

‘VANDAL’ SCANDAL

Sale by stealth or safeguarding important works of street art? A controversial auction of Banksy pieces takes place this month, writes Lara Brunt

By its very nature, graffiti art attracts controversy. Not every building owner is thrilled to have a mural sprayed on his property, nor every council willing to embrace the renegade art form. Removing and selling street art is just as contentious according to Tony Baxter, director of the Sincura Group. The last time the London-based events company auctioned a Banksy piece – *Slave Labour* in 2013 – Baxter received death threats. “We were accused of stealing it,” he says.

Still, that hasn’t deterred him. On April 24, Sincura will unveil 20 pieces by the subversive and secretive British street artist at a new exhibition at the ME London hotel. *Stealing Banksy?* explores the social, legal and moral issues surrounding the sale of street art and will culminate in a live auction on April 27. Estimated at £5 million in total, the pieces represent the most expensive collection of Banksy artworks assembled under one roof.

But is the Bristol-born artist still big business? Recent auction results suggest so. *Slave Labour*, which appeared on the wall of a north London store in 2012 and depicts a young boy hunched over a sewing machine making Union Jack bunting, was sold by Sincura for over £750,000 last year. *Kissing Coppers*, one of the artist’s most famous murals sprayed on the side of a Brighton pub in 2004, sold at a Miami auction in February for US\$575,000, although two other pieces failed to meet their reserve.

“We have had a lot of interest in the pieces from all corners of the world,” says Baxter. “America is always hot and we’ve had quite a lot of interest from Arab nations.” The headline piece, *No Ball Games*, painted in Tottenham, north London, in 2009 and removed last year, is expected to fetch £1 million. “It has taken nine months of painstaking work and cost £120,000 to restore it,” says Baxter.

As AIR went to press, the enigmatic artist had not commented on this latest auction. While Banksy has sold prints and canvases, he made his position clear on the sale of his graffiti art in a statement issued through

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his publicist in 2008: “For the sake of keeping all street art where it belongs, I’d encourage people not to buy anything by anybody unless it was created for sale in the first place.”

Baxter is more pragmatic. “I see it as being the lesser of two evils,” he says. “If we didn’t step in, in two or three years these pieces would be gone. Yes, we may be involved in removing them from the streets but we’re also involved in making sure that, in 200 years time, these pieces are still alive.” He cites another headline piece, *Balloon Girl*, stencilled onto an east London wall in 2006: “It was in such a bad state, the whole face



was falling off. It had been covered up for years under advertising hoardings. People walked past it every day and didn’t realise it was there.”

Baxter is quick to point out that it is the owners who approach Sincura. “What people don’t realise is these people don’t want the artwork on their buildings. They run the real risk of having a Grade II listing applied to their building, which means that all of a sudden they can’t make any changes to it,” he says. “We tell them about the social and moral issues of removing it – we warn them they will become hate figures – and encourage them to make a charitable donation to the community.”

The artwork is removed in one piece using diamond-cutting machinery, a process that can take up to four weeks, and then rigged up in an air-conditioned

warehouse. “The guy who heads up the restoration has been restoring chapel ceilings all his life. It’s more or less like a chemistry shop when you go in there,” says Baxter. “We have to take off ten years of grime and restore it back to the original paintwork.” Such is the controversy surrounding the removal, the team usually wears masks throughout the process. “Everyone on the project wants to be anonymous,” Baxter says.

Banksy, through his company Pest Control, never authenticates his street works. “But he’s self-authenticating because he issues books with all his pieces in them and if you can match a piece to a book, then you can match a trail. The market knows which pieces are Banksy,” adds Baxter. Private viewings are available and the live auction will be broadcast in all Meliá ME hotels around the world. stealingbanksy.com