Banksy:
Not Your Usual Graffiti Artist

Artistic talent, audacity and keen intelligence have made this mysterious street art provocateur a market sensation even as he maintains his anonymity.

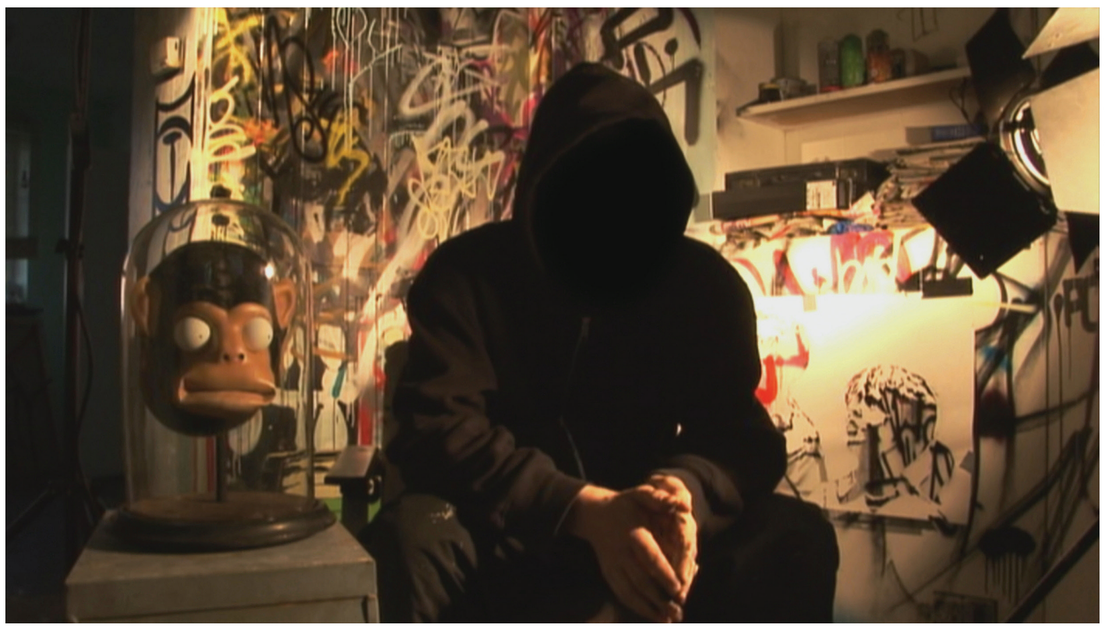

Photo: Courtesy Pest Control

The mysterious Banksy as he appears in the film "Exit Through the Gift Shop."

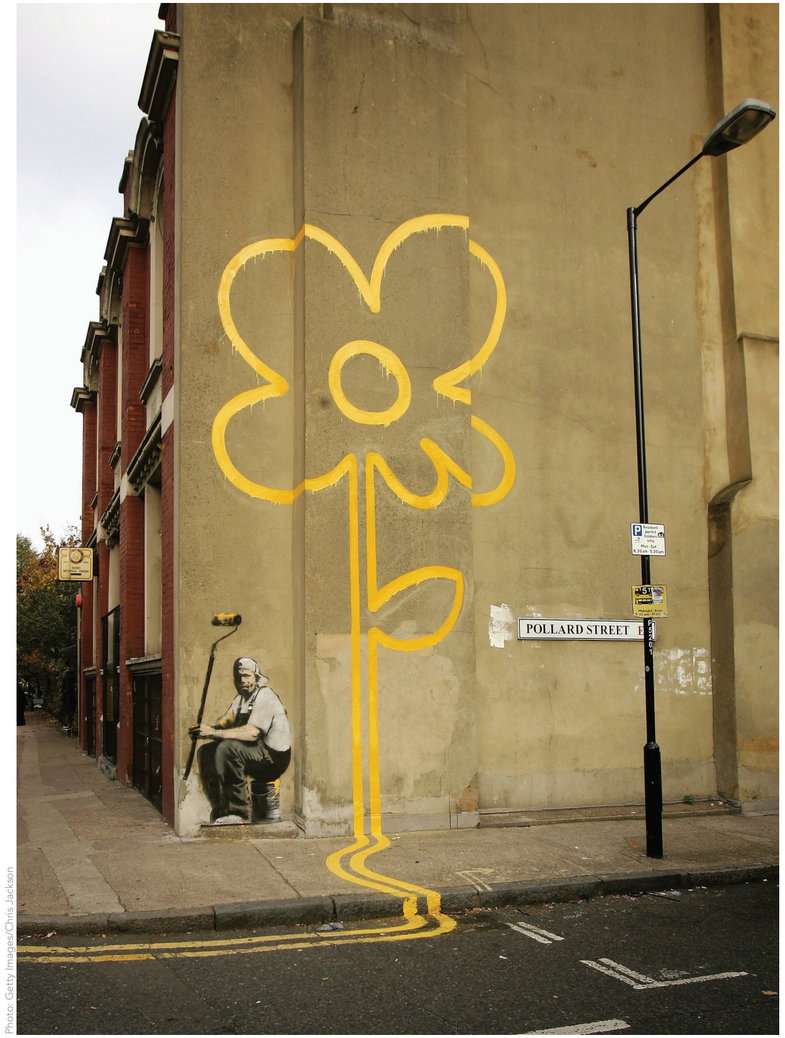

Photo: Getty Images/Chris Jackson

"Yellow Lines Flower Painter" seen on Pollard Street on November 1, 2007, in London.

by JASON EDWARD KAUFMAN

An innovative technique for graffiti removal has started to gain traction, particularly in London. To complete the three-step process, simply cut into the wall around the drawing, extract the slab and sell it at auction for a few hundred thousand dollars. It may require some post-removal masonry, but the new approach has become the preferred method of cleaning up—both literally and figuratively—when walls have been painted by Banksy, the enigmatic Englishman whose provocative pictures and entertaining pranks have made him the poster boy for the increasingly lucrative market for street art. ▷

Photo: Getty Images/Jeff Vespa

Premiere of Banksy's film, "Exit Through the Gift Shop," in Los Angeles, California, on April 16, 2010.

Most street artists are reviled as talentless juvenile delinquents who need a job. Banksy enjoys museum shows, high-ticket sales and the press attention accorded movie, sports and rock stars. *The Times* in London has called him "our unlikeliest national treasure," and in 2010 *Time* magazine deemed him one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World." His street art documentary "Exit Through the Gift Shop" was nominated in 2011 for an Academy Award. And now he's the subject of a 300-page biography, *Banksy: The Man behind the Wall*, penned by the former chief reporter for *The Sunday Times*.

His turf ranges across the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States, and even to the West Bank and Timbuktu. (Seriously, Timbuktu.) But against all odds, Banksy remains anonymous. He never shows up at his exhibitions and refuses to be interviewed in person, only rarely responding to questions by phone or email. (Queries from *Black Card Mag* were also ignored.) But a 2008 investigation by *The Mail* on Sunday outed Banksy and his wife. It turns out that Robin Gunningham isn't the ruffian he made himself out to be. In fact, the skinny 39-year-old grew up middle class in suburban Bristol and graduated from the private Bristol Cathedral School—not a great profile in a field identified with the disenfranchised underclass, but evidently a fine one for honing a critical attitude towards society and a talent for visual communication. ▷

Photo: Getty Images/Jason LaVeris

"The Crayola Shooter," appeared on February 17, 2011, in Los Angeles, showing a child wielding a machine gun, using crayons for bullets.

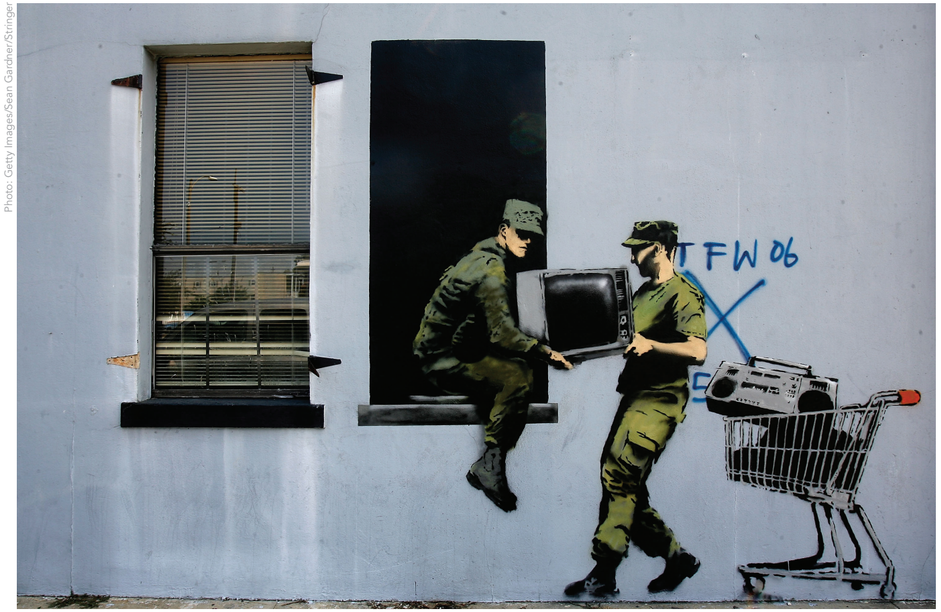

Photo: Getty Images/Sean Gardner/Stringer

Seen on a building August 28, 2008, in New Orleans, Louisiana. More works began popping up throughout New Orleans, coinciding with the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

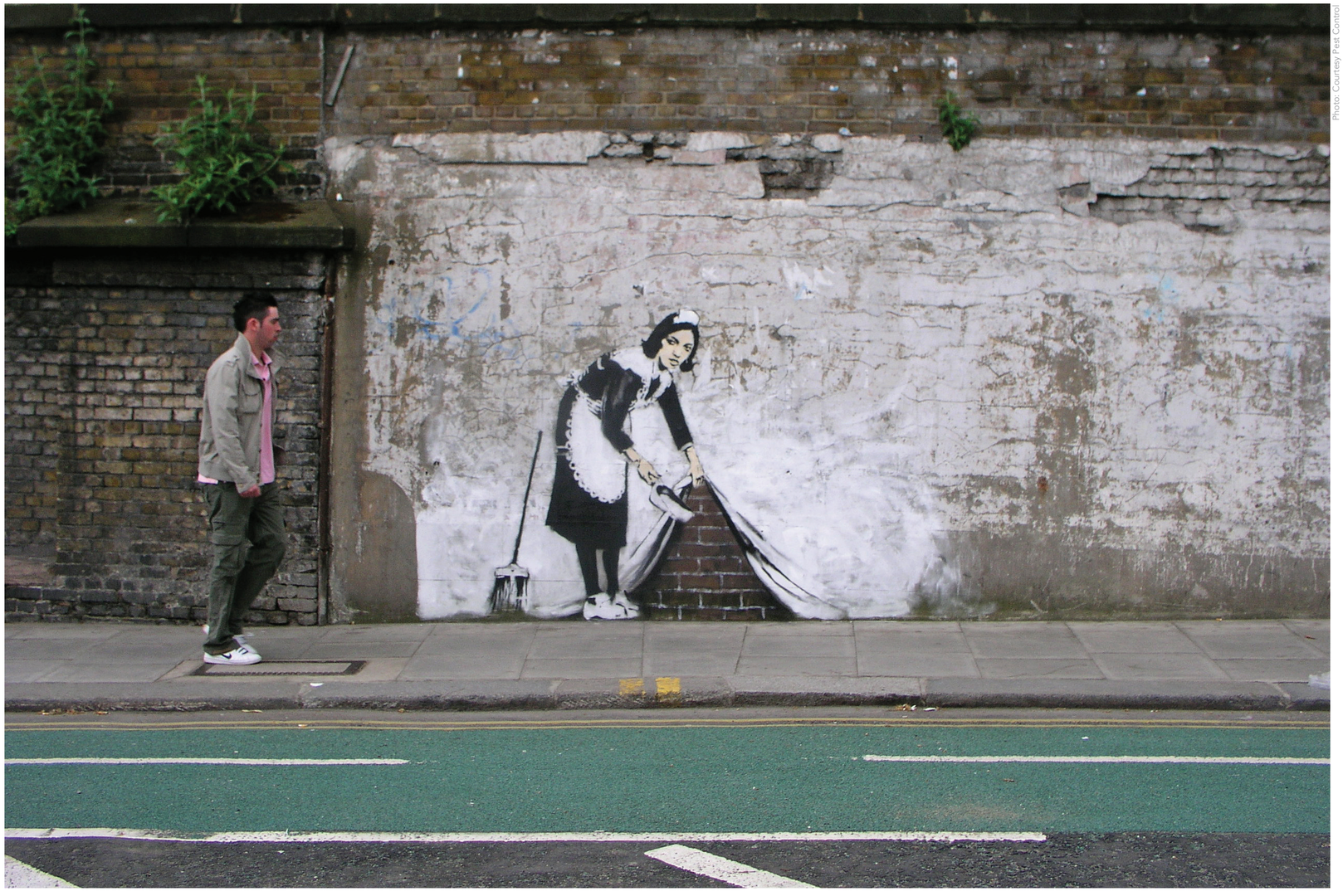

Photo: Courtesy Pest Control

The sweeping maid exists in more than one place, but this is apparently “Sweeping It Under The Carpet” at the corner of Regent’s Park Road and Chalk Farm Road, London, May 2006.

Taking on the Establishment

Banksy’s a capable illustrator whose images tend to be easy-to-read figurative scenes, mostly black-and-white with occasional touches of color. Instead of painting on the spot using a spray can or a marker, he composes in the studio and makes stencils for rapid transfer. This reduces the chance of being caught in the act, and allows him to render complex images more precisely for maximum impact. But what sets him apart is the intelligence and wit with which he takes aim at the power structures of society. His arch commentaries, morality tales and satires demand more than a fleeting glance. He may self-publish on the street, but Banksy is as much a journalist as any regular political cartoonist on the op-ed pages. ▷

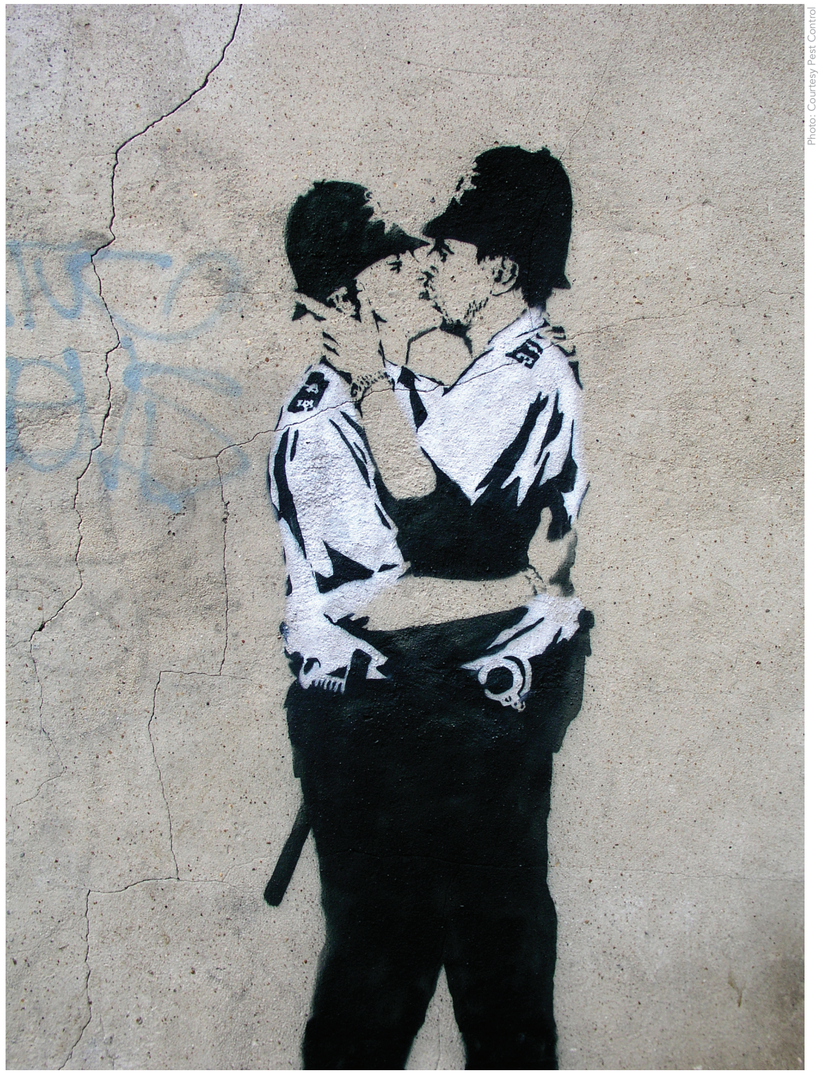

Photo: Courtesy Pest Control

"Kissing Coppers" was painted on the exterior wall of Prince Albert Pub in Brighton in 2005, but removed and sold to a New York City gallery in 2011.

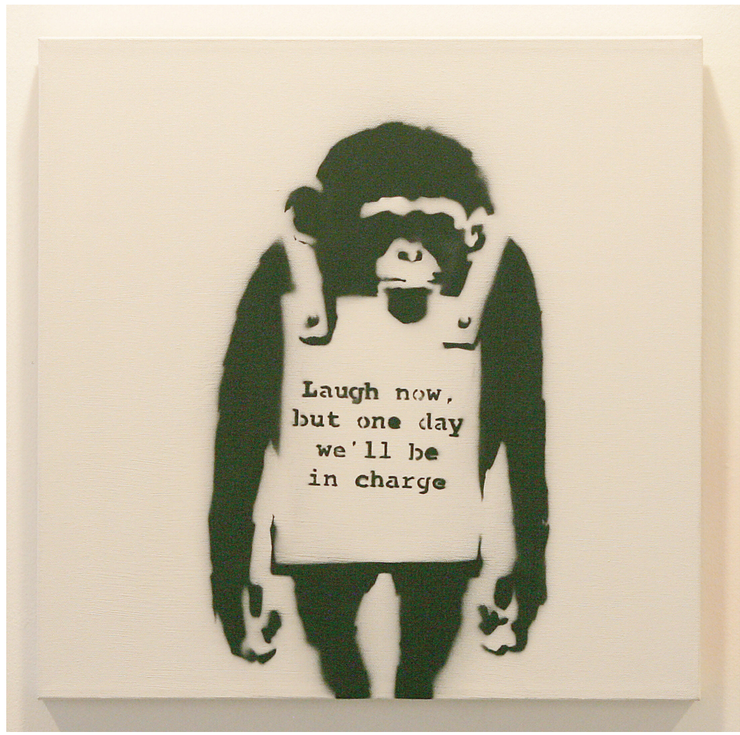

Photo: Getty Images/Stringer

Banksy's five-panel "Laugh Now" (detail shown) sold for $1.26 million in 2008.

His favored motifs are rats, cops and monkeys. He says his rats "represent the triumph of the little people, the unloved, over everything else." Policemen, natural enemies of street artists, are emasculated with smiley faces or shown making out with one another. He paints the Queen as a chimp, populates Parliament with apes and stencils scruffy primates wearing placards with slogans like "Laugh now, but one day we'll be in charge."

Among his graphic swipes at capitalism include a leopard escaping from a barcode cage, a vulture with a gas pump nozzle for a head and school children pledging allegiance to the logo of Tesco, a grocery chain that crushes smaller shops. Media violence is defused with images of "Pulp Fiction" villains wielding bananas instead of pistols, an attack helicopter with a pink bow and a protestor hurling flowers instead of a Molotov cocktail. On the West Bank wall, he paints a ladder, a pair of scissors and a dotted line and trompe l'oeil holes filled with vacation scenes.

To puncture the moneyed art world, he doctors copies of Old Master paintings: an English nobleman with a raised middle finger, an aristocrat getting a pie in the face and a Monet lily pond fouled with litter—canvases for which collectors have paid as much as $658,000. His cunning cartoons make street art's attitude accessible for those who otherwise would consider the whole thing nothing but defacement and blight. Their leftist sentiments are popular, but not universally admired. The critic for the conservative *Evening Standard* has stated, "Superficially his work looks deep, but it's actually deeply superficial." ▷

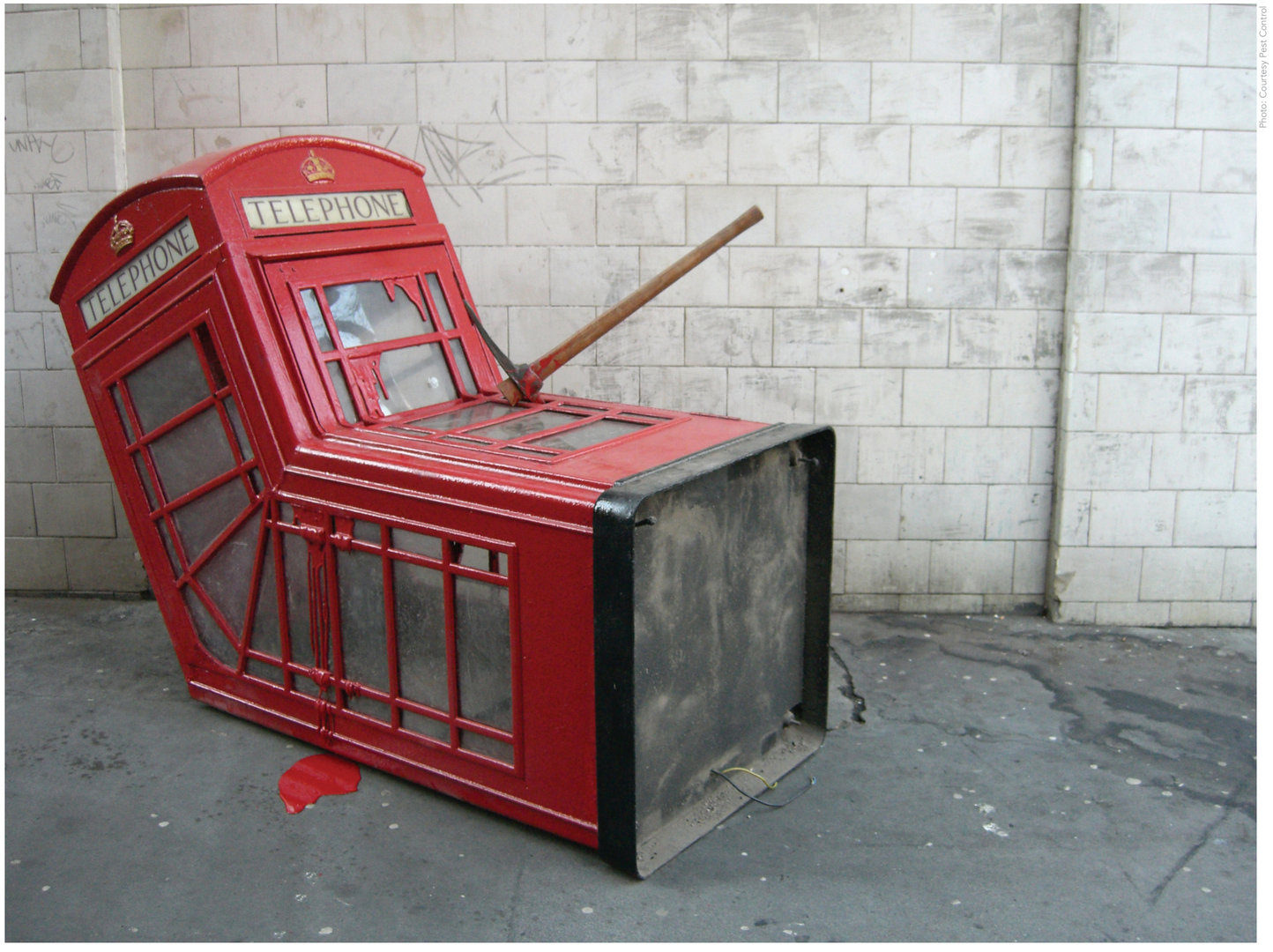

Photo: Courtesy Pest Control

A British Telecom (BT) telephone booth modified by Banksy was placed on a Soho street in April 2006, and soon removed by authorities.

Master Stunt Man

Early on, he sported the moniker Robbin Banx, then cut it to the catchier and shorter Banksy. It became a bold-faced name in 2003 when he sneaked a picturesque landscape painting crisscrossed with police tape into the heavily visited Tate Modern in London and affixed it to the gallery wall with a label griping about a U.K. crime-prevention program. Similar displays at the British Museum, the Metropolitan and other venerable institutions were removed within hours, but videos documenting the acts went viral online, and Banksy was on his way to stardom.

A few years later, he replaced Paris Hilton CDs in dozens of U.K. music stores with altered versions containing remixed audio and a brochure showing the singer topless and song list titles, including “Why am I famous?” and “What have I done?” Many sold for £9.99 and have since fetched as much as £1,500 at auction. In 2006, he sliced a red British Telecom (BT) phone booth in two, welded the parts together at an angle and embedded a pickaxe from which fake blood drips down the windows. He laid the murdered call box on its side on a Soho sidewalk, where passersby applauded the assault. In 2008, the sculpture sold for $550,000 at a Sotheby’s New York charity auction. ▷

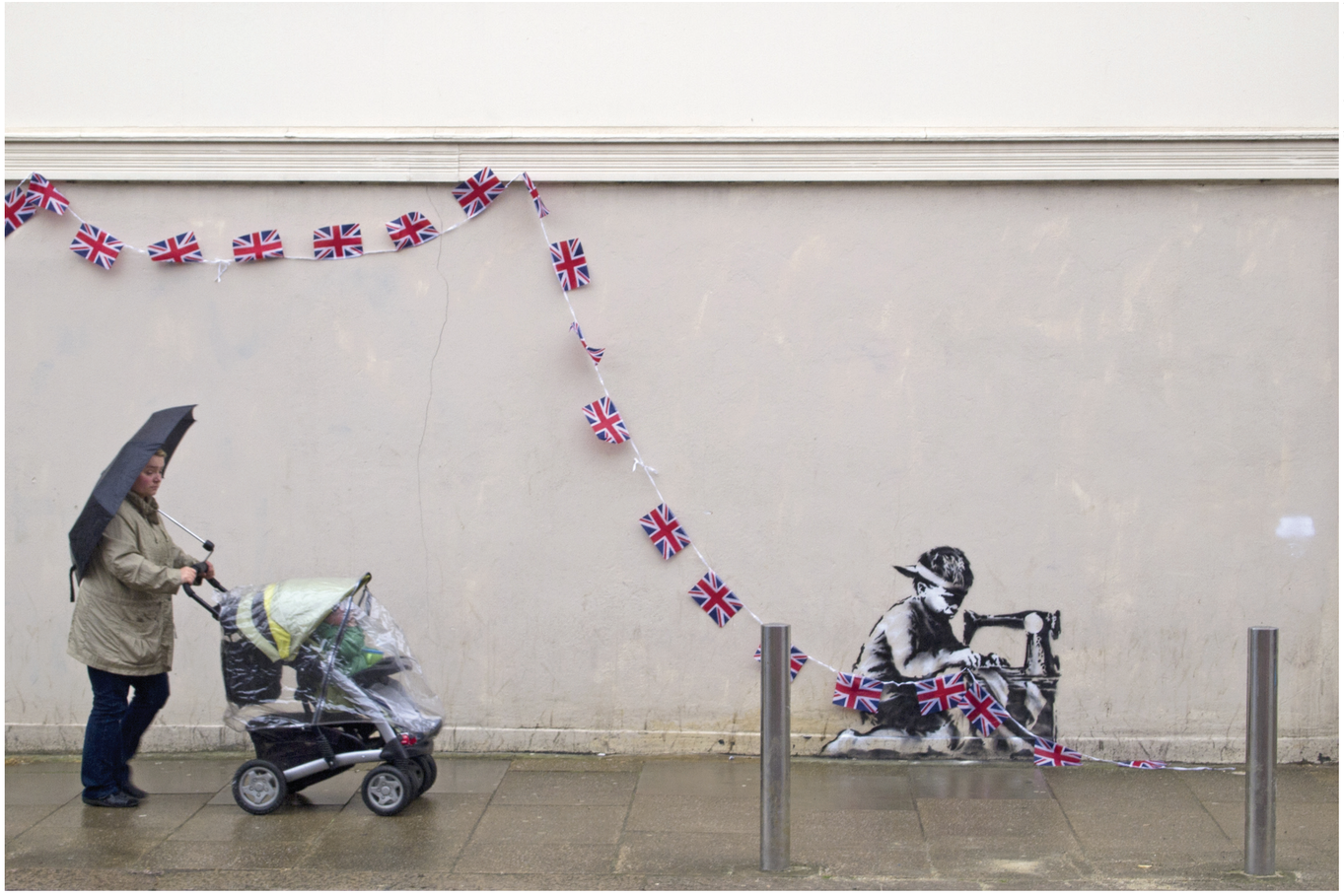

Photo: Courtesy Pest Control

"Slave Labor" showed up in May 2012, just before the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, on the wall of a Poundland discount shop in the Wood Green area of north London. The stenciled image depicts a poor child sewing the kinds of souvenir Union Jack flags that sold at the patriotic celebration.

Communities eradicate graffiti with high-pressure washing, solvents or overpaint. Owners of Banksys cover the images with Plexi or chop them out of the wall and sell them. With the artist's approval, a London hospital cut a rat painting from its facade and hawked it for tens of thousands of pounds. A picture extracted from the wall of a North London discount store was to be auctioned earlier this year in Miami for an estimated $500,000 to $700,000, until locals demanded its return. The image, which scorns the nationalist celebrations around the Queen's Jubilee, shows an Asian boy kneeling at a sewing machine working on a strip of souvenir British flags—an allusion to a 2010 inquiry into the chain store's stock of products made by child labor in India. The owners bowed to public pressure and pulled the piece from the Miami sale, but as we went to press, it was headed to a June 2 auction in Covent Garden, again eliciting calls for its return to the community from which it was taken. ▷

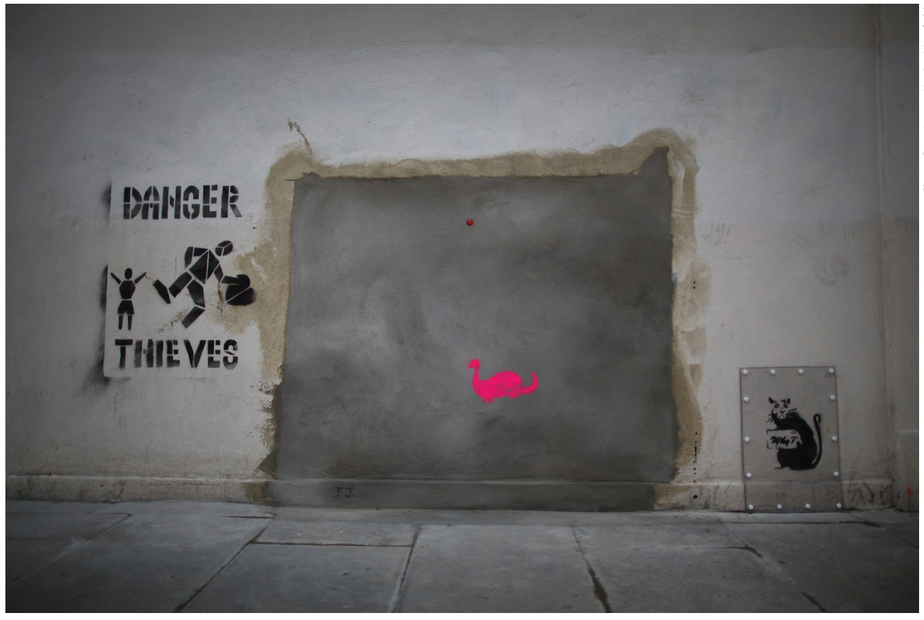

Photo: Getty Images/Jordan Mansfield

A new rat was stenciled on the side of the Poundland building on Whymark Avenue in London beside the repaired wall where "Slave Labor" was removed on February 23, 2013.

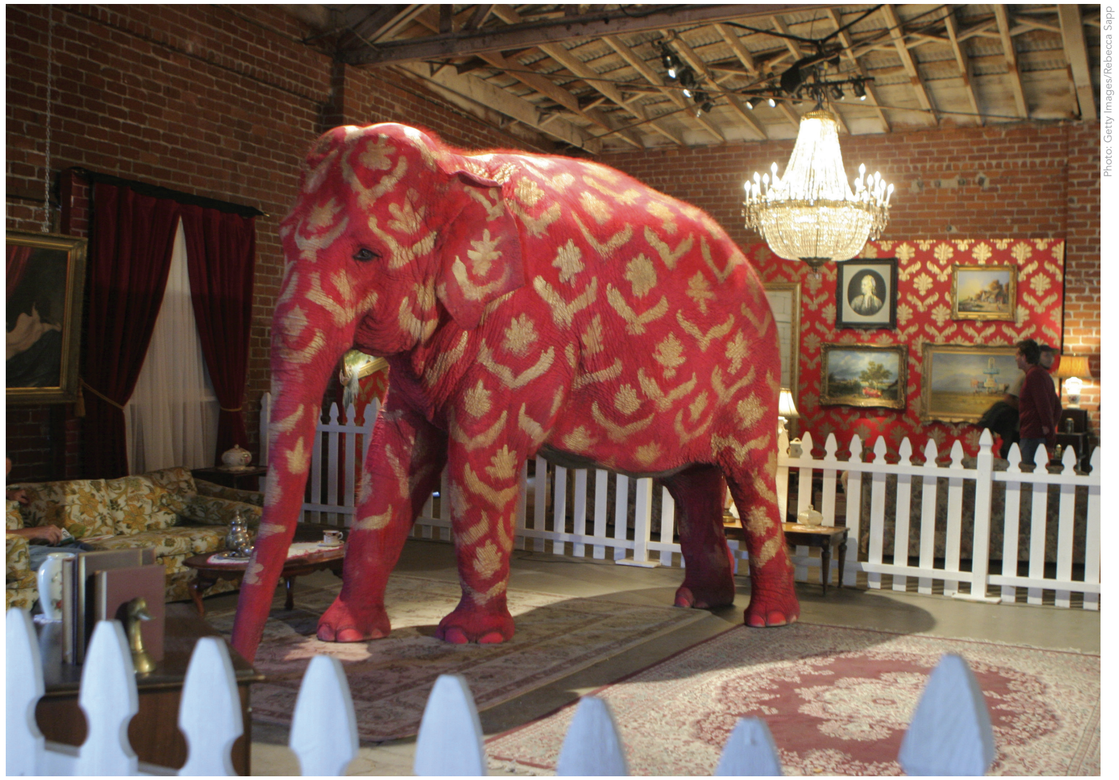

Photo: Getty Images/Rebecca Sapp

"The Elephant in the Room" is from Banksy's Barely Legal Art Show in Downtown Los Angeles on September 15, 2006.

Like graffiti pioneers Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat, Banksy has taken his street art indoors. In 2006, he rented a warehouse in Los Angeles, filled it with paintings and brought in a decoratively painted live elephant. Handouts explained that the "elephant in the room" symbolized world poverty, but even though he used children's face paint, activists bemoaned the artist's "cruelty to animals." The day before the opening, he went to Disneyland and inflated a handcuffed Guantanamo Bay prisoner doll near a miniature train ride. An online video of the exploit ratcheted up interest in the show, which by his count, drew 30,000 visitors in three days, including Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Jude Law, Keanu Reeves and Macaulay Culkin.

Another coup was a solo exhibition that filled the Bristol City Museum in 2009. Banksy conceived, pitched and bankrolled the hometown extravaganza. An effigy of Ronald McDonald sat with a liquor bottle above the entrance, and inside were various irreverent riffs on art icons: a Stonehenge made of porta-toilets, a fiberglass replica of Michelangelo's "David" wearing a suicide vest, a stenciled rat touching up a Damien Hirst "Spot" painting. A statue of a lion with a whip in its bloody mouth served as a surrogate self-portrait of the untamable rogue artist. The show attracted 300,000 to the dusty museum, making it the second most-visited exhibition in the United Kingdom that year. ▷

Photo: Getty Images/Robyn Beck

"Gangsta Rat," a work on canvas, was up for sale at Bonhams' inaugural U.S. auction of Urban Art, October 24, 2012, in Hollywood, California.

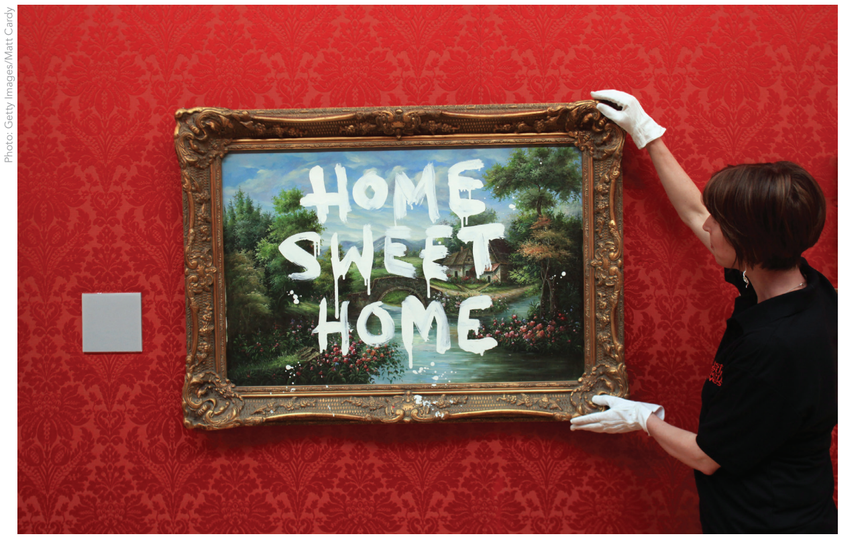

Photo: Getty Images/Matt Cardy

Banksy launched a surprise exhibition titled "Banksy versus Bristol Museum" in his hometown Bristol, England, on June 12, 2009. It was one of the largest single collections of the artist's works, organized under tight security and installed in just 36 hours with only a handful of museum staff aware it was even happening. Banksy said that hosting the exhibition was his way of thanking the city for his early street art career.

Success or Sell-Out?

Then Banksy hit the silver screen. A Los Angeles–based, French-born videographer named Thierry Guetta spent several years recording street artists Space Invader, Shepard Fairey (whose Obama poster briefly exceeded even Banksy's fame) and Banksy, who stipulated that his face never appear on camera. "Street art has a short lifespan, so it needed documenting," Banksy explains in a voice-distorted interview, his face shrouded in a hoodie that gives him the appearance of a grunge Grim Reaper.

Guetta's edit of the footage was "unwatchable," according to Banksy, who undertook a remake that cast Guetta as a main character. Reinventing himself as the street artist Mr. Brainwash, Guetta pays assistants to produce scores of Warhol-inspired paintings and mounts a Los Angeles show emulating Banksy's. He claims to gross nearly $1 million in a week, and one picture winds up on the cover of a Madonna CD.

The story of the flagrantly commercial Mr. Brainwash bares the hype and greed undermining the ethos of street art. "It never was about the money," Banksy says in the film, apologizing for his own financial success, which detractors construe as a betrayal in a field ostensibly devoted to throwing a wrench in the capitalist system.

Yet, for a street artist, Banksy is unusually attentive to business. He and his former manager, Steve Lazarides, "create[d] a market for street art where none had existed before," writes biographer Will Ellsworth-Jones. As sales agent, Lazarides retailed paintings and limited-edition prints to galleries, publicized Banksy's street art and escapades on a website (banksy.co.uk) and staged the exhibitions that spawned a media frenzy and cult following among a new young audience.

Since their split in 2008, Banksy's commercial operation has been handled by Pest Control, a company he founded to sell and authenticate his studio works. The nonprofit reported £1.1 million in assets in 2010, which may be an understatement considering that a five-panel chimp painting sold for $1.26 million in 2008. That's a fraction of the $16.3 million paid last year for work by Jean Michel Basquiat, the New York City graffiti artist who died in 1988, but it places Banksy on the market's blue-chip roster.

Inevitably, the deluge of money, museums and celebrity has led fellow street artists to castigate Banksy as a sell-out. It's one thing to do cover art for Blur, but another to collaborate with Damien Hirst on a picture that Sotheby's sold for $1.87 million. The embrace of the establishment has cost him street cred. But why not infiltrate the halls of power and use the mass media to carry your message far and wide? It's an issue Banksy addresses in the "Frequently Asked Question" section of his website: "Why are you such a sell-out?" His answer mocks those who would question his success or his motives: "I wish I had a pound for every time someone asked me that." ◆

Photos: Getty Images/Matt Cardy

An artwork adorns the side of a Youth Sexual Health Clinic building, which the Bristol City Council offices overlook. First seen on June 27, 2006, in Bristol, England, the large graffiti image depicts a woman in underwear, her jealous husband looking out, and her naked lover dangling from a window.