

## *I Am Banksy: Artist of the Year*

By Colby Buzzell | Dec 1, 2005 | *Esquire*

"Bus stops are far more interesting and useful places to have art than in museums. Graffiti has more chance of meaning something or changing stuff than anything indoors. Graffiti has been used to start revolutions, stop wars, and generally is the voice of people who aren't listened to. Graffiti is one of those few tools you have if you have almost nothing. And even if you don't come up with a picture to cure world poverty you can make somebody smile while they're having a piss."

—Banksy, *Banging Your Head Against a Brick Wall*

I'd never heard of the graffiti artist named Banksy until *Esquire* sent me to London to find him, which I did.

Right before I left the States, the magazine provided me with a list of art-world people to contact once I got there, people who might help me locate Banksy, but I paid about as much attention to that list as I would a parking ticket.

All I knew about the guy was stuff I read on the Web and his site, [banksy.co.uk](http://banksy.co.uk), which has a bunch of photos of his graffiti art and stencils, press clippings of him sabotaging big-name art museums with his work, and his manifesto, which stopped me cold. It's a diary entry of a British officer who was one of the first to liberate a concentration camp in 1945:

*It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for these internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity.*

This Banksy might be a little bit more than just a wanted vandal with a can of Krylon spray paint.

Right after I checked into my hotel in central London, I went over to the concierge desk for a free map of the area. I asked both the middle-aged men working behind the counter if they'd ever heard of Banksy, and both of them smiled and told me that they were familiar indeed with Banksy and that his graffiti was all over town. I asked one of them, How big is he here in London? And he told me that he's pretty big, "but no Shawn Stussy." I thanked them and made my way over to a nearby bar and took a seat next to an old-timer who looked like a local.

I ordered a pint of bitter and noticed that it was at room temperature, so I asked the guy what was up with that, and the next thing I know, for the next thirty minutes he's giving me this detailed history lesson on all the London-based beers, and he ends every sentence with the question "Yeah?" He asked me where I was from and what I was doing in London, and I told him I came from Los Angeles and that *Esquire* sent me here to hunt down a graffiti artist named Banksy and that I had no idea whatsoever

where to go or where to even begin to find this guy. He didn't know who Banksy was, but he had some advice for me: "Like-minded people always hang together, yeah? Art and thieves go together, yeah? So go to the area that has the most car thieves, yeah? And you'll find the most artists, yeah? And that's where you'll find him, yeah?"

## **The East End**

The next morning I took the Underground to the East End and got off at the Liverpool Street exit. London is very anti-street sign, and even though I had a map with me, I had to just guess in which direction I thought the East End might be. I noticed that the farther away from the Underground station I walked, the more and more tags and graffiti I saw up on the walls, which was a sign that I was headed in the right direction, but there was no sign at all of any of Banksy's stencils or art anywhere. I then stopped dead in my tracks in front of a store that had up on its wall an original screen print by legendary UK artist Jamie Reid, hand signed and numbered. (Jamie Reid did all the original Sex Pistols artwork.) I forgot about Banksy for a second and entered the store. I asked the girl how much for the print. She told me, and as I was thinking of a good way to convince Esquire that this was a business expense, I asked her about Banksy. She told me that she was well aware of him and that everybody knows who he is. She said she liked his anarchy the best. I asked where I could maybe find some of his stuff on the street, and she pointed me in the right direction, and I thanked her and left.

I looked up and saw a huge banner advertising the Urban Expression arts festival, which featured a graffiti wall and a graffiti workshop. I walked into this courtyard and saw several graffiti artists hard at work decorating a black shipping container, and on top was an old beat-up pink car with a spray-painted stencil of a skull on the passenger-side window. I made my way over to it, and for the first time since I'd been in the UK, I laid eyes on a signature Banksy stencil. It was in pink spray paint, on the rim of the container, and right underneath it a graffiti artist was hard at work on the early stages of an Einstein portrait. There was a barricade set up so that spectators couldn't bother the artists, so I approached a guy who had a clipboard in his hand and looked important and asked him if there was maybe somebody, anybody, here today who might know Banksy personally. He pointed at the guy who was spray painting Einstein and said that he would be the guy to speak to. He called him over, and the artist dropped his can of spray paint, picked up a beer, and walked over to me. I asked him if he knew Banksy, and he smiled cautiously and gave me a weak nod, but in a way that said, Yeah, but there's no way in hell I'm going to tell you. I tried asking him a few questions about Banksy, but he refused to tell me anything at all. He could neither confirm nor deny knowing him.

I saw that this was going nowhere, and as much as I wanted to turn into a character out of a Guy Ritchie movie and strong-arm my way into getting some answers out of him, I couldn't. So I ripped out a piece of paper from my Moleskine journal, wrote my e-mail address and a brief note on it, handed it to him, and asked if he could pass the message along to Banksy. He could neither confirm nor deny that he would pass it along to Banksy.

## **Actual Joy**

Almost everybody at this festival knew of Banksy, and the same words were used every time: *Legend. Well respected. Controversial. Rock star*. And one guy told me that every time he sees a Banksy stencil,

it brings joy to his heart. When I asked these people where I could maybe find him, they all laughed and said, Good luck! No chance!

So Banksy was a man of mystery.

One person told me about a nearby gallery that sells photographs of various Banksy graffiti. And another person told me about a tattoo shop up the road that has a lot of Banksy screen prints hung up inside of it. Later, when I went and checked out the shop, they told me that Banksy goes in there every now and then and trades his artwork for free tattoos for his friends.

I walked around Kingston Road for a good thirty minutes trying to find some of Banksy's work, and like when I went on foot patrol in Iraq, I didn't find shit. Frustrated, I decided it was time to refuel at a nearby pub, so I made my way down a side street with a pub at the end, and as soon as I turned onto that street, right there on a wall was a signature Banksy piece. It was a police officer walking a poodle on a leash, and on the wall was a stencil that read, THIS WALL IS A DESIGNATED GRAFFITI AREA. I pulled out my digital camera and took a quick crime-scene snapshot, and as soon as I put the camera away and was making my way to the bar, a couple showed up, and the guy pulled out his camera and took a photo of it, too. I turned around and approached the two and asked them what they thought of Banksy. Of course they both raved about him and his work. And I was starting to notice a pattern: Every time I said Banksy's name, people smiled, I mean really smiled, like they had just been told good news, or like they were remembering something cherished.

I then bitched to them that I'd been walking around this whole neighborhood for the last half hour looking for his stuff and this was the only piece I could find. The girl then pointed to the overpass that was located directly behind me and said, "Did you see that one?" I turned around, and right there was a huge ten-foot stencil of the word *Banksy*.

### **I Know Banksy (Personally)**

The next day I slept in and woke up kinda late, ended up downtown somewhere, and walked into a bookstore. *Happy Birthday, Jack Nicholson*, by Hunter Thompson, is available in the UK but not in the U. S., so I went in to pick up a copy, and as I walked by the magazine rack, there on the cover of the "Art Fart" issue of *Adbusters* was a Banksy oil painting, *You Have Beautiful Eyes*, which he recently contributed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York even though they had not asked for it. When I exited the bookstore, a backpack-wearing kid with baggy pants, a Krylon-paint T-shirt, and headphones walked past me. On the back of his backpack was the graffiti tag PEACE NOT WAR. I approached him and asked him if he knew Banksy, and with a smile he said, "Everybody knows Banksy, but nobody knows Banksy."

That was pretty Zen, so I asked him what he thought of him. "He's a fucking legend! Well respected. For various reasons—his stenciling, his art—you can tell right away when you see a Banksy. I have a friend who works over by King's Cross, and one day Banksy got hundreds of these ten-pound notes, which he fucked around with on Photoshop and pasted up on this wall. It was great! They took it down, but I took one of the notes and it says, 'Banksy of England' and in small print 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the ultimate price.' I still have it."

I asked him where I could find Banksy, and he just laughed. "There's no way you'll find him," he said. "Nobody can."

A minute later I came across another museum and walked into the bookstore part, and right there by the door in the best-seller section, underneath *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* and *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?* was a huge stack of *Existencilism*, by, of course, Banksy. I asked the girl working at the bookstore if she sold a lot of the books, and she told me that it was their best seller. We talked at length about his stuff, and she just beamed every time she recalled one of his pieces, like she loved the stuffed hip-hop rat that he placed in the Natural History Museum, and the rat stencils that she would see in places that she least expected, and the *Pulp Fiction* guys holding bananas. She thought that all his stuff was rather clever, and when I asked her what her favorite work by Banksy was, she told me that it was the one of the little girl letting the balloon go.

I told her that I was looking to find Banksy, or maybe somebody who knows him personally, and she recommended that I go check this bar called the Ten Bells. She smiled and told me it's where a lot of the hookers that Jack the Ripper killed used to hang out.

When I got to the Ten Bells, I sat down at the bar, pulled out *Existencilism*, and started reading: "I could sit in a pub and tell you all the things that are written in this book but you wouldn't fucking listen."

I took a big swig from my beer and continued: "It's better for both of us if I spend my time hiding in bushes waiting to spray little pictures on other people's property."

At the bar next door, I ordered another pint and asked the bartender girl if she had ever heard of a guy called Banksy. She looked at me like I was a fuckin' retard and said, "Who hasn't?" As I was telling her that I was from a magazine in America and I was looking for Banksy, a tall blond girl down the bar who was dancing with three guys ate shit and collapsed hard on the ground but got up laughing hysterically. They all looked like they were having a great time. The bartender pointed at her and said, "She knows Banksy." And she went over to her, and I watched her talk to her and point at me, and the girl instantly sobered up or tried to and with a serious look in her eyes walked over to me, leaned her body superclose to mine, stared straight into my eyes, and, even though she appeared to be really intoxicated, with total seriousness and believability in her eyes said, "I know Banksy. I know him personally."

Really? Okay. And as she was telling me that I was in the neighborhood where he grew up, but that he no longer lives here, I could feel her breasts up against my chest, and every time I tried to lean back and away, she leaned forward. She was so drunk, I don't even think she realized this. I asked her where he lives now. "I can't tell you," she said.

"How do I know that you're telling me the truth and that you really know Banksy?" She told me that he'd done a stencil of her. I asked which one, and she stared me dead in the eyes.

"I'm the little girl with the balloon," she said.

I left the bar to take a beer piss, and in a dark alley I came across a Banksy stencil of a police officer doing a huge line of coke.

It made me smile.

## Taxi Drivers and Other Banksy Haters

The next morning I received an e-mail from Banksy's PR person saying that Banksy was too busy for me and that Esquire was wasting its time sending me here to find him. Today I was going to a different hotel, so I checked out and took a cab to my new place. The cabdriver was a character, and on the way there, in a thick London accent, he said that where I was going a lot of rich Arabs lived, and the locals refer to this place as the Gaza Strip. I told him that I had spent a year in Iraq and had seen my fair share of Arabs there.

He turned around and looked at me. "In America, is it usually the poor who sign up for the military?" I told him overall, yes, that it's always the rich who start the wars and the poor who fight them. He turned around again. "Yeah, well, we all know that one, mate," he said.

He asked what I was now doing in London, and I told him I was looking for a guy called Banksy and asked if he knew about him. He told me he didn't. By now I'd talked to just about everyone in London, so this was a surprise. When I told him that he was a graffiti artist, he said, "Graw-feet-tee-awtist?! Why in hell is Esquire sending you all the way here to find a *graw-feet-tee-awtist* ?!" I told him that it was because I think they are making him one of this year's Best and Brightest. He totally flipped out. "A *graw-feet-tee-awtist* ?! Best and Brightest?! *Bollocks* !" This totally enraged him, and for the next five minutes he went off, swearing and cussing and banging on the steering wheel as he went on and on about how much he passionately hated graffiti, as well as the people who made it. When he dropped me off at my hotel he said, "When you find this guy, can you do me a favor? Kick him in the bollocks! I fawking *hate* graw-feet-tee-awtists!"

I checked into my new place and quickly ran back out to flag down another car. I told the driver that I needed to get to the British Museum and how much? He said, "It's about thirteen to fourteen pounds, but since you're wearing a Slayer T-shirt, I'll do it for a tenner!" Cool, so I jumped in his cab and we discussed my favorite topic (Slayer) for a bit, and I changed the subject over to Banksy. He told me about a rough part of town where a lot of shootings take place, and on an overpass Banksy wrote, "Please drive-by carefully in our village."

The British Museum is free, but they have donation bins located just inside the doors for people who feel like giving to the museum, which Banksy must have entirely ignored when he entered this place. The reason I was there is that Banksy donated one of his works to this museum without them even knowing about it for several days, and I kinda wanted to see what was up with that. I went up to the info desk and asked if they knew about Banksy. The girl didn't, but the guy next to her did and referred to him as a "guerrilla street artist," and he said that the museum still has the art that Banksy displayed there and it's actually thinking about putting it up on display permanently someday. I asked if I could see it, and they directed me to the press office. Fuck that, so I went to leave, and as I did I wondered how hard it would be to pull off a stunt like that. It looked kinda easy, so on the way out I approached one of the security guards and asked him how hard it would be for, say, someone like me to walk into that museum and put up a painting that I did without them knowing about it. He sternly told me that it would be "impossible!" I told him that it wasn't impossible, that in fact a guy named Banksy had already done it. He then said that he's worked at the museum for years and he has never heard of anybody hanging up his own artwork in the museum, and again said that it would be "impossible!" and didn't believe that it could be done. I asked a couple questions about the museum's security, and he started getting suspicious and started asking me questions, so I thanked him for his time and left.

## **Banksy Is the Next . . .**

Located within walking distance of the British Museum are a lot of galleries, and one of them that I came across sold a lot of Banksy's original art and screen prints. So I entered the gallery and said hello to the guy working there, who looked kinda hung-over from the night before, and I did, too, and I asked him if it was okay to look around, which he said was fine. A lot of Banksy's canvases and screen prints were hand numbered and signed, and they weren't exactly cheap. Up on the wall was a canvas painting called *Monkey Queen*. I asked him how much it was, since, like the others, it didn't have a price tag on it, and he told me that it was already sold, for a good five figures. I asked what kind of people shell out this kind of loot for a Banksy, and he told me "A-listers" mostly, as well as a lot of people who like his stuff and want a piece of it. I then told him that I was from Esquire and that I was looking for Banksy. He laughed and told me that finding Banksy would be impossible, that not even they know where he is, and I had no chance at all of finding him. Bollocks. I asked him if it was okay to ask him a couple questions, and he said it was. "Is Banksy the next—"

I didn't even have time to finish the question. "Andy Warhol. Banksy is the next Andy Warhol."

## **An Explosive Device**

I guess you might call it an art experience. By the next to last day of my quest for Banksy, I had seen dozens and dozens of his works on walls and overpasses and in galleries, and I had seen the glow on the faces of dozens of people as they contemplated Banksy, the kind of glow that you see when religious people talk about their god. It's clear that Banksy is like a god of sorts to a lot of people, and he brings them a kind of comfort.

Well, here's what happened: It was a simple print, and it was one of the most beautiful things I ever saw, and I had to have it. It's just a really simple screen print of a little schoolgirl hugging a bomb with a huge smile on her face, and the background is just matte pink. Pink makes the print soft and appealing to the eye, but at the same time, it's completely twisted and morbid. And it just makes you want to cry. Or smile, depending. A guy named Steve, who is the owner of Pictures on Walls, a company that prints and sells all of Banksy's screen prints online and to the galleries, gave it to me as a gift. He wouldn't even let me pay for it. Steve is probably the guy closest to Banksy. Well, I got this print, and because I'm a fucking burnout I left it on the ground just outside the train turnstile. I was in the Underground before I realized it, and when I did, I ran back, and when I got outside, I saw a guy standing where I just was, with the cardboard poster tube in hand, trying to open it up. I yelled, "Hey, man! That's mine, dude! Don't touch it!" He then told me that he works at one of the concession stands and when he saw the tube just standing there by itself, it looked suspicious, and he thought it was maybe a bomb or something. I wanted to tell him that if he thought it was a bomb, the last thing he should do is open it up, but whatever. Instead I told him that it was in fact a bomb. I opened it and took out the screen print and showed it to him.

"It's called *Bomb Hugger*," I said. He got a chuckle out of that. He said that he was ready to tear it up and chuck it in the trash can. He said that he had never heard of Banksy. I told him that one day he would.

## **I Am Banksy**

Last call in London is 11:00 P.M., which means that at 10:00 you find yourself turning into a hardcore binge drinker so that you don't leave the pub totally disappointed and thirsting for more booze. Which I've made the mistake of doing several times in England, and so I didn't want to make that mistake again on my last night.

The night before I was supposed to leave, I found myself hanging out at a pub in downtown London with three friends I'd made along the way while searching for Banksy, all of whom were cool people and extremely close to him.

We were all just hanging out at a pub, having a good time, killing time as well as brain cells. Whoever or whatever Banksy is (some people say that Banksy is actually a group of people), I had given up on finding him.

A majority of what happened after last call remains a blur, but the next thing I knew, I was at some locked-door after-hours party, partaking in some highly illegal activity with my art friends, when all of a sudden a fifth guy shows up with a twelver of Carlsberg. At first I didn't pay too much attention to this new guy, but in the back of my head, I kept on saying to myself, Who is this guy? and Why is he here? I stared at him for a minute. I ran down the mental checklist: five foot five, doesn't dress or look like a graffiti artist, reserved, quiet, chill, watcher not a talker, white, the last guy you'd ever expect, et cetera. Jesus, this guy totally fit the profile. I reached over really secretly and tapped the shoulder of the guy next to me. "Dude, that guy is Banksy," I whispered, loud enough for Banksy to hear me.

I studied his face to see how he reacted to my discovery. He just sort of shrugged it off in a manner that didn't say yes or no. Exactly what Banksy would do.

I stood up and pointed and took a couple steps back away from him. " *Dude! You're Banksy ! I found you, man!*"

He looked at me, smiled, lifted his beer to his lips. Everything got quiet. A moment went by.

"Banksy, man, that's you, right?"