**The Prints of Banksy-an introduction.**

It’s a challenge in writing about an artist that is both universally well-known and yet whose identity remains a mystery. This for an artist that works in the open, in public, stencilling his works under the gaze of anyone that might be passing, hiding in plain sight.

The character or indeed the legend of Banksy has some of the qualities of a later day Robin Hood in the manner in which his anti-establishment satirical practice has nevertheless endeared him to the general public. While for many, graffiti is regarded as an anti-social act of vandalism, Banksy’s interventions have gathered popular approval and by using the street as his gallery, he has taken his work directly to the public, many of whom would never consider visiting an art gallery.

While Banksy’s work has appeared in numerous locations across the world, including in London, New York and in Palestine where he used the West Bank Wall as his canvas, he has become synonymous with his home city of Bristol. Bristol has a reputation for cultivating independent and idiosyncratic thinkers such as the Oscar winning animator Nic Park, famous for his stop motion animation, *Wallace & Gromit* and for the BBC Natural History Unit with its pioneering work in raising consciousness of the fragility of the natural world through its long association with that living treasure, David Attenborough and the series *Life on Earth*. Bristol also has a reputation for taking issues onto the street as evidenced in its history by riots dating back to the 18th c and more recently to those in the St Paul’s district in 1980 and 1986 which drew international attention. This impulse to conduct affairs in public can also be seen in the summary justice handed out to the statute of the slaver, Edward Colston, which was toppled and ceremonially dumped into Bristol harbor in June 2020.

Banksy’s spayed stenciled interventions are an art for all and not intended to be owned, despite the number of his works that are quickly removed and sold on. However, he has maintained a parallel practice of producing screenprints in limited editions which are available often for no more than the price of a poster and which now command very high prices on the secondary market. For many, acquiring one of his prints has provided a windfall but through these editions it has also ensured that he has maintained a close connection with his followers. He can be understood within that long tradition of British political satire that includes William Hogarth, James Gillray, Thomas Rowlandson and George Cruikshank but, while these used engraving to circulate their images, Banksy has adopted screenprint.

Screen print was initially a commercial process that was embraced by the likes of Andy Warhol and the Pop Artists as a process of making art which reflected on advertising and popular culture. Warhol famously courted controversy when, in 1964 at the New York World’s Fair as an artwork, he pasted his screen-printed mug shots of the NYPD’s *Thirteen most wanted men* on the outside of the New York State Pavilion. For legal reasons Warhols artwork was whitewashed over but, as with Banksy, the event unfolded in the public domain.

Screenprint, with its capacity to print flat uniform colour and its commercial associations for printing posters and packaging, has resonated with artists wanting to distance themselves from the exclusive and esoteric concerns of the likes of the American Abstract Expressionists for whom art could be seen to exist in a rarified atmosphere.

Screen-printing is both a fast and cheap way to print and since it can be printed on all manner of materials, banners, posters and placards and required little in the way of equipment, it has become the process of choice for protest. Screen-printing in essence is very simple; a nylon or polyester mesh is stretched over a wooden frame and those areas of the mesh that are left open allow the ink to be pushed through onto the paper below using a rubber squeezy. Where the mesh is blocked, the ink is prevented from printing. The image is made through making a stencil, either manually through a cut paper stencil or photographically by exposing a screen coated with a photo sensitive solution.

The majority of Banksy’s prints use high contrast photographic images, each divided into just black and white, only rarely has he used a photographic half tone. The image is simplified to a sharp division between those areas that print and those left blank and detail in his work is reduced to minimum, as is also the case with the stencils that he uses to spray through on the street.

Most often he takes a familiar image and changes it in some small way, the pointing guns in *Pulp Fiction* are replaced by bananas or a golf sale sign placed in the hand of the Tiananmen Square protestor in G*olf Sale*. In this form of photomontage, he follows in that tradition of politically engaged artists most famously, the German Dadaist John Heartfield, who, in one of his most celebrated collages, modified an image of Hitler giving the Nazi salute to one where Hitler is receiving cash from a towering businessman standing immediately behind him. And more recently, Peter Kennard, who since the 1970’s has been a key figure at the forefront of politically engaged art with photomontage at its very heart. In one of his celebrated works in support of CND, he collaged Cruise Missiles into the otherwise tranquil setting of Constable’s Hay Wain.

Banksy’s use of collage and cut and paste in both his public works and his screenprints, also draw inspiration from the anarchic works of the surrealists, in particular those of Max Ernst, whose collages made from cut up and reassembled 19th century engravings, create such unsettling and provocative juxtapositions.

For Banksy his street stenciled works are made poignant by his careful selection of site, adding an extra layer of meaning as a result of their location. The screenprints in contrast are works to be seen in the home, framed, providing an ironic edge to their domestic surroundings. There is no attempt to make them formally richer, complex or picturesque. For the most part the prints are made using just 2-3 printed colours with the additional white of the paper. In this way, they retain a certain direct rawness, as if made in haste and left at the moment when the message is most readable.

Banksy’s prints and indeed his public interventions depend on clarity and for the viewer to immediately recognize his sources, as in one of his most successful and indeed disturbing prints, *Napalm (2004)* in which the harrowing image of the terrified young girl fleeing in Nick Ut’s photograph from the Vietnam War is juxtaposed with that of the perpetual smiling figures of Disney’s Micky Mouse and Ronald McDonald. The print is black and white with a plain cold grey background and just a yellow addition to mark out the costumes. Over and again, Banksy uses figures of children, Judy Garland from the Wizard of Oz, Jack and Jill, the infant Jesus, as well as those captured releasing a ballon, playing ball games or hugging a bomb as if a soft toy. In each case, it’s their innocence and vulnerability which is contrasted against corporate business and power and the impact of war.

While Banksy’s interventions are temporary and at risk of being removed, overpainting or the site itself being redeveloped, the prints stand as both souvenirs and as a lasting record. So while the future of his street works remains uncertain and subject to change, the prints being multiples and widely circulated will ensure a lasting legacy for his ideas.

Paul Coldwell

Paul Coldwell is an artist and Professor in Fine Art at the University of the Arts London.