

Once upon a time George Melly was to see René Magritte, the widely syndicated Surrealist. Melly was accompanied by a strikingly pretty girl called Robin Banks. Magritte was suitably impressed. Deadpan to the end (and steeped in pulp fiction), he heard the name as Robbing Banks.

It is tempting to think that Banksy, whose original moniker was Robin Banx, knew that story and indulged in a little *détournement*, as the Situationists say, to make it his own. Whatever else he is – street artist, social commentator, quality vandal or “brandal”, graffiti artist, humorist, outsider, prankster, public nuisance, national treasure, or, as Will Ellsworth-Jones would have it, “the first international artist of the internet” – Banksy is definitely in the know. The wall spray and the word play depend on knowing references to the art of the past and the politics of the present. His very medium is historically informed. Soon enough, he jettisoned the aerosol for the stencil. The motive may have been practical – the spray-can takes time, and is a difficult art to master – but the inspiration was political. “As soon as I cut my first stencil”, he recalls,

I could feel the power there. The ruthlessness and efficiency of it is perfect. I also like the political edge. All graffiti is low-level dissent, but stencils have an extra history. They’ve been used to start revolutions and stop wars. Even a picture of a rabbit playing a piano looks hard as a stencil.

As one of Banksy’s early associates confirms, “stencils are no coincidence. He knows his history. He looked at Paris in the sixties and how quickly they got their message up”. Forty years on, he travelled to the West Bank to find another wall: the Israeli wall, “the most politically unjust structure in the world today”, on which he painted a *trompe l’oeil* shell hole, through which may be glimpsed a tropical paradise. Beneath, stencilled children play contentedly with their buckets and spades. *Sous les pavés, la plage!*

Banksy as son of the Situationists is not altogether fanciful. “Against the spectacle”, runs the Situationist manifesto (1960), “the realized Situationist culture introduces total participation. Against preserved art, it is the organization of the directly lived moment.” The directly lived moment corresponds very well to Banksy’s guerrilla actions or interventions. Apart from the celebrated murals, he has been responsible for a variety of unheralded installations in unexpected (yet appropriate) places: in the Natural History Museum in London, a glass-encased beetle, complete with Airfix fighter-plane wings and missiles slung underneath, captioned with botanical punctiliousness the *Withus Oragainsus* beetle; in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, home of Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans*, his own painting, “Discount Soup Can”, a Tesco Value cream of tomato; on the path of the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad in Disneyland, California, a life-size blow-up doll in an orange jumpsuit and black hood, Guantánamo-style; and for Christmas 2007, in a disused chicken restaurant in Manger Square, Bethlehem, rented for

## Will Ellsworth-Jones

BANKSY

The man behind the wall  
323pp. Aurum. £20.  
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## Paul Gough, editor

BANKSY

The Bristol legacy  
160pp. Redcliffe. £14.99.  
978 1 906593 96 4

the purpose and renamed “Santa’s Ghetto”, a dove wearing a bullet-proof vest, and a donkey having its identity papers checked by an Israeli soldier – an enterprise which offended practically everyone and raised over \$1 million in one month, funding thirty university places for impoverished students, and other good causes in the area.

Robin Hood, perhaps, but Banksy is big business. He is indeed a phenomenon, fraught with contradictions, of which the most fundamental may be that he is famous for being anonymous, which is exactly how he likes it. “Charlie Chaplin used to say, ‘once I talk, I’m like any other comic’”, he told an American journalist, anonymously. “I figured I’d follow his lead.” Banksy is in remote control. “I don’t know why people are so keen to put the details of their private life in public; they forget that invisibility is superpower.” That might be his motto. It is also the theme of *Banksy: The man behind the wall*, which is not so much a biography, still less a whodunit (eschewing any attempt at unmasking), but more a kind of gumshoe’s progress. Ellsworth-Jones is an amateur detective but an experienced reporter. Here he keeps us up to date on his wanderings in an alien world. This is entertaining enough, as far as it goes; but in the end it is as if the subject has eluded him, rather like the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Banksy’s *modus operandi* extends to museum exhibitions, on his own terms, enforced by contract. Banksy’s people include lawyers, a PR agent and an authentication board called Pest Control. In the summer of 2009, in a characteristically hush-hush operation, he took over the city museum in Bristol, where he grew up. When the exhibition was revealed, overnight, some 300,000 people queued for hours to get in, bringing the city an estimated £15million in extra revenue, and quadrupling the museum’s voluntary donations. This extraordinarily successful hit-and-run raid is commemorated in *Banksy: The Bristol legacy*, which is a little like a high-gloss souvenir brochure, full of facts and choice reminiscence, sure to delight aficionados of Banksy or Bristol or both.

As for the man behind the wall, he has run rings round his would-be captors and interpreters. What manner of man is he? A con artist with a social conscience? A streetwise Situationist with a wicked wit? (“Mindless vandalism can take a bit of thought.”) An anti-capitalist laughing all the way to the bank?

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