5-2012

It's Not Raining Anymore

Shannon Drapalski
University of New Orleans, sdrapals@uno.edu

Award Name: Ella V. Schwing Award

It's Not Raining Anymore

Shannon Drapalski

Ella V. Schwing Award

Banksy's Rain Girl has transcended graffiti, transcended even art, to become a symbol for the most resilient city in the United States. When she was originally painted, three years after Katrina, she was a sad reminder to the city of how it had been betrayed and encouragement to stay optimistic about the future. Since then, that sweet face and those black streamers have become a symbol for all the city has overcome and the determination of its people to look forward to good times again. Today, the Rain Girl has been reproduced in cities all over the country, painted on canvas for home consumption, even tattooed permanently on the flesh of New Orleanians who want a constant reminder of what it means to be from New Orleans.

Before one can really effectively discuss the Rain Girl, one must explain Banksy. Banksy first became a public figure in 2003 when a man, improperly identified as Robin Banks, "tagged a cadre of pigs, cows, and sheep, enraging the local animal-rights activists (and farmers)" (Gaddy 68). Since then, he has made a name for himself by turning his art into a public statement about various local, political, and pop cultural topics. His pieces include images of a tropical paradise through the wall on the Israeli-Palestinian border and an image of Vincent and Jules from *Pulp Fiction,* brandishing bananas instead of guns. His art tends to encourage those who see it to question authority and the status quo.

The Rain Girl is a black image on white concrete next to the door of the old Drop-In Center. The image shows a very young girl in period black clothing standing under a white umbrella, looking up at the sky with her arm outstretched in a recognizable gesture to see if the rain is gone. She faces the door where the Drop-In Center used to be. Under the umbrella, black rain trails down on the girl. At her feet, she is slowly fading into the ground so that she hovers almost like a ghost. The girl's skin and umbrella have been painted in a brighter shade of white than the wall to make her stand out from the building itself. Over this piece of street art, someone has cared enough to place a piece of plexiglass, screwed directly into the concrete, to protect the Rain Girl from harm. On the plexiglass,

there is evidence of where someone tried to place graffiti over her, and it has been painstakingly removed.

The Rain Girl has become the new symbol for the city, the way the city views itself. People see the Rain Girl as a symbol of a good, old fashioned girl swamped with troubles by the structures designed to protect her, yet still optimistically looking forward to a brighter future. The pale, wispy, little girl does not represent a real person per se, but more of a concept of all people of New Orleans. She does not have the bright colors of a real person or character, and Banksy has not been shy about using color before. She lacks feet; instead, she actually seems to fade into the ground of the city upon which she is drawn, as though she grew from it like the natural appendage of an unnatural thing. At first, one might think this has more to do with location than intent, but there are many examples, even within the city, of Banksy including feet on his drawings, even when positioned so close to the ground. This girl is not representing something as real and grounded as a person or organization of people; this is about a thing, the Crescent City herself. The gesture of looking to see if the trouble has passed and the fact that she looks up, not out, reflects the optimistic spirit of the city of New Orleans after the storm, even to this day. The white umbrella echoes the concept of a "white hat," originally a hacker's term for hackers who used their skills for good causes and now an overall term meaning "good guys," but the dripping blackness seeping down from its cover symbolizes not just rain, but all the corruption that did the Crescent City more harm than good in the wake of the storm.

The Rain Girl has become a cherished thing by the people of New Orleans. So cherished, in fact, that someone has taken the time and effort to protect this piece of transitory street art with plexiglass and even clean this display meant only for the survivors of Katrina. For some residents of the city, she has even replaced the moon and star and the fleur-de-lis as the symbol of the city and all it has endured. To me, as a transplant to the city, she represents anyone who has been betrayed by the systems designed to protect them and retains the optimism to move on anyway. She was painted right next to the door of the Drop-In Center, immediately under the sign, the first place that many would have (and still do) encountered when passing through the city. Anyone coming there will recognize the betrayal the image comments on and understand the determined optimism it engenders to keep moving on anyway. I have personally met street kids and nomads as far away as Baltimore who speak with fondness of the Rain Girl that greeted them upon returning to New Orleans after the storm. As the writer Colby Buzzell commented on during his quest to find the elusive artist

Banksy, "Every time I said Banksy's name, people smiled, I mean really smiled, like they had just been told good news or like they were remembering something cherished" (Buzzell 201). The Rain Girl *is* good news, proof that the Crescent City can survive.

When I first walked up to the image of the Rain Girl, I remember being more concerned with hoping the Drop-In Center was not closed. The first thing I thought when I saw her was that she looked like a beggar girl someone had painted on the Drop-In Center. It was somewhat poignant to me, realizing how many children and teenagers needed the help that this place provided, but it was gone. This particular interpretation of the image also gave me pause from shame, showing me exactly what I was doing at the Drop-In Center in the least pleasant of terms. It was not until a couple of weeks later, when I began thinking about the image of the Rain Girl again, that I realized what it was really intended to mean. It was then that I began to realize how that image represented the city of New Orleans and the entire state of Louisiana: trying to ask the rest of the world for help, but getting abused by the basic tools put in place to protect it. Now, I understand that gesture I first mistook for begging, the behavior of one who has given up hope, is instead about looking for clearer skies, the behavior of a city clinging to hope.

In his article "The anger management is not working," writer Adam Barnard notes that graffiti supplies "[d]reamscapes created out of ordinary spaces by artistic intervention...and off the possibility of energizing people into becoming 'livers' of art, rather than spectators of art" (Barnard 127). For Banksy and the city of New Orleans, this has always been the greatest of their abilities. If you measure success as an artist by the number of people who are moved by your work, Banksy has definitely succeeded. If art is about saying something to the people who see it, the Rain Girl definitely qualifies. If you measure life by the lives you touch, the Rain Girl has lived more than most people. She is visible in the faces of all who remember her fondly, imprinted permanently on those whose lives she has changed forever, and preserved for all time by all those who have practiced the highest form of flattery and in every tourist picture. The Rain Girl is more than just a piece of graffiti. She is the newest indelible character of our fair city.

Works Cited

Barnard, Adam. "The Anger Management Is Not Working." *Capital & Class* Winter 2004: 125-28. *EBSCOhost.com.* Web. 8 Nov. 2011.

Buzzell, Colby. "I Am Banksy." *Esquire* Dec. 2005: 198-250. *EBSCOhost.com.* Web. 8 Nov. 2011.

Gaddy, James. "Nowhere Man." *Print* Jan.-Feb. 2007: 68-73. *EBSCOhost.com.* Web. 8 Nov. 2011.