

British graffiti artist leaves his mark on New York City, controversy too

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In this Oct. 19, 2013, file photo, a woman looks at work by British graffiti artist Banksy in New York City's borough of Brooklyn. The secretive street artist ended his self-announced monthlong residency in New York with a final piece of graffiti, a \$615,000 painting donated to charity and, of course, a debate: Is he a jerk or a genius? Photo: AP Photo/Alyssa Goodman, File

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

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

Banksy, who refuses to reveal his full identity, began his career spray-painting buildings in Bristol, England. Artwork placed in public areas and usually without permission is called street art. Banksy is arguably the most famous street artist in the world. He is known for his distinctive stencils and political statements through art. He was even nominated for an Academy Award in 2011 for a documentary he directed called "Exit Through The Gift Shop."

Each day in October meant a new picture, video or prank from Banksy to New Yorkers. Many of his images were silhouetted figures or spray-painted messages. The art ranged from a stencil of a dog lifting his leg on a hydrant to a video of a "slaughterhouse delivery truck" filled with stuffed animals.

Desperately Seeking Graffiti

Banksy put pictures of his work on BanksyNY.com, with clues to locations but nothing precise. That spawned a treasure hunt by fans who tracked the works down, shared locations via social media, then swarmed to see them.

Another piece of traveling performance art drew large crowds to various areas of the city. It featured a dirty young man shining the shoes of a life-size fiberglass statue of Ronald McDonald.

Some works were defaced by other graffiti artists, while at least one Banksy street work was covered with a clear plastic cover to preserve it. Some of Banksy's work also sold, unadvertised, for \$60 on the street.

Before he left New York, Banksy donated a painting. The original painting depicted a mountainous landscape, which sold for \$50 at a Manhattan charity thrift store called Housing Works. The thrift store sells used items to raise money to fight homelessness and AIDS.

Banksy added a Nazi soldier to the painting, titled it "The Banality of the Banality of Evil," and then re-donated it to Housing Works. The charity then put it in an online auction for \$74,000. The re-inspired Banksy painting ultimately sold for \$615,000 which went to Housing Works.

"Enough! Go Home!"

But Banksy's art did not make everyone happy. Instead, his stay in New York was full of controversy. Some New Yorkers saw him as a street punk and urged him to go back to England, while others declared their admiration and viewed him as an art-world darling.

The turning point for many critics was 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 "vanilla ... something they would build in Canada," and added, "It so clearly proclaims the terrorists won." He offered the essay to The New York Times. The paper wouldn't print it, so he posted it on his website.

"The terrorists won" comment upset many New Yorkers, including 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 culture, and he also appreciates fine art. But he doesn't think Banksy's art is all that good — "though I'll give him credit, he's a good marketer."

But Sean Lynch, 25, of Staten Island disagrees and thinks of Banksy as "one of the more captivating artists of our generation." Lynch said it was magical visiting Banksy sites around the city and hearing conversations about art that the works inspired, with "people of all different walks and cultures sharing opinions, sharing stories. The walls started to talk to them, in a way."

But Is He Any Good?

Radhika Subramaniam, a professor at Parsons The New School for Design in Manhattan, says Banksy is part of a long tradition of graffiti artists whose work ultimately earned recognition from the art establishment. But he also fits into a contemporary trend of opening up public spaces to conversations about who owns them and what can happen there. That is especially true in today's cleaned-up New York, where Mayor Michael Bloomberg, when asked about Banksy, called graffiti "a sign of decay and loss of control."

OK, but is Banksy any good?

"There's plenty of wit in what he does, as well as some thoroughly ordinary, sometimes pleasant, sometimes banal, but sometimes sweet things," Subramaniam said. But he's also not new to the art world. "After all, who would care if you or I were to set up a blog and enact a residency like this? It's only because he's able to marshal this kind of PR (public relations) and marketing that ... catapults his residency to another level and elicits these polarized points of view."

On his last day in New York, the British graffiti artist tagged, or signed his name, on a building. The building is located in Queens, one of the five boroughs of New York. 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.

In a final gesture that was serious and self-mocking at the same time, Banksy posted an audio explanation on his website explaining his final balloon inspired piece. The work, as explained in the audio tape, paid respect to the most well known form of graffiti – tagging – and "the city that invented it for the modern era. Or it's another Banksy piece that's full of hot air."