

THE MEAN



Named as an inspiration to Brit street artist Banksy, Blek le Rat has been showcasing his work on the streets of Paris for 25 years. He tells Anne Garbarini why his graffiti aims to offer both pleasure and a social message – and what he really thinks of his homeland

Blek le Rat, the world-famous graffiti artist, radiates energy. He is very talkative, instantly friendly and equally passionate about art and social issues. Il est tres sympathique.

Born in Paris in 1951, he began doing graffiti with a school friend. They chose Blek as their tag as he was the hero of a famous comic book of that time. Blek's generation is mainly defined by the 1968 revolution in France, when students, inspired by the political and cultural movement of situationism, rioted to try to effect changes in the sclerotic French society. "The text of L'Internationale Stuationniste is my Bible!" says Blek.

His influences are many and varied, ranging from painters like Hockney, Warhol and Bacon to thinkers like Debord and Vaneigem. Also, on a visit to New York, he discovered Pop Art and American graffiti, both of which made a major impact on the young student.

Social issues have always been at the heart of Blek's work. "Art for art's sake or for aesthetic reasons have no interest for me," he says. "When I took an artistic direction, I took a social

direction at the same time." When, two years ago in Paris, Blek saw a very young child begging next to his mother, he says he was "really in shock". He decided, there and then, to display multiple representations of that child everywhere in Paris.

"The real problem with graffiti is that it is an aggression. I really want to avoid being aggressive. I have a responsibility doing graffiti; I'm spreading a message that thousands of people will see. The message has to be thoughtful." He understands that young people may want to spread blunter messages. "I made some enemies in the graffiti world because, traditionally, people who do graffiti like breaking the rules and want to fracture society. It's not for me anymore," he laughs, "I'm not the right age."

He fully understands that some people are extremely upset to see graffiti on their wall. "Graffiti is not to everyone's taste." He consequently moved to 'light graffiti' and does not use stencils on walls anymore, but uses collage instead. He pastes up posters that are easily removable. "I want to give people pleasure and a social message. I would like

people to ask questions of themselves." When he put up an image of the French journalist, Florence Aubenas – who was kidnapped in Iraq – everywhere on Parisian walls next to political and media institutions, "this led to a real reaction. I wanted people not to forget about her." She was freed in June 2005.

His views on conceptual art and the elite that propagate it are of a contemptuous persuasion. "Conceptualists do not interest me. Looking at stuff on a washing line doesn't interest me. Conceptual art is of no use. It's only for a small number of people that I'm not sure I really want to talk to myself. I want to give access to art."

Blek believes that art should be open to everyone. "I want to give an easy access to creativity. The future for all artistic expression is in opening up. We have to stop closing ourselves up in our intellectual ivory towers. The future of art is in a social direction. You should mean something to the world, not just to a small elite who need a book to explain everything."

He does not care that museums do not recognise graffiti as art; his audience is on the street and that is the audience he wishes to