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Banksy's SF Legacy: high-priced Graffiti

By Evan Sernoffsky, Sunday, June 22, 2014



Art Conservator Scott Haskins (center) moves slats taken off a home that feature a rat by Banksy.
Art Conservator Virginia Panizzon and Master Woodworker specialist Paul Schurch assist.
On the stairs, videographer and screenplay writer Eva Boros takes images for a full length movie in the making.

Art restorers in Santa Barbara began work last week on an unusual canvas: 10 graffiti-covered redwood boards that were ripped from the side of a Victorian home on Haight Street.

Spray-painted on the slats is a beret-wearing rat clutching a Magic Marker, the stenciled work of anonymous street art superstar Banksy, who tore through San Francisco in 2010.

Private collectors have extended six-figure bids for the piece. But a self-

described "art freak" from San Francisco who owns it doesn't want to profit from the piece, and he says he can't without breaking a promise.

Brian Greif's effort to obtain and restore the painting - and now, to display it publicly - illustrates the fervor that surrounds Banksy's guerrilla artworks. It also stirs up a complicated debate about street art, its cultural value, and efforts to memorialize and monetize a form of expression that wasn't intended to last.



"It's not just tagging. It's fine art. The idea is that the city is a huge gallery," said Greif, 53. "Here you have the greatest street artist, and he's doing paintings in San Francisco."

Greif, a former general manager of a San Francisco television station, left his job last year after back surgery. This month, he launched a Kickstarter campaign called "Save the Banksy" to raise money to preserve the work and get people talking about street art.



Brian Greif

Banksy has been a focus of such discussions. First noticed by locals in his hometown of Bristol, England, in the 1990s, he took his antiwar and anticorporate art around the globe.

Banksy on the road

In the mid-2000s, Banksy gained prominence by painting several works on the security wall dividing Israel from the Palestinian West Bank. One image depicted the silhouette of a girl lifted by balloons.

He reached a zenith in October 2013 during a monthlong "residency" in New York City, where each day he unveiled a new public piece. Some of the works of graffiti were soon defaced. In one neighborhood, men even tried to charge admission for a peek at a painting.



Banksy wasn't as popular in the mainstream in April 2010 when he made his run through San Francisco, leaving about 10 works in such neighborhoods as the Mission, Chinatown and the Haight. The visit coincided with the release of "Exit Through the Gift Shop," his Oscar-nominated documentary that prods at the absurdities of the hyper-commercialized art market.

One piece, slapped on the side of a building in the Mission, showed a child with a paintbrush along with the words, "This'll look nice when it's framed." Others featured rats, one of his recurring antiestablishment images.

"That's part of the fun of Banksy. He likes to travel. He likes to intervene in certain situations and make people think about the cops - about authority," said John Zarobell, an art history professor at the University of San Francisco and former curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Making the deal

After Banksy's visit, Greif scrambled to see all of the works. But many were already painted over by building owners seeking to comply with city law, which considers graffiti "visual pollution."

One such business owner was Sami Sunchild, founder of the iconic Red Victorian bed-and-breakfast inn on Haight Street. Banksy, who uses stencils so he can move quickly, painted the rat on the side of the house from the roof of an adjacent building.

Sunchild, who died in July at age 87, was about to paint over the work when Greif approached her and cut a deal to remove the wood siding. He did so carefully in December 2010, hiring Brothers Collins Woodworking of Cotati, which specializes in historic buildings.

Part of the bargain with Sunchild, he said, was a promise that he would take the piece but not sell it.

"From the time we took it down, we've taken our direction from street artists," Greif said. "I gave my word that I wouldn't sell it. This is for public display and to generate discussion about street art."

Almost immediately, though, bids poured in. A private collector in Los Angeles offered \$200,000, sight unseen, and gallery owners are still making bids for the piece. Recently, Greif said, a collector offered him \$700,000.

"Everyone tells me I'm crazy," he said, "especially since I don't have a job."

High-priced acquisitions are not unusual for a Banksy. In recent years, groups have been traveling around the world, poaching his works and selling them for exorbitant prices.

Last year, Bloomberg reported that a Banksy mural known as "Slave Labour," depicting a boy sewing Union Jack flags, was cut from a shop's plaster wall in London and sold at a private event for \$1.1 million.

Toying with art's value

Banksy has at times toyed with the idea of his own marketability. During his

New York visit, he set up a stall in Central Park that offered unsigned "spray art" pieces for \$60. No one knew the pictures were done by Banksy, and only a few sold as the day went on. But next month, two of the canvases are expected to bring in around \$200,000.

Banksy is "trying to interrupt our thinking about art. How we see it. How we think about it," Zarobell said. "But the art market continues as it goes. People want it on their wall."

Street artists regularly paint over each other's work, but, as Banksy's popularity grows, so have preservation efforts. Some building owners have covered his works with Plexiglas. Or, as in Greif's case, people have removed pieces completely.



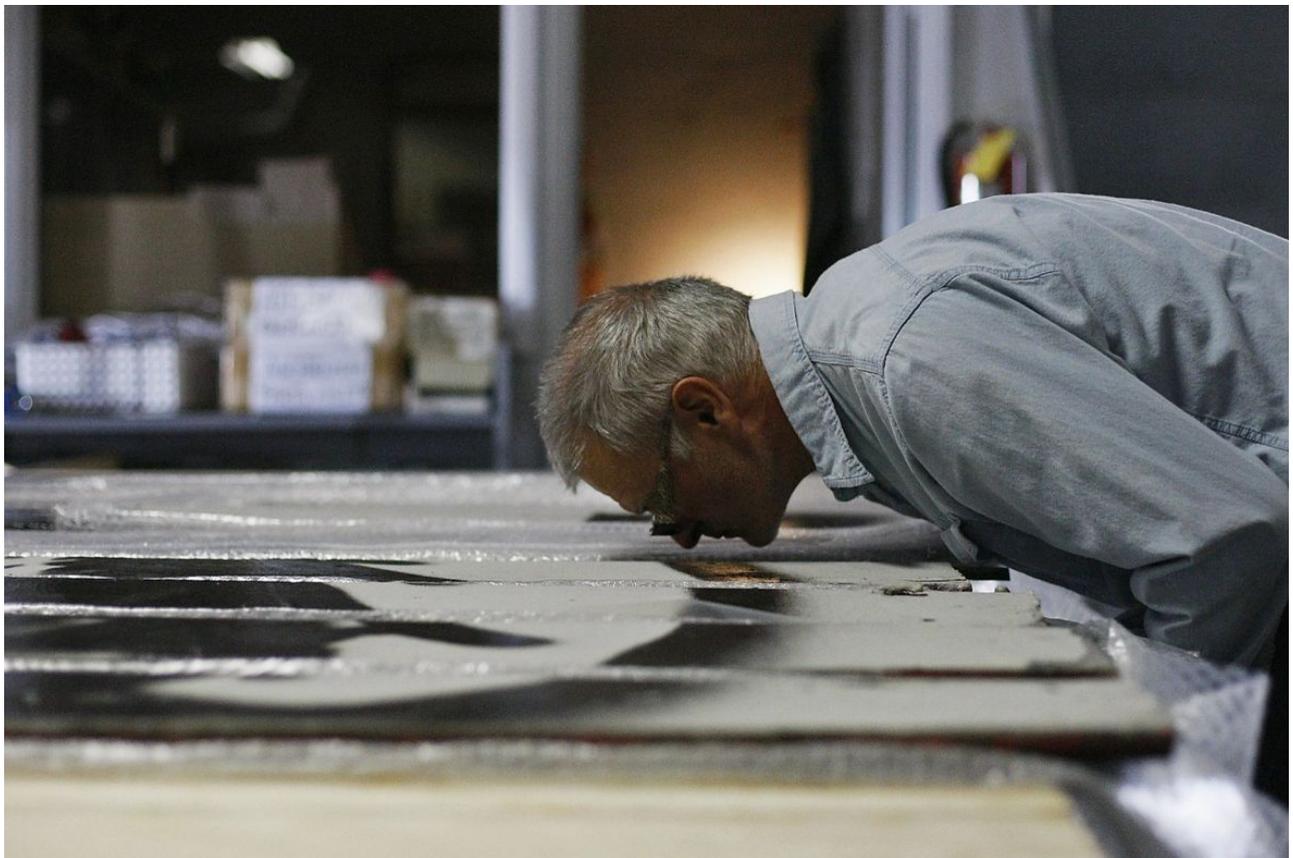
"That's the thing about street art," Zarobell said. "Once the work enters the public realm, it takes on a life of its own."

On Monday, art restorer Scott Haskins unsheathed the wood siding from the Red Victorian at his Santa Barbara lab.

Haskins has been restoring major artworks for 40 years. He was the team leader in restoring Gottardo Piazzoni's "The Sea" and "The Land" murals, which were painstakingly removed from San Francisco's old Main Library and now sit in the new de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park.

He has consulted on Banksy restorations in the past and said the rat painting shouldn't require much work.

"It's basically a preservation and reassembly of the piece, so it lasts a long time and looks good," Haskins said.



Paul Schurch, Master Woodworker, inspects under magnification details of the mural's redwood slats while planning the mounting system to a honeycomb panel.

His plan is to keep the work light and portable using "airplane technology" - affixing the slats to 1-inch-thick aluminum honeycomb material.

Greif doesn't want the piece to look new. Instead, he wants to preserve the street-art aesthetic. He wants the piece to look like it did on the side of the Red Victorian.



Testing the paint to see if it is oil, enamel or acrylic are Art Conservators Scott Haskins, Oriana Montemurro and Master Woodworker specialist Paul Schurch

"When we're done, it's going to look like you are standing on the rooftop looking at the wall," Haskins said.

But restoring the piece is only one step. Finding a venue for its display has proved more challenging than Greif expected.

Greif was in talks with SFMOMA and the de Young, but he discovered that curators were particular about their collections - and the context in which art is displayed.

"You've got to be considerate (about) if it was the artist's intent," said Zarobell, who was curator at SFMOMA when Greif made his inquiries. He said he contacted Banksy's people and found that the artist apparently didn't want the work shown in a museum.

"It's an interesting piece and an interesting question about where public art belongs," Zarobell said. "But based on the answers we received at SFMOMA, it wasn't for us at that time."

Greif said he has contacted three other museums about donating the piece. But each institution wants a letter of authentication from the artist - a courtesy Banksy reportedly won't indulge.

A museum in Mexico City recently offered to take the piece, but Greif would rather it stay in San Francisco.

And so he continues with his project, reaching out to several nonprofit museums as he tries to find the rat a new home. Greif's only stipulation: The work must be seen publicly.

"Street art," he said, "is made to look at and talk about." One man's effort to obtain, restore, and publicly display a Banksy painting made in San Francisco illustrates the fervor that surrounds the street artist's guerrilla artworks.

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