understanding of the dirtier degen side of things. Then there have been a lot of important voices who have shaped the project as it emerged, like Ben Vicker, Penny Rafferty, and Peter Holsgraves to name a few. And then a slew of very talented and amazing modellers, animators, unity, and Houdini wizards: Art Domi and Jakub Reichman.

EO: I really like Ian Cheng's analogy. It's interesting to think of the internet as a garden and our existence within these two dimensional formats. I've especially been thinking about this with the rise of video in the last five or so years. It's funny, the medium has been the message, so what happens when the message becomes the medium? People are beginning to think about a message or content in terms of system design, in a literal sense. The cultural significance of Web3 is really divergent from Web 2.0 or Web 1.0.

EF: If each is a proverbial fireplace, what are the people congregating around? And you're right, I think with Web3 so far we are congregating around the promise of a technology, people are spinning tales to each other about what the technology might be, these in turn are being made manifest by the vast flows of capital in the space, for better or worse.



THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

Ed Fornieles, *Solutionism*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 47 1/4 x 67 x 13/8 inches (120 x 170 x 3.5 cm).



Ed Fornieles, *I paint what I want to see*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 47 1/4 x 67 x 13/8 inches (120 x 170 x 3.5 cm).

EO: How does making the Finiliars feel as a departure from the previous work you made?

EF: I think the primary focus for all of my work has been to look at the narratives and various other pressures that shape things, that in turn create some sense of a norm. This is why I'm attracted to role play, you get to directly interfere with these things.

EO: Has making this body of work changed your approach to other objects and projects?

EF: I'm actually currently showing work at David Kordansky in Los Angeles in a group show. I made a series of powerpoint paintings. Which as an idea I can see comes directly from my interaction with the NFT space. The gallery becomes a platform for an idea as well as a fundraising platform that might bring about a series of actions outlined in the paintings themselves. In this case it's all about funding world building experiments using role play. But yes it's all seemingly about funding at the moment, I've been corrupted by the NFT space. [Laughter.]

EO: I talked to Hito Steyerl about this in an [interview](#) for *November Magazine*. She basically said that conceptually, we're back in the boom of the 1980s.

EF: I love Hito Steyerl because she talks about affect in a structural sense, and yes, we can definitely draw parallels with this moment and the '80s, where you get this underregulated market that pools extreme wealth.

EO: Do you ever think about the material implications of the work that you make?

EF: I think it's important to think in terms of affect, because it's hard to understand what a work is doing in real-time, a work's disposition only reveals itself in time. You have limited control of how things live in the world.

EO: Going back to these paintings, you painted these? They're so good. Have you always painted?

EF: [Laughs.] I painted them with two friends, luckily it's something I learned at art school. It was oddly pleasing to pick it back up especially after having spent so much time on my computer recently, it felt embodied.

EO: Which are in the show?

EF: There are twelve in total but eight are in the show. I have to admit I've not been very polite about painting in the past, it has often seemed like a willful shutting down of the possibility, a lifestyle more than an art, but I'm a convert. There is something powerful about the willful suspended disbelief required to make and look at them.