

“ROSA PARKS TOOK A SEAT ON THE BUS TO ALLOW MARTIN LUTHER KING TO WALK. MARTIN LUTHER KING WALKED TO ALLOW OBAMA TO RUN. AND OBAMA IS RUNNING TO ALLOW US ALL TO FLY’.

Epic phrase allegedly pronounced by Jay-Z during the electoral campaign leading Obama to the White House, and recited today by MBW, Mr. Brainwash aka Thierry Guetta – the new wonder boy of the band of renowned street artists such as Banksy & Obey. He’s sitting across from me, smack in the middle of an ice-cold studio in Los Angeles. Sharp-witted, insatiable, distrustful, frantic, a jet-black straggling beard – a sort of a cross between Luis Bunuel’s bedeviled Simon del Desierto and a young Marco Ferreri – as he shows me a portrayal of Obama Superman, the icon created during Art Basel Miami 2007. **“That sentence sort of spoke to me, and like all the things which tickle my attention it’s become a part of myself, though I’m not using illegally, I’m not plagiarizing it, I have the permit of Mr. Jay-Z in the flesh – a friend as well as a customer. Just use it.”** Just like Warhol did, Guetta uses pop art as a vehicle and – even more so – as an excuse to overturn and destroy all rules associated to the classic icons of American consumer culture, recycling so many of the concepts dear to the Factory, often making use of the same irony and research, immediately mistaken by critics as plagiarism, mocking, borrowed plumes, fake to the point of being indecent, all adjectives which earned him the nickname of Paris Hilton of the Street Art, no high praise indeed. **“I respect critics, I have scars on my skin reminding constantly of how cruel the world can be, but I ain’t hurting anybody, I want to spread a message that is to encourage people to be more creative, to live better, to enjoy what they have, respecting those living around them. Whatever I do, the message is unique and fundamental: to live according to a positive message vis-à-vis life, just as my own motto LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL. You should dive and feed into the passion that pushes you to do anything. Love is the answer. Only time will tell whether I am genuine or a fake, whether I’ve copied this work or the other. One thing’s for sure – nobody will ever deny my passion for life, the desire for something burning up inside you, something no one or nothing can stop. I don’t give a rat’s ass about what people say about me, all I’m interested in doing is just what I wanna do, my pieces get bought by customers, clearly they like what I do, there’s gotta be a reason why. You use art to yell out a slogan, it’s a sort of an alarm clock stronger than any other I could mention, and I’m referring mainly to Street Art which can be seen by everybody- just FYI, a lot more people have seen my pieces than they have the Mona Lisa at the Louvre Museum. The images by Banksy and the Obey messages hurt way more than politics. Art is Freedom, you cannot pass judgments on an artist, there are no rules, no such thing exists as the handbook of the perfect artist, anybody can be creative, art is for everybody, sometimes the result is better if you create without giving it too much thought. That’s why I’m Mr. Brainwash – right because pop culture is brainwashing, bare, raw, superficial but at the same time easy to enjoy and devour. I go for a brainwashing session with a constructive message. Life’s too short to leave room for evil, negativity steals energy and time which we should use to make art, I don’t have the luxury to throw time away”**. All this like an introduction, spoken calmly yet uninterruptedly, the fruit not of logic but rather of the passion characterizing him, genuine and sincere, just like much of his art. Many an image has been captured during the interview – paint-stained face and fingers, the acrid stench of spray-paint, a portrait commissioned by Dolce and Gabbana, another one by Madonna, posters of old pieces, signs and messages everywhere – one overshadowing all others – Mr. Brainwash smack in the center of his universe, in impeccably perfect Super Hero gear – t-shirt and jeans, sneakers, shirt, a Borsalino hat, and the ever-present, impossible to replace classical mirrored glass Ray Ban Aviators style pure 70’s Detective Callaghan, his icon. Not of moment of standing still,

continuously in motion, he says he cannot stand still, he describes himself a hummingbird, he says he does not own a watch because time does not exist for him, and sleeping is boring and his only normal, run of the mill job he had to drop because he was feeling the need to talk to people and since he can't focus on one thing only, it's better to do 10 things all at once.

“I got to LA in 1982 at age 15. My mother had just passed on and my father had a family here, so he decided for us that we should change our lives. I wasn't real happy then, I had to leave everything behind, friends and the enlarged family of the ghetto where I grew up, Garges-lès-Gonesse on the outskirts of Paris, 100 families all in one single project surrounded by tens of equal projects, a slaughterhouse of human flesh where I learned to deal with people of all types, colors, races and social status. I did not know anyone in LA, I was hanging out with a group of old folks – average age 80 – following them everywhere, grocery shopping or meeting in the park, because they always had something interesting to tell me”. When his father died he was 18, dropped out of school and started working making up a thousand jobs himself, all linked by a common passion: art, colors, creativeness, image. **“For me LA was a museum where any object was an icon, was art and though I practically didn't make any money at all I started to paint giant sized paintings inspired by Amerikan kulture – Tarzan, The Lone Ranger, Superman, some of which I even sold to Michael Jackson, I have it on tape.”** In spite of the 28 years spent in the States his accent is still unmistakably French, the manners calm yet tense, maybe because he is distrustful and in his heart of hearts he fears that this interview could also be a waste of time, time he could put to good use to keep on creating, making and demystifying. After some different jobs, a business in fashion, the opening of various second hand goods stores, a cooperation with Warner Brothers as executive art creator, there comes 1999 when his life takes a drastically different turn. **“My wife Debora gives me a gift – a video camera to tape the birth of our first born Jacques - soon to be followed by Julia and Ethan – and since then for 12 years I didn't have the guts to put the damn thing down. Shooting was worse than a drug, it had become an obsession, I could capture life and make it immortal, moving images were my art concept. One day I leave to go to the South of France to visit with my cousin, universally known as Space Invader, because he wanted to recreate mosaics not unlike those of video games and then paste them all over the city. All this interested me, tickled my fancy so I started to follow him and get arrested with him – a mythical example was the chopper and LAPD after a successful attempt to paste Space Invader on to the Hollywood sign - documenting all he was doing, mainly at nighttime, when he would cover with his tiles the most unthinkable places, just to provoke reactions and attract people's attention. Smart!”** Through him MBW gets to meet the most outstanding representatives – Shepard Fairey, Banksy, Swoon, Buff Monster, Faile and others – of one of the most revolutionary urban counter-culture movements since the inception of punk – STREET ART, i.e. socio-political-cultural propaganda for the masses, using the simple technique of the stencil – cleaner and more complex graffiti – found to be super-fast, sophisticated and cops'- proof (that shows how fast the whole operation was) aimed at raising our consciousness as simple bystanders and viewers. That is how the concept of Thierry the artist is born, together with his signature glued all over LA, a stencil picturing him holding a video cam. In the meantime he keeps meeting all the members of the Made in the USA Street Art until one day – for mere coincidence – he meets Banksy, the devilish British artist whose face has never been seen by anybody and he asks him if he can shoot a clip of him. This was also in view of the seed of idea of a documentary on this community of artists. And here comes Exit Through The Gift Shop, presented at the Sundance Festival 2010, in which Banksy himself, acting as director-producer, presents the Mr. Brainwash experience in the world of street art as seen through the collection of displays ected by Guetta during the years. **“YOU CANNOT MISS THIS. Art of the 21st Century.**

“Banksy told me that he thought that the documentary should not focus on the people I had met, but rather on myself, I was way more interesting than many other artists. Always thanks to his encouragement I put up my first solo show, Life is Beautiful. Organized in an abandoned building owned by CBS TV, the setting up of the show cost me all the money I had, down to the last red cent, risking the work of a lifetime, my home, my family. The warehouse was chock -full of objects of all kinds, and to empty it they wanted \$140,000. Knowing that every problem has a solution, I took out an ad on Craigslist and the following day I found tens and tens of trucks ready and willing to take stuff away. All of it. FOR FREE.” We are in the year 2008 and in the following months Mr. Brainwash literally fills the space with more than 200 paintings, prints, posters & sculptures the ones we find most worth mentioning being: urinary in the Marcel Duchamp style, all covered in graffiti stickers OBEY THE GIANT; the classical McDonald’s Happy Meal 4 meters tall à la Claes Oldenburg; 6 pack container of Petrol Light gas and a 10 meter tall Godzilla-robot built with old yet still working TV screens. Among these pieces one thing could not miss, the homage to the environment with more than 10.000 all green painted shoes, hanging from the trees in the yard, together with the sarcastic “clin d’oeil” for the signature enemy cops, buying two blacks and whites and feeding them to the frenzy of hundreds of Venice Beach Boardwalk style taggers. Unbelievable show and a just as unbelievable success, with people going nuts and standing in line for 6 hours a time to be able to buy a Brainwash piece. Voila! *Le Petit Bonhomme* had grown up. Since then, besides catering to the world of art collectors, brokerage houses and galleries the world over, he cooperates with Madonna for the creation of covers for 14 albums, the organization of two more shows – one in New York, February 2010 – Icons- and the latter in Miami – Under Construction – with installations in mammoth buildings full of Neo-Post-Pop Art. **“Lately I’ve been working on paintings made with old vinyls of music icons like Frank Sinatra, Hendrix, Notorious BIG, Bruce Springsteen, Bono and Jim Morrison – sold for \$100,00 – because I want to pay tribute to those who spent their lives devoting them to a passion which is infectious for millions of people in the world.”** Ironically, next project has been commissioned by the LAPD, 42 portraits of characters who helped make the city better. **“To enjoy the admiration of those who once wanted to throw my ass in jail, c’est genial! I wanna see people smile, use the money I make to create a better world and celebrate life every day. I live my reality as a dream and refuse to take NO as an answer, nothing is impossible.”** When I get ready to get up and go he takes a poster off a wall, it’s an Obama Superman poster, and tells me: **“This was bought by Berlusconi for 4.000 euro. I wanna give it to you as a gift, ‘cause your passion is like mine. Immortal.”** Merci, mon pote.