

PRESSBOOK

KAWS

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boys and their toys: a tale of two titans

Text Sean Baker

With New York as their playground and the world as their stage Brian Donnelly, aka KAWS, and James Jebbia, founder of Supreme, have gripped the attention of a new breed of collectors. From beer bottles to billboards, vinyl dolls to skate-decks this is the tale of two boys and their toys...

Brash and bright, in the 50s and 60s, pop art democratized an institution that had long placed itself beyond the reach of many. Warhol won the hearts of the masses with Campbell soup cans and Lichtenstein took comic art to explosive new heights as colour began to flood the world in modern art museums and on TV screens.

Sophie Persson, Assistant Curator of the Barbican Art Gallery's exhibition 'Pop Art Design' describes some of the key catalysts in the success of the pop art movement: "It was a fascination with everyday life as espoused by the media – particularly advertising and television. The 60s were a time when the dissemination of media was speeding up, advertising was becoming more sophisticated, international travel was becoming more normal, research into new technologies were generating huge excitement from the development of plastic to the space race. That society is one that we can recognise as our own, though we have now moved on exponentially." It's approximated that close to one trillion pictures will be taken in 2014; the parameters of 'pop' have evolved but its cornerstones remain recognisable.

After graduating from New York's School of Visual Arts in 1996, Brian Donnelly – or KAWS as his tag would dictate – quickly became immersed in two particularly accessible mediums: graffiti and cartoons. By day he'd animate for Disney and by night he'd customise New York's advertising billboards. Describing the influence of pop artists on his own work, KAWS explains: "I appreciated their ways of communication with their audience, especially the ephemera and editions." So was the public prominence of his work important from the get-go? "Yes, I would constantly think about my interactions with art."

Developing his craft, come the late 90s KAWS' pop art aesthetic would be translated onto vinyl toys or "dolls" as they're known to his followers. As he stepped into the bright lights of commerciality in the 21st century KAWS would go on to collaborate with some of the world's most powerful companies, designing trainers for Nike and Vans, a bottle for a Mexican beer company and reworking iconic pop characters including Mickey Mouse, SpongeBob SquarePants and The Simpsons family. Whatever the brief and whoever it's coming from, "it makes no difference, I just think about making something good no matter the situation." KAWS explains, "I think each person has their own reasons for coveting something, I make things I would like to own myself." In the same way that Warhol blew open the art doors in the 60s, KAWS was further developing the role, putting his work on the trainers of teenagers. In 2008, he put pen to paper for The Stepping Stone Issue of i-D. Legitimising his long-time love of 'enhancing' glossy advertising campaigns, page proofs featuring fashion's finest would zip from London to Brooklyn where KAWS would customise to his heart's content. For the issue, he collaborated with creative peers and luminaries Kanye, Pharrell and Mr Bathing Ape himself, NIGO, all three keen fans of KAWS themselves. And this year, KAWS will be the focus of an exhibition in New York's Gallerie Perrotin, again leading the

charge in blurring the lines between the intellectualisation of art and mass media communication. For the exhibition KAWS will offer up paintings rather than sculptures, but with his signature playfulness delivered in the canvases themselves shaped in the silhouettes of comic characters.

Despite his accessibility, KAWS has created an insatiable demand for his work. Ronnie K. Pirovino, an advertising director and creative technology entrepreneur based in the US, is perhaps the most prolific KAWS collector in the world: "I got hooked on KAWS with his Companion toy and have been avidly curating my collection ever since." Ronnie's not alone, though KAWS' professional art career has coincided with the financial crisis, he's conquered adversity and established himself as Gen Y's go to guy for a slice of the pop art pie.

Coasting back for a moment, as kid KAWS was first finding his feet on the streets of Brooklyn on his Vision deck, Tracker trucks and Slimeballs, a teenage James Jebbia was arriving into Lower Manhattan from the UK. Working in a shop in Soho for a while before branching out and starting a business of his own, James' early life in retail was spent spotting brands on the pages of *The Face* and i-D before later going on to stock them in his shop 'Union' on Spring Street.

Though he had no real track record on trucks, an interest in the graphical aesthetic of the skate scene gave James an acute perception of the obsessive and distinct tastes of its participants. After a few years at Union he'd upsize onto Lafayette and in his new shop 'Supreme' he would initiate an epicentre for Downtown's burgeoning skate scene and would create one of the world's most powerful skatewear brands in the process, prominently positioned at the intersection of fashion and art. Whilst KAWS cemented his signature on billboards around New York, James was doing the same with brand 'Supreme'; the satisfying red and white Futura font logo – proudly inspired by Barbara Kruger – fast found iconic status, initially on the underside of skate-decks, then by being plastered over Kate Moss in Calvin Klein ads.

From his Downtown roots to shops in London, LA, and across Japan and a global distribution via the Internet, it now goes a little something like this: the email arrives on Monday morning announcing that Supreme's latest collaboration featuring, "Vans utilizing original album artwork from New Order's 1983 release *Power, Corruption & Lies* designed by Peter Saville" will drop into their flagship stores in three days. Although rumours of the tie-in have been whirling for some time, the official images featuring well-trodden Vans styles emblazoned with Henri Fantin-Latour's 19th century painting "A Basket of Roses" made famous by New Order and Saville will cue crazed clicks. Internet forums will be ablaze within the hour, Supreme simply plant the seed and their loyal followers will make the bouquet blossom. Almost exactly 72 hours after the mailbox pinged, polite queues of pristine teenage and twenty-something lads gather outside Supreme stores. Doors open and half an hour on, some styles will have sold-out entirely, never to hit the floor again.

That weekend, the Supreme set will proudly sport their wares with victory and pride. Two weeks later the same will happen again, perhaps this time it'll be their collaboration with Comme des Garçons or Nike or their tie-in with artists Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst or KAWS that causes the furore, whatever the the ignition this is what devotion looks like.

Instagram @KAWSSTUDIO, @supremenewyork

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Original KAWS artwork for i-D.



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