

Banksy Removes The Mask For Us

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“if you want to say something and have people listen, then you have to wear a mask. If you want to be honest then you have to live a lie.” - Banksy

*“Man is least himself when he talks in person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth”
- Oscar Wilde*

In our world we have put great stress on being authentic. But what does this actually mean? Especially as we have discussed for centuries in darkened corridors that we are almost never our ‘true’ selves. No, we all wear masks of one kind or another and some of these masks are so well-fitting that we do not even realise we are wearing them at all. Yet wear them we do, in fear of being naked to others and, perhaps more disconcerting, naked to ourselves.

So what happens to us when we engage with an artist such as Banksy who literally wears a mask at rare public interviews or in his film, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, so that he can say and do things that we all wished we could say and do ourselves. Could this be one reason why so many people around the world have made a hero of this artist? Is this a form of admiration like ‘I wish I could do that, but I can’t, so thank heavens someone has and is taking us along for the ride?’

When we add to this that ‘a picture speaks a thousand words’ we can more clearly see the attraction that this artist offers us all. Addressing challenging and ever-present issues with poignant and humorous one-liner artworks, Banksy makes us first laugh then wince, as we consider what is actually being presented before us: poverty, injustice, inequality, war, politics and a whole spectrum of social issues, historical and present day.

Of course, we warm to such a person who cleverly mastermind’s artworks, installations and public events that draw us, mostly unknowingly, into looking at and hearing some worldly truths. If we go further and allow ‘me’ to go deeper within myself than our busy lives normally permit, we could begin to see some personal truths too.

Truth, or trueness, has a tough time in our society. Firstly, we struggle with taking our own masks off and being true to ourselves, and then just when we start believing that we can find ourselves in those glimpsing moments, we are hit with the juggernaut of relentless advertising, social media and the pervasiveness of information. Again, Banksy cuts through much of this noise by delivering us statements of ugly truth: commercialism being the new religion (*Christ with Shopping Bags*), the dogmatism of traditional faiths (*Toxic Mary*), the longing for love and security (*Girl with Balloon*), the schizophrenia of our media (*Paranoid Pictures*), etc. The more one looks at the art the artist offers us, the more we can see the freedom this artist who wears a mask allows us to fleetingly remove our own and look within. In that moment we are in stasis: we may realise that we do each wear a mask, and we can, from time-to-time, allow ourselves to take it off and see ourselves and the world more clearly.

If it is difficult for us to differentiate between who we really are and what we present to the outside world, then similarly, the world suffers the same fate: it is difficult for us to distinguish between what is real and what is fake out there. With the easy manipulation of social media, newspapers and TV channels, and the sheer volume they relentlessly spew out, we increasingly find ourselves lost or unable to distinguish between the two. How often we ask ourselves “but is it true?”.

The question of truth and lies is not a new one. These ethical debates have been going for millennia: from ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, Persia and beyond. What is perhaps more astounding is that in the 21st century we find the need to describe (or excuse) the vastness of grey between what is right and wrong, truth and lie. Misleading people by telling another and irrelevant truth (but not answering the actual question) has become so pervasive in our lives that psychologists have given it a term of its own: paltering.

We experience paltering every day of our lives, not least, in the comedic interactions of politicians who respond to difficult questions by giving another truthful fact without actually answering the question they have been asked. Through the ages, artists have responded to such nonsense in their own ways. Subtly in the past, more brazen now; making use of their position which affords them the privileged opportunity to criticise, argue and mock such behaviour.

Banksy does just this, an artist who cleverly fuses satire with poignant imagery that slices open the ridiculousness of what is clearly questionable with our world. The frustrations that we all share when we see stupidity in politics, the human cost of war, or the injustice of child labour. Banksy tackles such topics both through his art and his projects. His undertakings with *Dismaland* in England and the *Walledoff Hotel* in Israel are just two such examples. These grab the attention of the global media, though here too the media often misses the truth, focussing more on the satire and less on their truthful poignancy.

Here too there is also some irony, the very tool that distributes the nonsense of fake or useless news to our phones, tablets and TV's now becomes a conduit for Banksy to carry his images and messages back to us. He is the envy of many an advertising executive or social media PR as his artwork or latest stunt goes viral in minutes. Why? Perhaps people see a truth which they already know deep down but still have the need to be jolted or reminded, or perhaps they take solace from something that finally feels authentic and clear from the streams of noisy digital feeds.

Of course, there is also paradox here and it has been much debated before. How can an artist remain authentic, especially when involved with such themes as poverty and social issues, whilst selling art to celebrities, controlling the issuance of certificates of authenticity and undertaking public stunts at auction that results in increasing the value of the artworks? The explosion in demand to satisfy buyers, collectors (I distinguish the two as very separate) and museum shows is furious. Selling art for a few thousand pounds is one thing but selling publicly for £10 million pounds changes the game significantly. Yet, Banksy, being a one-way communicator to his constituency, and refusing to be represented by an art gallery, continues to break the rules, removing the mask of the art market itself. By the artist 'lying' to the market: bringing with him his own set of rules and conditions, perhaps this rebalances our belief in authenticity. As for the vast monies being generated, we can accept this dichotomy if Banksy continues to give us future projects, public street art and further opportunities to remind ourselves of some truths.

So, is he a private school boy, champagne socialist, Robin Hood hero, or an artist who was in the right place, at the right time? Actually, does it really matter? . . . through his 'lies' he elbows the door open to truths we all need to be reminded of, and he gives us a chance to remove our own mask, if only for a moment.

"Lies. . . and again lies. . . it amazes me, the amount of lies we had told to us this morning."

"There are more still to discover," said Poirot cheerfully."

— **Agatha Christie**