

Details

Art brats put the cool in Yule

A squatted shop on Oxford Street selling works by Banksy? So long Christmas tat

Only 14 shopping days to Christmas and, unlike many major department stores on London's Oxford Street, 'Santa's Ghetto' is doing a roaring trade. The Banksys sold out in the first hour of opening, the Hewletts followed suit, and there were unseemly scraps over the Shrigleys. The word on the street is that sales in the first week hit £300,000. Not bad for a squatted shop only advertised via a website and word of mouth.

Now 10 days into its three-week run, 'Santa's Ghetto' is the brainchild of Banksy, the suddenly ubiquitous but still invisible graffiti artist, whose work also graces the more august Serpentine Gallery across town, part of the Damien Hirst 'Murderme' collection. Part art gallery, part print shop, part good old-fashioned happening, 'Santa's Ghetto' has been a fixture in the capital for the past five years but this is its first pitch in the West End. It is organised by a collective called Pictures On Walls, who describe themselves as 'more like a record company than a print house'.

This is unlike any other seasonal shopping expedition. There are two burly, besuited bouncers on the door, and the main window display features a huge photographic print of a grinning Tony Blair snapping himself on his mobile against a backdrop of a firestorm in Iraq. An inebriated lifesize Santa with bug eyes also jerks like a man in the

throes of almighty comedown. Inside, there's a Mona Lisa flashing her arse, her enigmatic smile now revealed as a bawdy come-hither look.

The art is determinedly 'street', edgy in tone, and brutalist in form. The buzz is palpable, and, having just come from the almost empty, energy-sapping space that houses this year's Turner Prize non-event, I found it oddly uplifting. In among the crowds of mostly young and trendy visitors there are some life-size sculptures resembling many of the punters – hoodies, baggy jeans, sneakers. One such figure seems to be peering through the wall into Waterstone's next door; another could be a homeless beggar but, beneath the hood, there is no face, just a dark cavernous hole.

Amid the posters, prints and original artworks on the walls there are some arresting images, particularly Ben Turnbull's ominous sculpture of a gun in a glass case embossed with the words 'Break In Case of Emergency'. We're talking visual overload here, though, and a lot of the graphic work needs more room to breathe. The most arresting piece in this wilfully overcrowded space is Emma Heron's vending machine, which sells artificial limbs. A black boy on crutches, one leg blown off at the knee, peers longingly inside. Amid all the irony and the mischief, it is the only piece that stops people in their tracks.

'It's brilliant art because it makes you think,' says Si, aged 18, who has journeyed into the West End from Tottenham with his mates. None of them has ever set foot in an art gallery before, save for a school outing to Tate Modern, which left Si unimpressed. 'Some of it was all right, but a lot of it was boring,' he says. 'This is more the sort of stuff I'd buy if I won the lottery.' He stands briefly in front of Banksy's latest allegorical piece: two tiny Hansel and Gretel figures lingering uncertainly by the threshold of the Wicked Witch's house, tempted by a stick of candy. 'It's Michael Jackson,' he whoops. 'Oh man, that's naughty!'

That's exactly the word for most of the work in 'Santa's Ghetto': 'naughty', as in mischievous, gleefully shocking, and unhindered by the heavy baggage of conceptual art – though Hirst obviously sees Banksy as a fellow traveller on the road to world domination.

As art events go, 'Santa's Ghetto' is



The window of the Santa's Ghetto exhibition in London's Oxford Street. PA

an uneasy mix of provocation, old-fashioned radicalism and trendier-than-thou, Hoxton-style posturing. The organisers have what they call on their website 'a unique artist development programme' that includes 'returning sketches with "what the fuck is this?" scrawled over the top'. Cork Street it isn't. They are currently trying to trace the interventionists who spraypainted the front windows of the shop with anti-globalisation graffiti in the early hours of last Sunday morning – just to credit their work on the website, you understand. Try as I might, I can't see Charles Saatchi or Jay Jopling running with that one just yet, but Malcolm McLaren would certainly be proud of them.

SEAN O'HAGAN

'Santa's Ghetto', Oxford Street (next to Tottenham Court Road Station), until 23 December; picturesonwalls.com



Michael Jackson as the Wicked Witch in a work by Banksy (detail).

The Hours—As se
Narcissus Road—
A dark, disturbing
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