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# KAWS

## “The Nature of Need”

Opening Tuesday, May 15, 2012 / 6 - 9 pm

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May 16 to June 30, 2012  
Tuesday - Saturday 11 am - 8 pm

Famed Brooklyn-based artist KAWS is known for transforming icons of popular culture into cartoon-like characters that are seemingly accessible, easy to identify, and have become instantly recognizable as KAWS interventions. In order to continuously explore the potential of those representations, the artist submits his characters to different abstraction processes that render them unrecognizable, resulting in paintings increasingly akin to the work of the 1960s "post-painterly abstraction" artists, such as Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, and Frank Stella. Currently—as seen in this exhibition—KAWS is paradoxically functioning within the possibly antagonistic traditions of Pop art and Geometric Abstraction, while brilliantly revitalizing the fields of both figuration and abstraction.

## THE NATURE OF NEED

This new series of vertical canvases can be perceived in multiple ways. The fifty paintings can be seen as one single gesture: one work that has been sliced, much like Damien Hirst's sliced cows—which have been described as being reminiscent of the process of life and death, and the ironies of our desires and alienations. KAWS's canvases offer the same paradoxes; they are part of a series, a whole, and yet they can stand on their own, as a single alienated slice. They can be grouped as desired in unlimited ways, two, seven, twenty . . . This composition brings to mind the concept of "deconstruction" set forth by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who explained that to deconstruct was "a tendency to subvert or pull apart and examine existing conventions having to do with meaning and individualism." THE NATURE OF NEED pulls the viewer in many directions, forcing on one hand an examination of the conventions, of the individuality pertaining to one work, and, on the other, a review of the series, finding the limit where one multi-tych painting/work begins and where it ends.

The palette for this vertical series has been returned to mainly blacks, dramatized by bright colors. In the past, KAWS resorted to a similar range of colors as a way to clean his palette. By reducing the set of colors for a series, the artist focuses on experimenting and exploring, taking one single graphic to its ultimate consequences. For this particular series, KAWS took fragments of the facial features of the popular cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants and reduced them to the minimum expression—a concise sign—that is still able to convey meaning and communicate, just like a logotype. Zooming in on a couple of lines and curves that barely represent an eye, a nose, mouth or tooth, and then inflating the scale and enlarging that fragment, gives it a personality it never had before and creates a vehicle for a new vocabulary. For the viewer, there is a sense of familiarity based on the almost-recognizable cartoon features, while a tinge of uncertainty also creeps in as the picture is incomplete. A series format such as this allows the viewer to confirm an initial hunch or perception by going back and forth between all the similar yet different canvases, and to feel comfortable about finishing the composition in his or her mind. The visual exercise encouraged by a series provides rhythm, a recurrent pattern, and also dissonance as the attractive and varied color compositions eventually capture our imaginations. Seriality and the variation of minimal elements in a composition, repeating a character over and over again, is part of the Pop art tradition. Through repetition, Warhol transformed the banal image of a Campbell's soup can into a relevant one.

## CHUM and KEEP MOVING

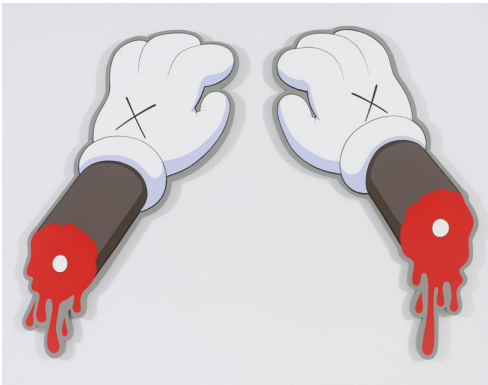
In furtherance of this tradition of Pop art, KAWS alters, transforms, and permutes popular icons into cartoon characters infused with human and animal features. Thus he provides new images—hybrids that are recognizable as being familiar, sweet, and tender due to their soft and supple features, and yet somewhat critical and bittersweet given the imminent presence of the KAWS signature



KAWS "DEATH RACE" 2012  
Acrylic on canvas Ø 101,5 cm / 40 inches



KAWS "CHUM (KCA1)" 2012  
Acrylic on canvas over panel, 213 x 172 x 4 cm / 85 x 68 x 1 3/4 inches



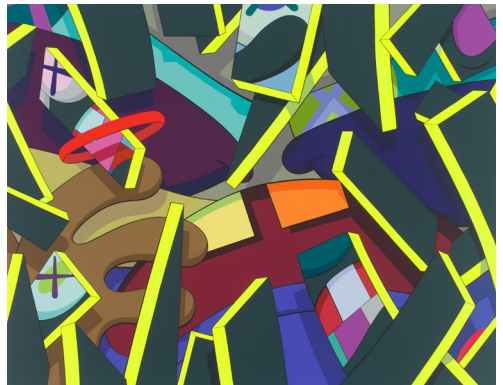
KAWS "KEEP MOVING" 2012, acrylic on canvas over panel  
 (in two parts) 183 x 114 x 3 cm & 183 x 119 x 3 cm  
 72 x 45 x 1/3 inches & 72 x 47 x 1 3/4 inches

skull, where crossed-out eyes and crossed bones replace a living head, leaving the implication of a dismembered body. Such is the case with the works CHUM and KEEP MOVING.

The CHUM image is a send up of the Michelin Man, the celebrated marketing character created in 1894, representing KAWS's own interpretation of one of the world's oldest trademarks. With an assertive attitude used to lure potential consumers, the Michelin Man—now with a KAWS-style skull—is transformed into a rather cute, yet defeated character, rendered humorously in lush dark gray and vibrant neon outlines. One of the first versions of this same CHUM image appeared in a sticker KAWS designed some years back. Remembering his first aesthetic experiences with the concise signs and symbols on the skateboards and T-shirts he used as a teenager, the artist has created his own condensed graphics that function similarly to logotypes. This CHUM is one example of a condensed graphic that finds its way back and forth across the different formats and channels of communication that serve popular culture (marketing, stickers, paintings, toy editions, etc.).

Challenging the absolute domain of the ubiquitous and iconic Mickey Mouse and its status as the most famous image in the cartoon world has a long history in KAWS's body of work. His first take on the Mouse was the toy edition called COMPANION, released in 1999, that featured a skinny-legged Mickey Mouse body with the KAWS skull. KEEP MOVING presents the severed and recognizable four-fingered hands of the COMPANION, based on those of Mickey Mouse. The creation of the COMPANION initiated a whole series of toy editions, paintings, and sculptures that continues today and also includes the CHUM.

Using grandiloquent Pop art strategies, such as a radical change in scale, KAWS achieves different versions of his characters. The CHUM and the COMPANION change in both format and scale: from the skateboard sticker and small toy edition to sixteen-foot-tall sculptures (the monumental 5-meter seated COMPANION was on view at Harbour City, HK in 2010), and six-and seven-foot/2 meter paintings. Pop artists ranging from Roy Lichtenstein and his blown-up comic strips, to James Rosenquist, who called his



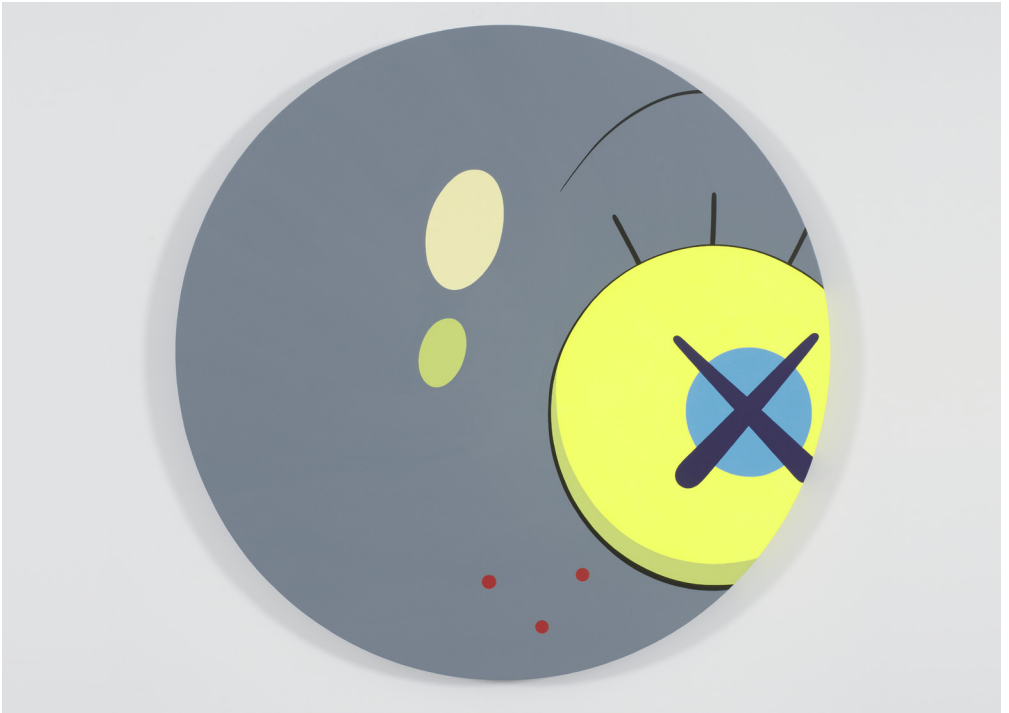
KAWS "CHAIN OF COMMAND" 2012  
 Acrylic on canvas 172 x 218 cm / 68 x 86 inches

paintings "visual inflation," to Claes Oldenburg, with his soft, inflated, and gigantic store objects, wanted to enhance and celebrate everyday life. In the case of Oldenburg, an artist KAWS admires, his change in scale was inspired by New York City stores and showrooms that displayed large objects such as cars, pianos, and furniture, and were an everyday sight for passersby. Similarly, KAWS enhances his subjects—a marketing icon and a cartoon figure—and puts the viewer's relationship with the familiar to a whimsical test with his giant versions.

In addition to the tondo paintings, both CHUM and KEEP MOVING are KAWS's first serious incursions into the exploration of shaped canvas. Highly reminiscent of Frank Stella's shaped pieces, these works explore the sculptural qualities in KAWS's paintings—a paradox given that his figures are in essence bi-dimensional (cartoons)—and yet, with this strategy, they increasingly gain physical presence. With their borders meticulously painted and incorporated in the overall composition, these canvases now seem to inhabit the realm of the high relief: an image that is raised to give the impression of materiality and weight, of importance.

### CHAIN OF COMMAND

The artist draws upon the passion he felt for graffiti as a young adult in this large-scale painting, which presents planks of color similar to the flying slabs that made up the bars of the letters "KAWS" when they first appeared in New York City's public spaces in the 1990s. Impeccably executed, dense and intense, the canvas in this exhibition presents a hybrid between the power of abstraction and the recognition (or not) of a cartoon character—the power of figuration. The foreground, an anti-gravitational cluster of floating slabs, challenges normal perspective similarly to abstract works, and veils the presence of a figure, giving the viewer only a glance at a couple of lines (an abstraction) that hint to facial features (eyeballs, teeth, mouths). The distinctive color palette, packed with powerful contrasts of bright and neon colors, also contributes to the equal relevance of the whole canvas. The opaque surfaces are the result of the animation cel paint that KAWS has used since his first job, as a painter of surfaces for an animation company.



KAWS "DON'T SINK" 2012, acrylic on canvas, Ø 101,5 cm / 40 inches

### **Tondo paintings**

Taking his influences from popular culture, KAWS associates smaller-scale round canvases with popular and collectible lapel buttons, making the works more personal and approachable, while still acknowledging their collectible qualities. In the history of art, tondos have mainly served to focus attention and enclose the composition around a scene, since the background was generally absent or unimportant. These KAWS tondos subvert traditional notions for round canvases and present almost unidentifiable and fragmented portraits of infamous cartoon characters. Adding to this complexity, the distinctive color palette is packed with powerful contrasts, instilling the entire canvas with an equal relevance. Foreground and background are undistinguishable, and the color intensity fights for the viewer's awareness throughout. The presentation of an even surface without texture showcases the paintings' own material magnificence, allowing this body of work to also function within the realm of abstract painting.

### **Biography**

KAWS' works have been exhibited in numerous museums and galleries, including the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia (until 20 May 2012); Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas; The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut; Harbour City, Hong Kong; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, California; Palazzo dell'Arte, Milan; USF Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, Florida; Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, Maryland; Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California; Yerba Buena Arts Center, San Francisco; PARCO Gallery, Tokyo; Nicosia Municipal Arts Centre, Athens; DESTE Foundation, Athens; and collected by many prominent private collectors and public collections the world over.

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