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ART & DESIGN

Banksy's 'Dismaland' in England: It's a Strange World, After All



A performer at the "Topple the Anvil" booth at "Dismaland," a theme park-style exhibition featuring works by Banksy and about 60 other artists at Weston-super-Mare in England.

TOBY MELVILLE / REUTERS

WESTON-SUPER-MARE, England — Rain pelted down for much of Sunday afternoon on this drooping beachside resort town where “Dismaland,” the gloomy anti-Disneyland created by the artist Banksy, opened this weekend.

Sophie King, 27, who lives in southwest [England](#), and Andrea Griffiths, 28, who lives outside of London, were among the roughly 2,000 visitors inside the mock theme park early Sunday afternoon. The pair, friends from college, had planned to camp this weekend in the area, but when they heard about Banksy’s exhibition — and saw the weather — they nixed their plans, rented a motel room and headed to the exhibition.

“They’re intentionally being so rude,” Ms. Griffiths said of “Dismaland” “staff members,” who greet visitors with an angry pat down. (A guard who patted this reporter down told me to avert my eyes as he did so; another asked me to turn around, then told me to turn around again. “I didn’t ask to see your butt,” she said.) “It is hilarious because I mean, we’re British, we’re so polite,” Ms. Griffiths said.

“They’re really good actors,” Ms. King added. “Or they’re just rude.”



Slide Show | Banksy's Dismaland The graffiti artist Banksy has unveiled a dystopian take on Disneyland.

"Dismaland," a satirical take on a theme park, features grumpy guards, funereal theme park games and art by about 60 artists — including [Banksy](#), [Damien Hirst](#) and [Jenny Holzer](#). The exhibition had a "locals" day on Friday and opened to the public on Saturday; it runs through late September.

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The exhibition came largely as a surprise: Members of the British news media had spotted construction at the exhibition site — the abandoned grounds of a former family swimming pool — early last week, and had begun to speculate on what was taking place there. But organizers managed for the most part to keep the exhibition a secret until Thursday morning, when a local newspaper, [The Weston, Worle & Somerset Mercury](#), formally announced it on Twitter and ran a front-page article.

The exhibition includes new and old artwork by Banksy, including a pool with mobile boats full of figurine immigrants in what apparently is the English Channel, and a mural-style work in his signature silhouette style, which shows a fat cat in a suit gorging himself while a gaunt woman with children stands across from him. One installation on the site — billed as only for children — features a trampoline and a stand offering small loans with interest rates of several thousand percent. The exhibition also has an undoubted political edge: On Sunday, the artist [Shadi al-Zaqzouq](#) was in the main space, where he rolled a sheet over his artwork and scrawled "R.I.P. Gaza" in capital letters across it.

Naomi Woodspring, 66, an academic visiting from nearby Bristol, where she lives, contrasted Banksy's show with an installation based on Thomas More's "Utopia" that she recently attended in London, saying that she saw in Banksy's exhibition "a visioning of real change." She added, "It pushes us to envision a whole other way of being, and to begin to live that way of being."



A Banksy sculpture at "Dismaland" depicting a woman attacked by seagulls.
YUI MOK / PRESS ASSOCIATION, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Trey Cruz, 40, who lives in Seattle and works in software development, had a more laid-back take on the exhibition. Mr. Cruz took himself on a monthlong tour of Europe to celebrate his birthday this month. He canceled his flight home when he heard about Banksy's show; checked into a hotel on Saturday; and visited the show Saturday and Sunday. "I just like that I've met a ton of people," he said. "Just kind of randomly ended up, like, walking around with some people for a little while, then went and met other people."

Lines into "Dismaland" on Saturday and Sunday started several hours before the park's 11 a.m. opening, but by early afternoon the line appeared to be only several hundred people long and to be moving quickly.

Shortly after the website for "Dismaland" went up on Thursday, the ticketing function abruptly crashed, prompting online speculation that the ticketing issues were part of Banksy's doom-and-gloom concept. In an email, Clare Croome, a spokeswoman for Banksy, said there was "no truth" to the Internet rumors, and that the site had crashed after receiving 6 million hits per minute. (Tickets are still available at the entrance, and online ticketing is expected to resume this week.)

The exhibition was out of the ordinary for Banksy, who is mostly known for graffiti works that pop up in unexpected urban locales. His last major display was a series of political [murals that he unveiled in Gaza](#) in February. In 2009, he staged an exhibition featuring dozens of his own artworks at the Bristol City Museum. That show was also kept tightly under wraps before it opened, even from many staff members at the museum. In 2013, he had a major [outdoor exhibition in New York](#).



A performer with balloons.
TOBY MELVILLE / REUTERS

Details on how “Dismaland” came together and when it was conceived have been kept secret by Banksy and his team. In an email, [Zaria Forman](#), a New York artist with work in the exhibition, said that Banksy had approached her around eight weeks ago about participating in the show, and that she was given a “general idea” of what the exhibition would include. She said she had been instructed not to answer certain questions about Banksy, and had “no comment” about whether she had met the artist in person. (Another Banksy spokeswoman, Jo Brooks, declined to answer whether the artist had visited the exhibition since it opened.) Banksy did not respond to email questions sent on Friday to his two spokeswomen.

In a wry and somewhat elliptical interview with The Guardian about the exhibition, Banksy called “Dismaland” “a theme park whose big theme is — theme parks should have bigger themes.” He also said, “I asked myself: What do people like most about going to look at art? The coffee. So I made an art show that has a cafe, a cocktail bar, a restaurant and another bar. And some art.”

Outside the exhibition, Alessia Acciari, 26, a visitor, said the weather fit the "Dismaland" mood. Ms. Acciari, a native of Rome who lives and works in Bristol, England, visited the exhibition with Ruben Martinez, 35, a Portuguese pizza chef in London. They came to "Dismaland" together, equipped with a selfie stick and a Go Pro camera.

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They arrived later than they expected because no trains were running from the area where they camped on Saturday night. (Workers at First Great Western, the train company that operates in the region, announced a partial strike early Sunday.)



A visitor at a "selfie hole."

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"I think they have been told to behave like this because of the occasion," Ms. Acciari said jokingly of the train employees, adding, "Wherever there is Weston-super-Mare, there has to be some disappointment around."