BIOGRAPHY:
In a celebrity-dominated culture marked by a near-universal quest for fame, the British graffiti artist known as Banksy has remained resolutely invisible. Cloaked in anonymity and often using intermediaries to handle the press, the one-word phenomenon nevertheless became one of 2006's most talked-about personalities. That same year, he brought his brand of subversive, politically challenging, and often darkly witty art to the United States for the first time in a Los Angeles exhibition. Graffiti skirts the border between art and crime, and Banksy's self-imposed secrecy allows him to continue his work outside of the conventional commercial channels of galleries and museums.

Though he has sought to keep his real identity a mystery, Banksy was identified by London's Guardian as a Robert Banks who was born in Bristol, England, in 1974 or 1975. The artist has admitted to experiencing difficulties in school during his youth and drifting toward a life of petty crime after he was expelled, and said that he had spent some time in jail. At some point he left Bristol for London.

As for "tagging," as graffiti-writers call their work, Banksy first tried his hand at it when he was 14 years old. He soon realized that he was simply not quick enough with the spray-paint can to create the exuberant, multicolored works some of the most impressive graffiti artists create on the sides of buildings, freeway overpasses, or urban walls. The more time an image took him to make, the higher the chances of his being picked up for vandalism by the police. To speed up the process, he began to cut out stencils at home of images or phrases he wanted to paint. Some of these first ones were comic depictions of
metropolitan London police officers in their distinctive uniforms but engaged in unlikely activities, or of rats, monkeys, or storybook-style children hugging missiles. Sometimes he just put up an official-looking advisory, such as the words "By Order National Highways Agency This Wall Is A Designated Graffiti Area."

By the turn of the new millennium Banksy's peculiar but comical figures had become something of a cult phenomenon in London, with his fans always on the lookout for new examples for his work. Many in the city's younger vanguard of artists and musicians centered in the East End came to know him, and were appreciative of his work's artistic merit.

One of the first conventional exhibitions of his art was held in a warehouse in 2000, but in characteristically unconventional fashion Banksy gave out only the street number for the building and not the street. As mainstream interest in his work began to grow, he concocted elaborate deceptions to shroud his identity, usually conducting interviews via telephone and using trusted associates to handle sales of his work.

With the increased publicity, however, came greater danger of being caught spray painting on public sites, and so Banksy began to undertake more elaborate, one-off stunts. He got into the penguin exhibit at the London Zoo and stenciled, "We're bored of fish" on the wall; in October of 2003 he probably donned the uniform of a museum worker to hang one of his own paintings on the wall of an esteemed British museum, the Tate. It depicted a bucolic country scene bounded by police tape, and the identification tag below it read, "Banksy 1975. Crimewatch UK Has Ruined The Countryside For All Of Us. 2003. Oil On Canvas." He pulled a similar stunt in 2005 at four major museums in New York City, including the Museum of Modern Art, which decided to add the piece to its permanent collection.

In late 2005, Banksy received a slew of media attention for a show at a gallery in London's Notting Hill area that featured 200 live rats scurrying about as part of the art-viewing experience. To eliminate any health risk, the vermin had been specially bred to be free of disease. The artist explained the reasoning behind the rodents in an interview with Times of London journalist Morgan Falconer as an attempt to be "deliberately entertaining. I wouldn't cross town to see an exhibition of paintings, but I would cross town to see 200 rats."

Banksy's works have appeared in several places outside of England, including the Palestinian side of a wall in the troubled West Bank. His nine images were a commentary on what would probably expand to become the world's largest manufactured human barrier, with one of them depicting youngsters digging to get to the other side. In September of 2006, Banksy—likely with the help of some trusted associates—inserted 500 fake CDs of Paris Hilton's debut release, at music retailers in several major U.K. cities. Unwitting buyers bought his remixes of Hilton's songs, which were tagged with new titles, such as "Why Am I Famous?."
Both that and another prank seemed to be advance-publicity stunts for Banksy's first major show in the United States, held in September of 2006. Just before "Barely Legal" was set to open at an undisclosed Los Angeles warehouse space, the artist managed to install a large blow-up doll inside the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad at the Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California. The inflatable figure was dressed in an orange jumpsuit, identical to those worn by detainees at the U.S. military facility at Guantanamo Bay, and was handcuffed and blindfolded. It remained there for an hour before Disneyland officials learned of it and shut down the ride.

The Los Angeles show was attended by several celebrities, among them Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Christina Aguilera, and Macaulay Culkin, and received an impressive amount of press coverage—even a feature on Good Morning America —but the artist was, if present, incognito on opening night. He chose Los Angeles as the site of his first major U.S. show in part, he told the London Times' Luke Leitch, because "Hollywood is a town where they honor their heroes by writing their names on the pavement to be walked on by fat people and peed on by dogs. It seemed like a great place to come and be ambitious."