

PRESSBOOK

KAWS

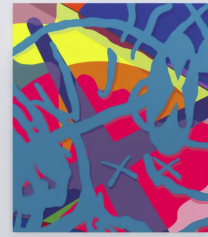
CoBo Social

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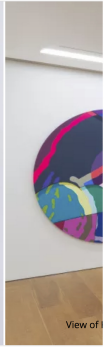
KAWS: Finding Narrative in Abstraction



Portrait of KAWS. Photo: Ringo Cheung, Courtesy Perrotin.



KAWS, NTY, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 213.4 x 182.9 cm | 84 x 72 in. Photo: Farzad Owrang, Courtesy Perrotin.



View of

March was quite the month for Brian Donnelly, better known as KAWS, with a double-header of two simultaneous shows at Perrotin in Tokyo and Hong Kong. Presenting circular canvases bordering on abstraction as well as a pair of his universally-recognized character sculptures, the Hong Kong show was the first in this city since KAWS inaugurated Perrotin's 50 Connaught Road space when it opened in 2012. As many know, KAWS is much more than a fine artist, releasing toys, apparel and other products, often in collaboration with the world's top designers. Yet, the artist never seems to be merely commercial especially with his most recent explorations that are eye-popping and jazzy but hardly superficial.

TEXT: Barbara Pollack

IMAGES: Courtesy of Perrotin



Portrait of KAWS. Photo: Ringo Cheung, Courtesy Perrotin

Born in Jersey City in 1974, KAWS started his career as a graffiti artist in the late-1990s, after graduating from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. KAWS draws his influences from a wide range of sources: high art, comic books, popular animations and graphic design. Yet, he retains a unique artistic vocabulary, often recycling the facial expressions or hand gestures of one of his cartoon characters into the circles, dashes, lines and shadows of his most recent *tondo* paintings. His recent solo exhibitions include *KAWS: WHERE THE END STARTS* at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas in 2016; which traveled to the Yuz Museum, Shanghai in 2017. He has also had solo exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, Missouri in 2017 and the Brooklyn Museum in 2015, among many others.

So it was thrilling to sit down with the popular artist on the day of his opening at Perrotin, though it seemed at first like the interview would never happen because so many people wanted to take a selfie with KAWS.



KAWS, NTY, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 213.4 x 182.9 cm | 84 x 72 in. Photo: Farzad Owrang, Courtesy Perrotin.

You've done a lot in Asia and people in Asia love you.

Yes, I have. I don't know about that.

When was the first time you came to Asia?

I came to Tokyo in 1997 and the first time in Hong Kong was '99. I wanted to go to Japan and I thought it was an interesting culture. A classmate of mine from college at SVA, his brother traded me a trip to Tokyo for a painting. Well, I thought it was a trip to Tokyo but it actually was a trip to Ibaraki which is an hour and half from Tokyo. But I did get to go into town and do some work on the street. It was fun.

What was your impression?

It was fascinating. It was 1997 and I had had only one trip outside the U.S. before that. You know, still even Tokyo is different than any other city in the world. It's just an amazing place, amazing aesthetic, people and mannerisms. It is a labyrinth of social code that you slowly get used to it.

Do you think your work was influenced by Japanese artists?

Yeah, definitely. Well, I take influences from everywhere but especially when I first started going to Tokyo. Even now, especially from Tadanori Yokoo who had the best design books that he created. He did design work but at 35, he switched and just completely cut off his design life and focused on making just art work. I always find him fascinating, especially his collaborations with Issey Miyake and generally his approach to art and his choice about it was a good example for me to put into my mental bank.



View of KAWS' solo exhibition at Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2018. Photo: Ringo Cheung, Courtesy Perrotin.

How did you like showing at the Yuz Museum last year?

It was great. I feel I have this long relationship with Asia but I don't have this long relationship of getting original works in front of people. So it was important for me to show something at this scale with sculpture and painting and product. It's such a different experience to be in front of something than to see it on a screen or on a phone. It was a real goal of mine, still a goal of mine to get in front of people.

I heard there were lines around the block, just lines and lines of people?

I was only there for the first day but it was really well attended. It's great. I would see it on social media every day.

Do you think about having a universal appeal? Is that important to you?

No, honestly, I just think about the work I want to make. I'm really fortunate that I can have opportunities in different countries and have a sort of dialogue but it's not something that I'm really methodical about. It sort of develops slowly. I put a lot of attention in different outlets, making art and objects, and now it seems that there is nice synergy between the two. Whereas in the 1990s, it was put to me that you got to be commercial or you can be a fine artist. It was very different roads you need to choose and lanes you need to stay within in order to be one or the other. And now I feel like a lot of those barriers have been knocked down and I am very fortunate because it is something I've been doing for a little longer.



View of KAWS' solo exhibition at Perrotin, Hong Kong, 2018. Photo: Ringo Cheung. Courtesy Perrotin.

With this show, what were you trying to do?

The show at the Yuz was a 20 year survey, so it was weird. I always like to hustle and always think about the next thing, but it made me stop. It is not from the beginning but it's like all the tangible stuff. Phone booths are really where the show started. You put two years of work into the content of the exhibition and the work for the catalogue. Afterwards, I came back to the studio and I started making the small *tondo* paintings. They are different than the ones that are in the show but similar in aesthetic. I didn't have the pressure of a project. I just jumped into making these experimental color compositions that I feel are a new direction but at the same time pulling in different parts of work that existed.

They do feel like a new direction. Do you plan everything out on the computer first?

The way I work is that I make little drawings and then I'll redraw everything out in Vector on the computer. I assemble paintings the same way you would assemble a collage. So I have a data bank of drawings I have made and I create new compositions. My computer is on the second floor so afterwards, I'll go down to the studio and draw them out on canvas and from there I'll choose the whole color of the painting. Just making notes, bringing in little color dots; it's sort of a number system I've developed. From there, there's the painting and we go through the process. Occasionally, you'll see in some of them another layer of painting that acts as a veil. After a painting was complete under it, I decided to start to work on top of it, repainting all the shadows and repainting it again. That's not normally the process. I normally have it all figured out.

Do you paint with a brush or airbrush?

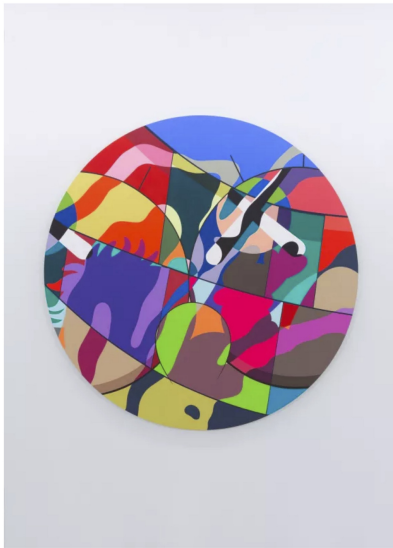
Everything is freehand. There's no masking.

Really? That's amazing!

That's all I know how to do. The line of masking tape makes me cringe so. I worked my whole life to be able to paint so I enjoy it. I feel happy when I'm doing so.

Would it be okay for someone to call the work abstractions?

People call the work whatever they will. For me it's not abstract. I know where this image is coming from. I know every line where it is coming from. So I can't not see that when I am forming an image. But yeah somebody walking into the room may not know that and it's not important for them to understand the narrative to the drawings.



(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/5_KAWS-e1523256580662.jpg)

KAWS, NYT, 2018. Acrylic on canvas. Ø: 213.4 cm | Ø: 84 in. Photo: Farzad Owrang, Courtesy Perrotin.

Do they all come out of characters you have worked on?

A lot of them do. Different characters, different elements. A lot of times I look at traditional art, animation, books, comic books, but everything I wind up drawing often comes out in this cartoon aesthetic. It's just an aesthetic I like.

And it really cuts through all ages and cultural differences in a way?

Yeah, I think cartoons operate in a way that nothing else does, throughout different countries. Like my first trip to Tokyo in the 90s, the city wasn't as English speaking as it is now. But you realize they grew up on the same things, they understand the same gestures, characters, noise. I did some billboards. It was fun, it was interesting. It was a clean city. There was no graffiti at the time.

So what's your hope for this show?

I'm just happy to be back in Hong Kong. I have a lot of friends in Hong Kong and it's nice to have work that they can see and enjoy. Especially during the fair when you have this international mix of people. But, I don't have any clear set goal of what this show needs to do for me.

KAWS (<https://www.perrotin.com/exhibitions/kaws/6409>)

50 Connaught Road Central, 17th Floor – Hong Kong

March 26 – May 19, 2018

KAWS (<https://www.perrotin.com/exhibitions/kaws/6408>)

Piramide Building, 1F, 6-6-9 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo

March 22 – May 12, 2018

About the artist

KAWS is a New York-based artist who has made a name out of him designing limited edition toys and clothing. He is also a world-renowned artist who exhibits in museums and galleries internationally. His art stands somewhere between fine art and global commerce. KAWS moved beyond the sphere of the exclusive art market to occupy a more complex global market.

Barbara Pollack

Since 1994, Barbara Pollack has written on contemporary art for such publications as The New York Times, the Village Voice, Art in America, Vanity Fair and of course, Artnews, among many others. She is the author of the book, *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China* and has written dozens of catalogue essays for a wide range of international artists. In addition to writing, Pollack is an independent curator who organized the exhibition, *We Chat: A Dialogue in Contemporary Chinese Art*, currently at Asia Society Texas and she is a professor at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She has been awarded two grants from the Asian Cultural Council as well as receiving the prestigious Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writer Grant.