

The Clerkenwell Post

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FREE



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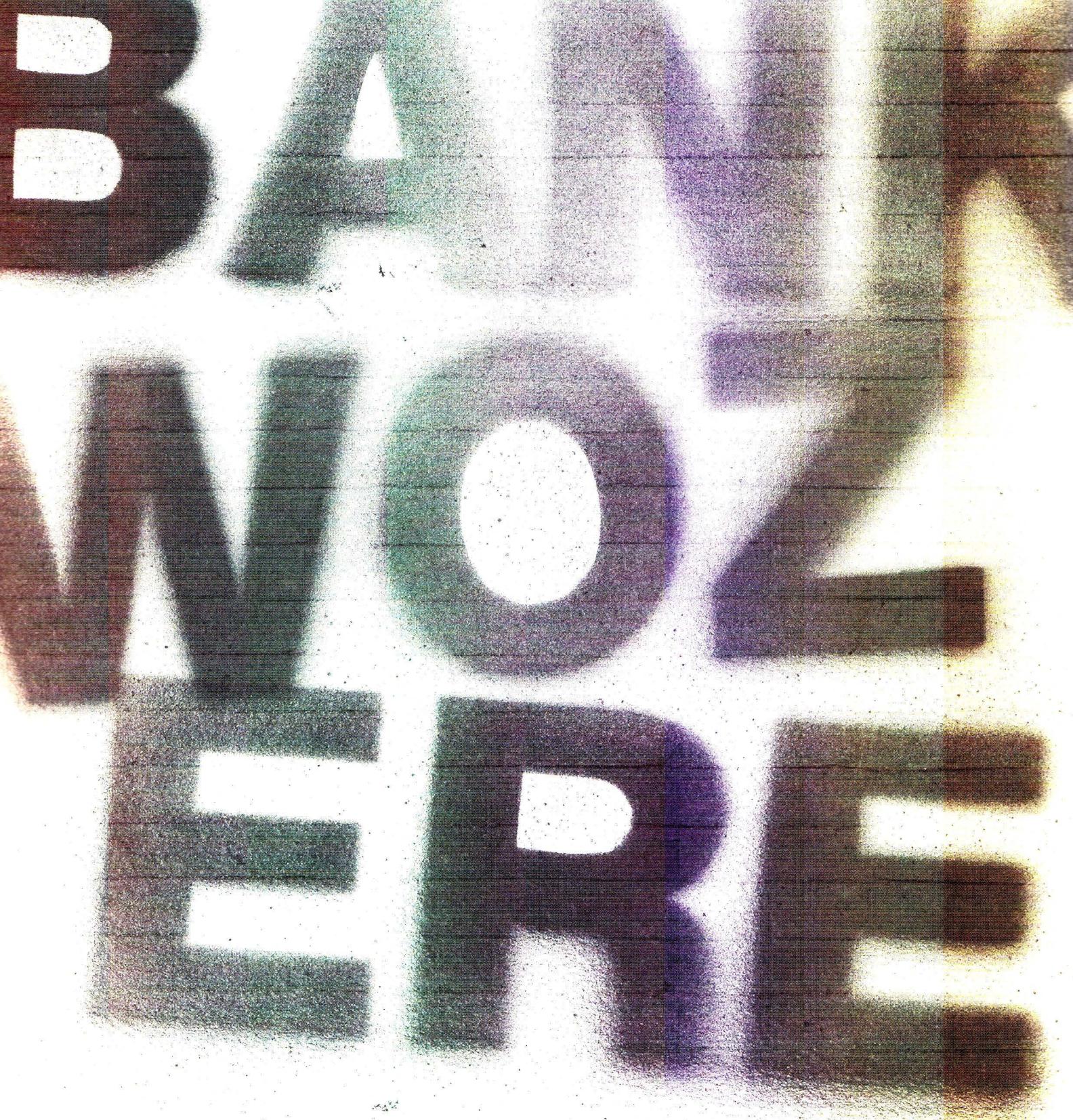
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Banksy is synonymous with Clerkenwell. It's here that the millionaire celebrity street artist made a name for himself. And even though most of his stencils have long been erased, his local legacy lives on, says **Dominic Simpson**

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The name Banksy is enough to divide opinion like few others. To his detractors, his tedious art promotes patronising right-on messages and vapid platitudes. To his fans, he's a genius of the subversive, reclaiming the street in the face of omnipresent advertising while democratising art for the masses.

A large part of his attraction is, of course, his anonymity. In his film *Exit Through The Gift Shop*, megalomaniacal street-art obsessive Thierry Guetta films Banksy, and vice-versa. Banksy appears, but with his face completely obscured by a hood and dark lighting and his voice heavily modulated. Who's to know if it's really him? Like the film itself, it could just be one of his many famous hoaxes.

To Clerkenwell-lovers, though, there's further appeal: the fact that he chose familiar back streets in which to carve, or stencil, out his career. EC1 got him noticed and helped him on his way from Bristol aerosol-wielder to international star. In 2007, his *Bombing Middle England* picture of pensioners bowling with bombs sold at Sotheby's for no less than £102,000. And when *Exit* was nominated for an Oscar in 2010, the big talk in LA was not about the usual celebrity parade but about whether Banksy would actually turn up (the film eventually lost out to *Inside Job*).

Yet it's no surprise that he should seem hugely ambivalent about his success, viewing the rarefied world of art galleries and auction houses as part of the Establishment he makes out he despises. After the Sotheby's sale, he posted on his website an image of people bidding on a picture containing the slogan, "I can't believe you morons actually buy this shit". Meanwhile, he once stencilled "Mind The Crap" on the steps of Tate Britain and quipped: "As far as I can tell, the only thing worth looking at in most art museums is all the young girls on school trips."

Even those who profess to dislike his work cannot deny that it has, literally, made its mark. The many, many rats, with their enigmatic slogans ("London Doesn't Work", "Welcome to Hell") or dressed up as rappers, complete with medallions, ghetto-blasters and baseball caps, or voyeuristically taking photos of the public, hanging from parachutes, or on catapults ("ratapults", as they've been inevitably nicknamed). Many of them are still visible, such as the one on the right-hand side of The Three Kings pub on the Green.



In Clerkenwell, Banksy's touch is keenly felt. The ghosts of his work haunt the area. In 2004, he stuck a statue in Clerkenwell Green (known for its radical past) of the figure of Justice from the Old Bailey, recast as a prostitute. "A monument dedicated to thugs, thieves, bullies, liars, the corrupt, the arrogant and the stupid," read out his spokesman on the day, MC Dynamite. Somewhat unsurprisingly, Islington council didn't quite agree, and removed it with a crane two days later (at Banksy's expense, incidentally).

Rosebery Avenue, meanwhile, was the location of one of his most recognised pieces: his cash machine, from which a large mechanical arm protrudes, grabbing a little girl and lifting her off her feet. Now long gone, it gave rise to the shortlived Banksy Bagel Bar, a café next door to it. Banksy was quick to disclaim any involvement: "Banksy does not produce greeting cards or sell freshly baked bread."

Indeed, it's a measure of his impact that the area has seen plenty of newer street art inspired by his style. Whitecross Street has seen its fair share of Banksys in the past, with a huge ratapult taking up the whole side of a building (accompanied by the text "Rat fact – in London you're never more than 20 feet away from somebody telling you you're never more than 20 feet away from a rat"). At the moment, it boasts a very Banksy-esque image of a soldier riding an Afghan Hound by Terry Baden.

It's difficult, in fact, to think of Clerkenwell without Banksy's daubings dotted around it. And, despite the area's gentrification, there still feels plenty of scope for more of his work. I'm sure we haven't seen the last of him yet.

Find Dominic Simpson's blog at <http://goodnightlondon.blogspot.com>

NOW YOU SEE 'EM... SOME LOCAL BANKSY'S YOU MAY REMEMBER



1 WAKLEY STREET
Boy with a paint brush

2 ST JOHN STREET
Basil Fawlty with a Hitler moustache

3 CHISWELL STREET/
LAMB'S PASSAGE
Rat with "London Doesn't Work"
placard

4 CITY ROAD
Rat at Moorfields Eye Hospital

5 EXMOUTH MARKET
Rat rapper



6 SCRUTTON STREET
Grim reaper with a Smiley face



7 CLERKENWELL ROAD
Old Skool "gang" of geriatrics,
opposite the Italian church

8 FABRIC
Bomb hugger, next to the
nightclub's toilets