Street art that may be by Banksy appeared on a wall in Lowestoft, Suffolk, in August 2021

"Taking vandalism in an entirely new direction"

Von Sprühdosen und Schablonen zu internationalen Auktionshäusern: Der als Banksy bekannte Künstler hat Straßenkunst populär gemacht und mit seinen Graffitis weltweiten Ruhm erlangt. Von JULIAN EARWAKER

MEDIUM

A teddy bear faces a group of police officers. In its left hand, the bear holds a Molotov cocktail, ready to be thrown as the police move forward with their riot shields. This mural, titled *The Mild Mild West*, is on an old building in Bristol and dates back to 1999. Painted as a protest against the way the police handled illegal rave parties, it's one of the earliest surviving works by the mysterious graffiti artist Banksy.

Said to have been born in Bristol, the artist's identity and personal details are a closely kept secret. Not so his artwork, which is subversive, humorous, intelligent and very popular. Focused on politics and social issues, Banksy's special style expresses emotive themes of injustice, homelessness, poverty and asylum, often using scenes of innocence and love contrasted with cynicism, violence and greed.

Painting something big where you shouldn't

Few journalists have interviewed this famously elusive artist. When Banksy met a journalist from *The Guardian* newspaper in July 2003, it was to discuss *Turf War*, his first gallery exhibition in Britain, held in an old warehouse in London's East End. The interview describes Banksy as "white, 28, scruffy casual – jeans, T-shirt, a silver tooth, silver chain and silver earring".

elusive [iˈluːsɪv] ► schwer fassbar, scheu	**mural** [ˈmjʊərəl] ► Wandgemälde	**scruffy** ► schlampig, ungepflegt
greed ► Habgier	**riot shield** [ˈraɪət ʃiːld] ► Einsatzschild	**warehouse** ► Lagerhalle

Banksy says that he was an unhappy schoolboy who expressed himself through graffiti. He says that the "buzz" from painting "something big where you shouldn't" is "better than sex, better than drugs". By the time of the London exhibition, he was already making a name for himself with works clearly influenced by French graffiti artist Blek le Rat. Today, almost 20 years later, his body of work has expanded into sculpture, installations, films and books. Banksy is one of the world's most recognizable artists.

Urban art goes mainstream

In a recent online art survey, 66 per cent of respondents said Banksy inspires them, and 42 per cent found his art powerful yet easy to enjoy. When asked how Banksy's art made them feel, 51 per cent said "thoughtful", while 22 per cent replied "rebellious".

In his 2010 Oscar-nominated documentary film, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, Banksy questions whether his lead character is "a genius ... or got a bit lucky". It's certainly true that Banksy was helped when street art went mainstream in the 1980s and '90s. He joined a wave of contemporary artists whose work was being sold by the world's major auction houses. Jean-Michel Basquiat, Invader, Keith Haring and Kaws – they all have their roots in urban art, whether it's through their stencils, stickers, posters, sculptures or graffiti. Within the genre, Banksy has created his own style. Genius or not, he's provocative and creative. To quote Banksy himself, he's "taking vandalism in an entirely new direction".

What is art (for)?

Although often associated with the city of Bristol, which offers tours of his artwork, Banksy has worked all over the world. As an artist and activist, he chooses the mood and location of his artworks with great deliberation. One repeat site for his work is the Israeli West Bank barrier separating Israelis and Palestinians. In 2005, he painted *Unwelcome Intervention* on the

Palestinian side of the barrier to show hope coming from despair. The previous year, it had been the simple beauty of his iconic *Kissing Coppers* that caught the eye, painted on the wall of a pub in Brighton to show solidarity with the city's LGBTQ+ community.

Sometimes, a simple "art intervention" works best: in October 2003, a heavily disguised Banksy hung one of his own paintings among the landscapes at Tate Britain. Eighteen months later, he displayed *Peckham Rock*, a fake "cave painting", in the British Museum's Roman Britain gallery (it went unnoticed for three days). More than just high-profile pranks, these actions ask questions about what we exhibit in major institutions, and why.

Using art as a political weapon

Banksy shows an intuitive feel for the zeitgeist, his artwork frequently reflecting public concerns and opinions. In May 2017, a year after the UK's historic Brexit vote, a giant new artwork appeared near the ferry terminal in Dover. It showed a man on a ladder, chipping away at one of the yellow stars on the EU flag, with small cracks spreading outwards.

The following year, Banksy sold a motorized refugee boat from his *Dismaland* installation and donated the money to fund a real-life rescue boat used in the Mediterranean. To reinforce where his priorities lie, during the first wave of Covid-19, Banksy produced *Game Changer*, a painting of a young boy playing with a superhero NHS nurse doll. The artwork was later auctioned, raising more than £16 million for the NHS.

Most recently, in the summer of 2021, while Brits prepared for their "staycation" instead of travelling abroad, Banksy launched a series of new works. Called *A Great British Spraycation*, his installations appeared in East Anglian seaside towns known as much for their social deprivation as for their sandy beaches and sea views. You can watch the video on YouTube, for example, at: *www.youtube.com/watch?v=v450Acut8Q0*

BIOGRAPHY

Name: Possibly Robin Gunningham

Born: Possibly Bristol, UK

Famous for: Subversive, intelligent graffiti art on political and social themes

Latest work: *A Great British Spraycation* (2021)

buzz *ifml.*
▶ Begeisterung

cave painting
▶ Höhlenmalerei

chip away at sth.
▶ an etw. herummeißeln

copper *UK ifml.*
▶ Polizist(in)

deliberation
▶ Bedacht, Überlegung

deprivation
[ˌdeprɪˈveɪʃən]
▶ Entbehrung

despair
▶ Verzweiflung

disguised [dɪsˈɡaɪzd]
▶ verkleidet

doll
▶ Puppe

donate [dəʊˈneɪt]
▶ spenden

entirely [ɪnˈtaɪəli]
▶ komplett, gänzlich

ferry terminal
▶ Fährhafen

high profile
▶ mit hohem Bekanntheitsgrad

launch [lɔːntʃ]
▶ starten, einführen

NHS (National Health Service)
▶ britisches Gesundheitssystem

prank
▶ Streich

raise
▶ *hier:* einbringen

recognizable
▶ wiedererkennbar

reinforce
▶ bekräftigen

respondent
▶ befragte Person

staycation *ifml.*
▶ Urlaub zu Hause, Urlaub auf Balkonien

stencil
▶ Schablone

unnoticed: go ~
▶ nicht bemerkt werden

Graffiti that's worth millions

Banksy's work is collected by celebrities across the world. Bono, Brad Pitt, Drake and Robbie Williams, among others, have bought his artwork, while Justin Bieber has the famous *Girl with Balloon* tattooed on his arm.

With fame, however, comes a problem: what to do with the growing number of Banksy artworks illegally painted on buildings and public spaces? The artworks are valued at tens of thousands of pounds or more, and homeowners and councils now face a dilemma: how to protect it.

Should it be sold? How can the physical artwork be safely removed without causing structural damage? Whole brick walls have been lifted away and sold, while large areas containing paintings have been removed from properties and made available for auction.

Banksy's attitude to the commercial art world has always been ambivalent. He keeps tight control over authentication through his official website: *pestcontroloffice.com* But the auction of his much-loved *Girl with Balloon* at Sotheby's in October 2018 perhaps best sums up Banksy's opinion of the mainstream. To the shock of the auction room, just as the hammer came down on the winning bid of £1.1 million, the painting began to self-destruct through a shredder hidden in its frame. Ironically, the partially shredded artwork, retitled *Love Is in the Bin*, then was auctioned in September 2021, with a guide price of between £4 and £6 million.

Anti-establishment – or part of it?

Who is Banksy – and does it really matter? Some theories suggest the artist is Robert Del Naja, a graffiti artist (known as 3D) and frontman of the Bristol-based band Massive Attack. Others say he's Jamie Hewlett, comic-book artist and founder of the virtual band Gorillaz. Or could Banksy actually be more than one person, perhaps even a group of people working together?

In July 2008, after a year-long investigation, the British *Daily Mail*

Gorilla in a Pink Mask is an early Banksy image in Bristol

newspaper claimed that it had identified Banksy as Robin Gunningham, who was born in Bristol in 1973 and attended the exclusive Bristol Cathedral School. This is accepted as the most likely theory.

Whatever the truth, the question of his identity remains part of a carefully spray-painted mythology. Despite this, or because of it, a 2019 YouGov survey found that Banksy was the UK's most popular artist of all time. Not bad for someone who in 2003 said: "Because I was quite crap with a spray can, I started cutting out stencils instead." From painting guerrilla art in public spaces to becoming a household name, Banksy is a truly anti-establishment enigma who is firmly part of the art establishment.

✋ **INFO TO GO**

What's the difference between "urban art", "street art" and "graffiti"? "Urban art" is the term used to describe visual art created in urban areas, including street art and graffiti. Street art is usually image-based and painted with permission or commissioned. Graffiti is often word-based and is usually illegal.

brick
▶ Ziegel, Backstein

commission
▶ in Auftrag geben

crap: be ~ *vulg.*
▶ schlecht sein

enigma [ɪˈnɪɡmə]
▶ Rätsel

guide price
▶ Richtpreis

household name
▶ gängiger Name, Begriff

image-based
▶ bildbasiert

shredder
▶ Schredder, Aktenvernichter

suggest [səˈdʒest]
▶ nahelegen

Fotos: ART-Banksy/www.visitbristol.co.uk; mauritius images/Photozaic/Alamy