

PRESSBOOK

KAWS

Prestige

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KAWS ON CREATING, COLLECTING, COLLABORATIONS AND THAT H&M SCANDAL

The artist divulges details on his upcoming Changsha sculptures and has words on last month's street-art copyright dispute.

BY CHRISTINA KO ON APRIL 13, 2018 , ART & CULTURE



Brian Donnelly, the artist better known as KAWS (<https://www.kawsone.com>), was in Hong Kong in March for the opening of his show at Galerie Perrotin (<http://galerieperrotin.com>) during Art Basel week. But although almost every single gallery in the Central district opened exhibitions on the same morning, Perrotin's was the only one with a constant, consistent flow of visitors who weren't journalists, collectors or curators – KAWS is, of course, that rare breed of artist that's able to straddle the commercial and critical worlds seamlessly and fluently, even while both sides beg mutual exclusivity.

His general oeuvre needs little introduction – if you've seen popular animated characters rejigged with XX symbols over their eyes, then you've come across a KAWS piece, and this show features no shortage of them, with close crops of characters like Snoopy rendered in neon colours, along with a more-than-man-sized pink furry creature that holds court in a side room.



Installation view of KAWS 2018 at Galerie Perrotin Hong Kong

We see some familiar tropes in this show, but it seems you're taking further steps towards abstraction.

You're not the first person to say that. For me I don't feel like it's more abstract at all, I feel like it's right in line with the work I've been making. But perhaps in a lot of the imagery I'm focusing more on little parts of pieces and that's creating more of an abstract impression.

How does the show represent an evolution of your practice?

When I did the survey show at Fort Worth Modern, and then it went to the Yuz Museum, after working on that for two years and kind of gathering a comprehensive show and looking at old work and new work, I came back to the studio and started making these little xx paintings, and I had no pressures. They were a lot more experimental, with composition and colour, and from there it led me to finding elements that I like and doing that in a larger format and that's kind of where I'm at with the show.

A lot of people access your work via your collaborations with brands, which is commonplace now but you were definitely an early adopter. How did that happen initially?

It was very normal even before street art, or just graffiti, for guys to go paint together. It's like a sport – instead of going to play football, three guys would go paint, and you would inevitably wind up working together. For me, when I started doing collaborations with companies, that was in the mid '90s and it just seemed like a natural thing. You're two people sharing this moment, you get to cross-pollinate and learn a little about their process and how they approach

a project. You can take the positive and the negative from that. For me, it's great. Part of the reason I was so drawn to art was the communication with people and the dialogue you get to have through art, and collaboration is just another heightened form of that. You get to really learn in a way that you don't when you're just alone in the studio.

Pairing up for all of these capsule collections is also what's made you a household name and one of the most visible artists in the world today. What does that kind of phenomenon and fame do to you?

I hope I can answer and say it's not done anything to me. You do get a little self conscious with knowing that the work you make is seen on the scale that it is, but you got to take it in stride and not take it too seriously and not let it affect the work that you make. That's the benefit of having [an artist name] that's not your [real] name. It's the same when I was doing stuff on the streets, you can have the work exist but it doesn't need to be all. I feel like I'm a pretty open, honest person with how I handle myself with social media, when I was coming up and seeing the different generations of artists before me that I looked at, I feel like there could be a lot of smoke and mirrors, and to me I always was like, I don't want to be that. I don't want to have a persona, I don't want to have to be guarded [or] be like, you can't see my kids. I know it's kind of a ridiculous hope, but just be as normal as possible.

What do they understand of your work?

It's hard to say, they're one-and-a-half and four. They travel for different projects. My daughter came up here when she was six or eight months old to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, she was with me the whole time on the grounds, I was so psyched that she was with me walking around, going "daddy sculpture, daddy sculpture", and then we walk past a Henry Moore and she's still saying "daddy sculpture". I was like, oh, she just thinks all these things are daddy's sculptures. So that was a nice little taste of reality.



KAWS, NTY, 2018

At this edition of Art Basel in Hong Kong, Galerie Perrotin is showing KAWS, and down the road Lehmann Maupin has put Brazilian twins OSGEMEOS up. Do you feel there's a sea change in so-called blue-chip galleries embracing street artists?

I look at artists as artists. I never thought when I was doing graffiti or street art that I'd done, that I was a street artist. At the same time I was at college studying realist oil paintings. You just make art, you happen to have this outlet, and this happens to be the one that you chose. But it makes perfect sense. It's the same thing with people who label Outsider artists or artists like Martin Ramirez or Susan King. They're feeling like they need to look at it differently but no, it's just great drawing. You put Ramirez next to anything and it holds. I try to shed labels. It's frustrating to come to an exhibition to have somebody comment or say "Oh, street art." I'm like, what are you saying? You're obviously not looking. But I'm excited to have a show in Hong Kong and OSGEMEOS is a few blocks away. They're great artists and it's great.

But it's true that there is a bit of prejudice – let's take the recent H&M case as an example, when the company attempted to define the artist Revok's street art as vandalism in order to justify not paying royalties. You spoke out quite strongly on the issue.

It's nothing against any company, I don't want to be unfair to anyone. But if you see a situation and it's just not right. I couldn't dream up a company doing worse PR for themselves. To attack a whole thing that at the same time you're trying to sample for what you do. To pay an artist with a company of that level is change, it's really change. The truth is, I was in no way speaking about a fee that should be attained, it's just a community, and if fashion and art are working together, then you enter the conversation and you have mutual respect. I wouldn't expect to just have the rights to anyone's IP just because they're not within certain parameters. And where does it start and stop? If that case happens, do they have the right to all of Keith [Haring]'s street work that isn't commissioned, or Basquiat? Or cave paintings? Can we just start pillaging all this stuff? It seemed absolutely ridiculous and actually I'm a fan of Revok and those pieces in particular, and I see a fragment of one from a block away and I know exactly who the artist is. I just felt very strongly about it. Just tasteless. Just admit they're wrong, you can move on in a day.

You're often a victim of IP violations, too.

I have counterfeits, [and it's] like any other counterfeits. I'm not like, oh, great, this is a nice thing to stimulate the conversation. It's not, it's somebody making a buck.

If you sign a figurine, its resale value goes up. People have to enter digital lotteries just to get their hands on KAWS merchandise. Do you ever feel like you've become a market?

You can't think about it. If you sit around and sulk and think about this kind of stuff, then you'll not make anything, and then you're defeated. So you just sort of make what you make and put it into the world. I'm happy that it is embraced, the flip side to that is that nobody could want it and have it. I feel like it comes with the territory and you can't put too much weight behind it or lose any sleep.



KAWS with his art collection. Photo: Highsnobiety.com

What do you collect yourself?

It's all over. Anywhere from influences to peers to new discoveries. I look back a lot. I don't collect probably beyond the '50s, as a point I haven't delved past that, but you follow rabbit holes, you get into an artist, you learn about his periods, what was happening around him which leads you to new artists who you do the same with. I have a lot of Chicago images, little bit of Outsider – I hate that term – and then people I grew up on, [Richard] Pettibone, Peter Saul, George Condo.

One of the artists I like a lot that I collect is Martin Wong, I met him when I was younger. He wasn't a graffiti artist ever but he was really supportive of that community, and he used to collect it, and he donated all of his collection to the city of New York, and I just found that not as graffiti artist, playing such a pivotal role for graffiti, is what led me into his work. But when I got into it, I just became highly appreciative of it, and once you go down the rabbit hole you start to obsess about what you don't have.

What's coming up for you?

I'm going to take a little time back in the studio. It's great to have all these opportunities but it's equally important to carve out time to make stuff without obligation. I'm looking forward to it. I just did this show in Tokyo last week and this one now and I'm just looking forward to shutting the door for a few and getting to work. Nine to six every weekday. As an artist you get to choose what you choose to do. There are people who enjoy being really social and out and about, and I'm not one of them. I have two kids, and when I weigh things out, I think almost 99 percent of the time, I'd rather be with my kids.

There's a sculpture project that's coming up in mainland China in Changsha, in a new development area, two eight-metre bronze permanent installations. And that's fun, they're going to be sitting on this new building with their legs off the edge, it's going to look very casual. I'm excited about putting work in an area I haven't been.