



Banksy's graffiti art on Israel's West Bank wall



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British Graffiti Artist, Banksy, Hacks the Wall

In the Summer of 2005, celebrated British graffiti artist, Banksy, traveled to put his mark on Israel's wall in the West Bank, described on his website as "the ultimate activity holiday destination for graffiti writers."

"How illegal is it to vandalize a wall," asked Banksy in the website introduction to his summer 2005 project, "if the wall itself has been deemed unlawful by the International Court of Justice? The Israeli government is building a wall...[which] stands three times the height of the Berlin wall and will eventually run for over 700km—the distance from London to Zurich."¹

In Banksy's work, location is a major component of the resulting metaphor. Whether he's hanging a fake rock pictogram of early man pushing a shopping cart in the British Museum, or installing an amalgam of the Statue of Liberty and Statue of Justice clad as a prostitute at the site of his last arrest in London, the environment and location are usually key parts of the message.

The Holocaust Lipstick motif in Banksy's art, inspired by the diaries of Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett Gonin, DSO, has also appeared on the streets of the UK and aptly distills the deliberate incongruity of his large body of public work. Gonin's diary entry about the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945 unwraps

the concept:

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.... 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.²

Gonin's diary entry captures an absurdity in which a seemingly gratuitous commodity nonetheless "gives back humanity." In his work, Banksy uses similar juxtapositions to highlight the relentless, and therefore chaotic and distracting, pace of modern society.

Familiar images—the Queen, smiling children, policemen—are given a dark twist, designed to wake observers up from the nine-to-five rat race. The rat race is a common Banksy theme, typically delivered by talking rats—a rat race that literally streams, mirror-like,

through Banksy's borderless gallery of streets to challenge us to reassess the structures and symbols that form the backdrops to our lives.

Much of the art Banksy produced on Israel's West Bank barrier visually subverts and draws attention to its nature as a barrier—preventing Palestinians from access to Israel and, increasingly each other, as it snakes deep into the West Bank and blocks movement to neighboring towns and agricultural land—by incorporating images of escape: a girl being carried away by a bunch of balloons, a little boy painting a rope ladder.

Other pieces invoke a virtual reality that underlines the negation of humanity that the barrier represents—children in areas cut off from any access to the sea playing with sand buckets and shovels on piles of rubble that look like sand, below a painted break in the wall that reveals a tropical beach landscape.

Banksy's website offers two snippets of conversations with an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian who happened upon him while he was in the process of creating the series of nine pieces on the wall, in Bethlehem, Abu Dis, and Ramallah.

Soldier: What the fuck are you doing?

Me: You'll have to wait till it's finished

Soldier (to colleagues): Safety's off

Banksy reclaims public spaces as places for public imagination and enlightenment, breaking through propagandistic barriers to thought and awareness, as is reflected in the very terminology for Israel's West Bank barrier, officially described as a "separation fence" or "security fence." His summer project on Israel's wall stands out as one of the most pertinent and visible artistic and political commentaries in recent memory.

Perhaps the clearest answer to people of this world who wish to whitewash all that is ugly rather than challenge its basic nature, comes from another conversation Banksy reported having with an old Palestinian man:

Old man: You paint the wall, you make it look beautiful.

Me: Thanks

Old man: We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall, go home.

Notes

1. <http://www.banksy.co.uk/outdoors/palestine/index.html>; Internet, accessed 23 May 2006.
2. <http://www.banksy.co.uk/manifesto/index.html>; Internet, accessed 23 May 2006.

The Holocaust Lipstick Motif



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