

Dismaland, Banksy's parody theme park: A despairing response to a complex world

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26 August 2015

The announcement that artist Banksy was creating “Dismaland”, an installation parodying the theme park experience, created a huge wave of interest. (See the video trailer [here](#).)

The website selling advance tickets for the show crashed due to the volume of people trying to make a purchase. Banksy issued apologies and follow-on announcements. Despite rumors that the process was a hoax, a spokeswoman for the artist insisted, according to the BBC, that the attraction's website was “100 percent real” and had gone down under “huge demand”.

In any event, the ticket-buying experience was a taster for the theme park as a whole—how the process of life under capitalism of building hope, excitement and anticipation in youth becomes butchered by the reality of disappointment, anger and loss in adulthood. This was a sentiment expressed by one of the artworks, proclaiming, “Keep hold of your longings ... going ... going ... gone”.

Banksy says he hit upon the location for the theme park while walking past the disused Art-Deco “Tropicana” Lido in the seaside resort of Weston-super-Mare (on the Bristol Channel, 18 miles southwest of Bristol) six months ago. There is some irony to the fact that the event is being held in the town. After the Second World War it became a popular holiday destination for workers from industrial Birmingham, but then fell, like many resorts, into a protracted decline in the 1970s. Today, with significant alcohol and drug problems, parts of Weston have turned into a real-life Dismaland.

Entry to the theme park is via an airport-type security installation created by California-based artist and filmmaker Bill Barminksi. Actors play the roles of unhelpful and intimidating staff. For visitors, it is

probably the only opportunity they will get to poke fun at security measures and not face further consequences.

This effort to warn about the threat of a militarised and locked-down society is married to another concern of Banksy—attendees bringing in pens, markers and paint. They are not allowed on site, for fear of attack on the artwork by opponents of Banksy who feel he has sold out to commercialism.

Coming through the main gates into Dismaland, one is confronted with a world that is terribly sick, where the staff are depressed, uncooperative and dreary, and the slowed-down Hawaiian-style holiday music continually bears down on you. The entire thing is a scene of surreal carnage, with a riot van operating as a fountain on the palace lake.

The show consists of three parts: the traditional Banksy dark view of modern life with old, battered fairground toys littered everywhere, along with works from his previous shows in Bristol and New York; a more traditional art exhibition inside the old main building; and an area of tents given over to the promotion of “political activism”. Throughout the exhibition there is a strong anarchistic theme, conveyed through simplistic slogans such as “Power Inherently Corrupts, Don’t Trust Experts”.

Dismaland brings together artists from all over the world and particularly the oppressed countries of the Middle East in an interactive art form, with Banksy in the role of curator. Some of the art works are sensitive and emotionally charged, and address the chaos and violence of the present class system, including:

* Banksy’s “Immigrants on a Boat”. This traditional seaside slot machine game allows visitors to steer boats across a pool, but with a difference. Numerous boats are packed with migrant workers, but one is a gunboat patrolling below the white cliffs of Dover while the

attendant shouts out, “I see no borders, I see no race”. It comes as a shock to visitors to realise the water is littered with dead migrants or to discover they are steering the gunboat. The feeling that these people are human and deserve better is heightened by the intricate and individual detail in each migrant’s face, clothing and posture.

* Amir Schiby’s upside down image of four Palestinian boys playing on a beach, recalling the innocence and beauty of childhood and made all the more emotive knowing they were later killed by Israeli shelling.

* Jimmy Cauty’s UK town in the aftermath of a social uprising, the scale and detail of which is breathtaking. The flashing blue lights of the police light up the set. The streets are awash with soldiers and police, a few of whom spray “Fuck the P.....” on a wall—a reminder of the false flags and provocations often carried out by the police to justify further oppression.

* Darren Cullen’s “Pocket Money Loans” installation, offering a satirical attack on payday loan companies. Children are offered a good price to sell their healthy teeth and get advance payments on their pocket money.

* The “Museum of Cruel Objects”, curated by Gavin Grindon, housed in a blacked-out bus with a timeline of war and oppression.

* Tammam Azzam’s reproduction of Gustav Klimt’s “The Kiss”, projected onto a bombed-out housing complex in Damascus, Syria.

The simple iconoclastic images in Dismaland and the one-liners that often accompany them offer the visitor an amusing, angry and healthy protest, but after a while their impact weakens and one is struck by the build-up of unrelenting despondency. Inevitably, hopelessness and the lack of belief that the situation can be improved create a certain cynicism.

However genuine Banksy’s opposition to the existing set-up may be, his outlook has never developed beyond a youthful anarchism gained on the trendier back streets of Bristol.

Disneyland, like McDonalds, is an easy target and something of a cliché for artistic treatment. More problematic still is the thin line between attacking big-brand influence on economic and political life and blaming the working class for supposedly being wedded to consumerism and viewing a trip to

Disneyland as the “holiday of a lifetime”. Attendants in various places hold bunches of black balloons—as if for sale—which read, “I am an imbecile”.

The resignation, passivity and fatalism expressed by the likes of Banksy become links in a causal chain. This is an artist who has had an impact on people. It is an evasion of responsibility simply to say “Oh, what a terrible world we live in, but there’s not much we can do about it”.

The limitations of the parody theme park raise the need for a far greater appreciation by artists of a host of historical and contemporary issues, including the crisis of working class leadership and perspective. Only such a deeper understanding will help break down the scepticism and pessimism that dominates in artistic circles, even the “oppositional” ones. And it might lead Banksy and others to avoid simply portraying working people as passive victims of the “consumer society”, but as the social force that can and will fight for something better.



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