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KAWS

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KAWS

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KAWS

A GIANT YOU CAN
STILL HOLD ONTO

INTERVIEW BY CARLO McCORMICK // PORTRAIT BY JONTY WILDE



FOR ALL THE VICISSITUDES OF FATE AND FORTUNE, those unpredictable and even unlikely quotients of luck, timing and character that propel some forward while leaving others in unfair obscurity, there is little about the phenomenal success of KAWS' career that could be described as either random or unwarranted. Against that predominant model that renders artists as idiot savants, brilliant but slightly daft, capable of genius but not remembering to wear matched socks, KAWS represents a prime example of a generational shift in which a rigorous studio practice extends even further afield into the nuanced realms of production and distribution, into those contested grounds where being visionary is not simply a matter of pictorial innovation but about redefining art's fundamental relationship to commodity culture. By such a measure, the great achievements of Brian Donnelly, the artist known as KAWS, are not a fluke. He's had a plan all along, and he's a whole hell of a lot smarter than most.

Young enough by most any measure to be some distance from mid-career status, and having developed largely outside the usual context of art world attention, with years of work dedicated to those lowly youth culture forms like graffiti, street art, street wear and artist toys, he now enters the perpetually late arriving, fine art world as a fresh novelty. We have, nonetheless in KAWS, evidence of a deliberate methodology and graceful symmetry in the evolution of his

work to date. His work unfolds over time with exponential growth in scale and ambition but with a continuity and directional logic that is exceptional, and dare we use the word, awesome. To catch up with KAWS again for *Juxtapoz*, on the occasion of his first major exhibition in England at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, seems to offer something more than simply the usual "what you up to now" query. His art has entered fully into dialectic with itself, his visual language and codes of representation interrogating themselves on their own analytic terms. If we need to know where he's coming from to understand where he's going, our bet is Brian Donnelly has a better idea about that than anyone else.

Among the many lines of connectivity that function like a conceptual axis around which his art, in all its myriad mediums, rotates is its positioning within the public realm, from graffiti to street art to, most recently, monumental public sculpture. "The communication with people is still there for me, and I suppose that has always been important," KAWS contends, while noting that, "now it is being invited into the places, which it wasn't before. Unlike street art or graffiti, now it's expected the audience in a sculpture garden can only be so surprised by a sculpture." These elements of surprise and expectations were learned from his tenure working on the streets, and arguably certain placements of his *Companion* sculptures, as they travel the world, are so spectacular as to astound any measure of predictability or

All photography © Jonty Wilde
All artwork courtesy the artist and YSP
All artwork featured at Yorkshire
Sculpture Park, 2016

above:
CHUM (PCBS) with
LIPS AND DOWNS
2012

opposite:
CHUM (PINK)
2009

familiarity. This would certainly be the feeling registered in front of Amsterdam Rijksmuseum this past summer, or the Kowloon Ferry Terminal, sites that appeal to KAWS for their immense pedestrian traffic. In fact, he sounds like something of a marketing maven and a lot like the criminal of his youth when he recalls producing these sculptures, traveling them around the world, installing and then de-installing them. "It's not about the money. It's about the eyeballs, and in Kowloon [outside Hong Kong], a million people saw the work."

When Brian starts talking about eyeballs, and about what it means to have all these people experience his art outside the context of a museum or a gallery, it becomes clear how his achievements directly manifest his vision. His negotiation of the highly compromised and compromising territories of public and commercial art as a dedicated fine artist sets him apart. To be honest, the last cat we knew who thought and worked this way was Keith Haring, and we can be sure that KAWS would have little problem with that comparison.

The most apparent difference between the art you find in *Juxtapoz* versus the other major art magazines has always had something to do with this, like how those of art world ratification may attain fame and fortune but just don't have rabid fans the way someone like KAWS does. And compared to most anyone else of his generation, KAWS brings more amplitude to his engagement with mass popular culture. Arguably, art has always had a dramatic impact on the world at large; it's still the genetic material of what we call culture, but when it comes to measuring the cumulative force of his public art projects (including a balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving parade), the fanatic following that collects all the toys and apparel he has designed, the global reach of designing the VMA awards

and high profile collaborations with the likes of Pharrell and Kanye, it's less a measure of his effect on pop culture than the simple fact that KAWS is pop culture.

Like the musician who starts performing in a dingy basement and eventually ascends to stadium concerts, part of KAWS' transformation as an artist is a matter of mastering scale. This is crucial for him, and unlike any musical comparison, his sum of effects finds no magnification through smoke machines or laser light shows. "The early work I did on the street was small scale, done quickly, where I got away with what I could," he explains, "now these works are as big as a building, and that kind of scale dramatically changes the relation between a person and the piece." In the current mural movement, there is keen awareness among artists about the relation of their art to the urban environment, the spaces, sightlines and shifting light afforded by the dynamic geometries of buildings and roads. KAWS' sculptural works abdicate the traditional role of accessory by which public art decorates space to become activated characters within the city.

KAWS readily admits that his mastery of sculpture was apprenticed through his decade-and-a-half tenure designing his own toys. It has helped him with a lot of the basic problem solving such that, "you always want your small figure to be able to stand up and not fall over, but when it's ten tons and standing outside, you have to be sure it won't topple and kill someone." We might easily extend this lessons-learned arc to all aspects of design as he practices it across media beyond sculpture, but also his uncanny business savvy. Let's be clear: KAWS did not go to business school, so while we might try to attribute his remarkable acumen in business as an inherent talent, akin to artistic gift, it is more appropriate to consider this part of a DIY ethos

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INTENTIONS

THE WAY

MAY 2016



What we can continue to learn from KAWS' art through these decades of production is how it is a practice about understanding things, even when that comprehension is embedded within confusion. His art collection rotates on and off the walls with enough frequency that I see new things on every visit, offering a kind of creative nourishment he credits for sustaining his own art. Seeing gorgeous examples of HC Westerman, Hairy Who artists like Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum, Peter Saul, Keith Haring and seminal Japanese illustrational artists too esoteric for my memory banks, I'm always stunned by the breadth and depth of his collection. "There are so many versions of Pop," he remarks, adding, "I'm always interested in identifiable images, how we relate to the world and bring it into our work, how it comes back through this filter to be our own. This all comes from genuine appreciation, from a life of pursuing what interests me, and trying to figure out how they all work. It's not so different than the renaissance of advertising and branding in the '90s. I saw how all these billboards and ads were taking out the great graffiti spots and began to pay attention to the emergence of this more dynamic language of global, corporate campaigns. I never worked with Calvin Klein. I worked over him," he reminds us.

Much of what is so prescient as to seem visionary in KAWS' art comes from his inspired understanding of how so many different things work discreetly in unison and within the bigger picture of culture. In this way, he can disassemble and reassemble the primary language of iconic comic characters in his paintings into the hybrid realms of

sampled mix-culture and kitbashing. His approach to the thorny dilemma of representation today is design-based problem solving, where he can cross-pollinate his own work across different series and mediums. We'd have to be as astute as Brian himself to know if KAWS is responsible for this expanding compression of market convergence or simply intuiting and responding to it faster than anyone else. And if he knows, he's not telling. "Toys aren't meant to be archival, and it's problematic when we make art auctions out of toys and ephemera. An art auction and eBay are different interpretations of commodities, and now they're converging, like streetwear and luxury goods, but who am I to say there's a difference? I was always far more interested in how art, culture and industry worked together than I was in separating them."

As KAWS continues to mine the shared DNA that bonds this global spectacle of pop and to articulate its nuanced interconnectivities in his own migratory art practice, we begin to see something sublimely whole and wholly fractious. It is a beauty that intimidates, but it is also metaphysics that can make us laugh.

PIX

KAWS' exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park will be on display through June 12, 2016.

@KAWS

