An artwork a day keeps the Big Apple at bay

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.11.13
Word Count 863

NEW YORK — No one has ever photographed British graffiti artist Banksy, but he’s well known, especially in New York City. That’s because the secretive street artist recently ended his self-announced monthlong residency in the Big Apple.

During his 31-day stay in October, Banksy created surprise exhibits, sculptures and stencils spray-painted in public spaces including on streets, under bridges and on buildings. By the time the trickster left, New Yorkers were debating: Is Bansky a jerk or a genius?

Banksy began his career spray-painting buildings in Bristol, England. He is known for his distinctive stencils and political statements through art. But he has never been identified and no one knows his real name. In 2011 he was even nominated for an Academy Award for a documentary he directed called “Exit Through The Gift Shop.”
Artwork placed in public areas and usually without permission is called street art. Banksy is perhaps the most famous street artist in the world.

"The Walls Started To Talk To Them"

Banksy created a new picture, video or trick every day in New York City in October. The art ranged from a stencil of a dog to a boy holding a hammer to spray-painted messages.

Throughout his 31 days in New York, Banksy put pictures of his work on BanksyNY.com, with clues as to locations but nothing precise. That sparked a treasure hunt by fans who hunted the works down, shared locations via social media, then swarmed to see them.

Before he left New York, Banksy donated a painting that he had changed. Mountains and a river were all that could be seen in the original $50 painting. Then, Banksy added a Nazi soldier to the painting, titled it "The Banality of the Banality of Evil," and re-donated it to a Manhattan charity thrift store called Housing Works.

The store sells used items to raise money to fight homelessness and AIDS. The charity put Banksy's altered painting up for sale. It eventually sold for $615,000, with the proceeds going toward the charity.

New Yorkers like Sean Lynch admire Banksy and think he is "one of the more captivating artists of our generation." He described visiting Banksy's works around the city as magical and liked hearing conversations about art that Banksy's work inspired. He said that people of all different walks and cultures were sharing opinions, sharing stories. "The walls started to talk to them, in a way."

His WTC Essay Offends Many

But Banksy's art did not always make people happy. Some New Yorkers see Banksy as a street punk. Not an artist. They urged him to go back to England by posting on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook.

Many New Yorkers were particularly offended by an essay Banksy wrote criticizing the building replacing the World Trade Center, which was destroyed by a terror attack on 9/11. Banksy called the new design ordinary and added, "It so clearly proclaims the terrorists won." He offered the essay to The New York Times. The newspaper wouldn't print it, so Banksy posted it on his website.

"The terrorists won" comment upset New Yorkers like Brian Major, 51, of Brooklyn. "Enough!" Major said. "Who is this guy? Everybody's got a right to an opinion but what gives him any kind of credibility in New York? Shut up, Banksy! Go home!"
A lifelong New Yorker, Major says he understands graffiti as an art. But he doesn't think Banksy’s art is all that good. He does think that he is good at selling his art.

Professor Radhika Subramaniam agrees. "There's plenty of wit in what he does as well as some thoroughly ordinary, sometimes pleasant" sometimes common but sometimes sweet things, said Subramaniam, who teaches at Parsons The New School for Design in Manhattan. She went on to explain that no matter how Banksy's work is viewed, there is no denying that he is an expert when it comes to promoting his work to the general public.

**The Mayor Is Not Amused**

Subramaniam says Banksy is among a group of graffiti artists whose work ultimately earned respect from respected artists. But Banksy also fits into a new space where artists use public space to create art. That leads to conversations about who owns these public spaces and what can happen there.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg is often credited for cleaning up New York City’s public spaces. When asked about Banksy, Bloomberg called graffiti "a sign of decay and loss of control."

On his last day in New York, Banksy tagged, or signed his name, on a building. The building is located in Queens, one of New York's boroughs. But instead of using spray paint, Banksy spelled out his name with giant balloon letters. The inflatable letters were stuck to one of the building's walls and later taken down by police. The police did not consider the letters art.

Before he left New York City, Banksy explained his balloon piece on his website. The work, he said, paid respect to the most well known form of graffiti, called tagging. He also said it paid respect to New York City, the city that had basically invented tagging. Then the secretive artist joked, "Or it's another Banksy piece that's full of hot air."