

Books

Banksy:

The Bristol Legacy

*Timothy Mason on a hugely enjoyable book that assesses the impact that street artist Banksy had on Bristol when he returned to his home city to put on a show*

There's something of Baroness Orczy's elusive Scarlet Pimpernel in the carefully contrived mystique that surrounds Banksy, perhaps the best known of that cadre of artists for whom the street is their canvas. Like the Pimpernel, Banksy keeps his identity a well-guarded secret.

As Paul Gough's highly readable *Banksy: The Bristol Legacy* so clearly shows, this is an artist able to generate both unbounded enthusiasm and venomous criticism.

Wherever you stand in the debate around Banksy's artistic credentials, there's no getting away from the fact that Banksy vs Bristol Museum was a 12-week phenomenon that captured the public imagination in a way that few exhibitions do. Over the summer of 2009 more than 300,000 people queued for up to four hours in sunshine and in rain to see the result of a collision between a traditional municipal gallery and a brash streetwise "quality vandal".

For most visitors it all began with a twisting queue from which it was quickly clear that the show was attracting not just an enthusiastic local public but visitors from further afield. I travelled from London while just in front of me was a family who had made a special journey from the west coast of Scotland. There were rumours of foreign Banksy fans flying into Bristol airport. Groups of teenage boys waited patiently in the slow-moving line. This was no ordinary experience of a city museum. Kate Brindley,

the director of Bristol's museums at the time, had worked with her colleagues and Banksy to pull off a major coup.

In one of 18 essays commissioned to determine the legacy of this exhibition, Katy Bauer confesses that what she liked best was the queue: "I wanted the queue to leave its mark... it was a vote for defiance and the voters could best be described as: The General Public."

Bauer's own contribution to the Banksy legacy was *The Banksy Q*, a collection of 3,500 drawings created by those waiting to enter the museum.

Gough has used writers who can assess the impact of Banksy vs Bristol Museum from all angles, including the city's economy (£22m being the key figure). It's a wide-ranging team of contributors and it is only to be expected that the result is a broad perspective and an equally wide range of opinion.

Much of this debate circles around Banksy himself. Brindley notes, from her frontline experience, that Banksy divides opinion, both in the art world and within the public at large; a smart artist or a one-trick pony; entrepreneur or entertainer; a maverick or a vandal; a flash in the pan or a legacy?

And this book is no eulogy to Banksy, Bristol boy. Gough has encouraged all shades of opinion including David Lee, the editor of art magazine *the Jackdaw*. He must have enjoyed an afternoon of railing against Banksy, although even he concedes that, like him or

not (and Lee falls into the second of these categories), the effect of Banksy's exhibition at the museum was remarkable, "if only so far in Bristol".

Was the show at the Bristol Museum a simple corralling of a footloose stenciller in a cage of traditional culture? Or a genuine invasion of a bastion of middle-class collecting? In the battle of Banksy vs Bristol Museum was there a winner?

History is always a good teacher and some of Gough's essayists effectively place the Banksy show in its historical context, taking both the long and the short view. An excellent contribution from social and cultural historian Steve Poole finds evidence of graffiti in Bristol that dates back to the early 18th century. "The wall has always been the best place to publish your work," says Banksy, pointing an ironic finger at massive advertising billboards.

Meanwhile, Gough and the other contributors to the book show how Banksy fits into the more recent history of public art in Bristol. And ultimately, if there has to be a winner, it is probably the city that comes out best from this story.

It is easy to get caught up in the is-he-or-is-he-not-an-artist debate over Banksy and what he stands for. There are certainly elements of nimbyism in Banksy appreciation – a Banksy on someone else's wall is probably more enthusiastically greeted than one on your own.

Perhaps Banksy too needs to be seen as part of a wider tradition – not of artists who paint on walls, from the hieroglyph painters of Gobustan to Giotto and Stanley Spencer; Banksy would never pretend to be a Michelangelo. But look at him as part of the rich British tradition of satirical art – Cruikshank, Gillray and Beerbohm – and he seems to make more sense.

Where he would stand in that Pantheon is, of course, another matter. But if I might hazard a guess, it will be at the back with his hood over his head.

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