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PAPER

KAWS' WORLD



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When a huge balloon version of KAWS' celebrated figure "COMPANION" floated down Fifth Avenue in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade last year, it seemed that surely that was as big as the artist and toy maker could get. Previously, his "COMPANION (PASSING THROUGH)," a massive fiberglass sculpture, had toured from Hong Kong to Europe to the Standard Hotel in New York. But now KAWS has two major museum shows running -- at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas -- and this month he'll have a pair of solo exhibitions opening in New York: one at French maverick dealer Emmanuel Perrotin's new fancy uptown gallery, and the other at legendary power-player Mary Boone's Chelsea gallery. And if you were one of the 10 million people who tuned into August's MTV Video Music Awards, you saw Kaws take over the stage of the Barclays Center with his giant version of the MTV moon man, in what was one of the grandest co-branding opportunities afforded any visual artist. This is undeniably the year of Kaws. But if his work is omnipresent, from the bastions of high art to the hipster nooks and crannies where his apparel and toys are collected and coveted at dizzying prices, KAWS, the man, is far less visible. Perhaps the shyest and most soft-spoken of art stars, he rarely leaves his studio, and when he does, it's with a persona that is somewhere between humbled graciousness and a deer caught in the headlights.

Having known him since he was still a struggling kid called Brian, I knew the only way to engage KAWS would be to go out to his studio. There I was reminded that his modesty aside, KAWS is remarkably articulate and totally aware of what he's doing as an artist and his place in the art world. I'd love to describe his studio, a splendid new building designed by Masamichi Katayama of the Japanese architectural firm Wonderwall, which is as sparsely functional and elegantly minimalist as the aesthetics of its inhabitant, or tell you about the amazing art collection he keeps as "the food that sustains me" -- a broad array that runs the gamut from his New York art pals to early masters of Japanese pop art -- but he made me promise not to talk about this stuff. Right, just don't tell him I told you. Privacy is a hard thing to negotiate in the world of celebrity, and KAWS is as painfully reticent about basking in the glory of his success as he is inspired by the creative opportunities

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it has allowed him, particularly in regards to impacting people who are not normally exposed to the possibilities of fine art. A consummate outsider, he knows most of the biggest power players in our culture, not just because his work is great and defines the zeitgeist like no other, or even that the opportunity to monetize it in today's market is as profitable as printing money, but through the most fundamental matters of cultural production and commerce. Unlike most famous artists, KAWS has something few in visual art actually enjoy: rabid fans who wait on line for days just to see what his latest project will be. What makes this even more noteworthy is that he himself is a fan, subject to the same process of collecting stuff as a way of constructing one's identity as the kids around the globe who fetishize his work. If he knows a big-time dealer like David Zwirner, it's not because he's trying to show at his gallery, but because he buys punk iconoclast Raymond Pettibon's work from him. And if you press him on some of his most well-known supporters, like Pharrell Williams, his longtime collector who commissioned work from him early on in his career, or Kanye West who he did a record cover for, he will either describe them as friends or talk about what their work means to him. If he has stories, he's not sharing. "I don't leave the studio, so it's not like I'm out drinking with these people," KAWS explains. "It's important to keep your life simple, otherwise you'll never get anything done."

Neither a fine artist who does commercial work, nor a commercial artist who does fine art, KAWS is decidedly both at once and emphatically neither as he refuses to parse those distinctions of high versus low. Last we checked, you can still see some of his early graffiti work on the New Jersey side of the Holland Tunnel, and his first pieces to be shown in galleries were phone booth and bus shelter ads that he removed and reworked with his own slick additions and then returned to their locations. The arc of his involvement with streetwear that began when he did his first T-shirt design for Subware in 1991, and continued through his immensely popular clothing line "ORIGINALFAKE," only ended this past spring because, as he says, "I love waking up and making stuff, and dealing with a business takes away from that." What's most telling is his response when asked the difference between his suite of huge sculptures he's making for the Mary Boone Gallery and his work as a pioneering creator of vinyl figure toys: "To me

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they involve the same thought process, so it's funny that when I work big in bronze it's called a sculpture, but something I do that's small and plastic is called a toy."

Years ago John Waters told Paper that one of the things he loved best about art was that it was a hermetic little world that totally intimidated most people, and while we must agree with that, there are occasionally those exceptional figures like KAWS, who are able to reach a vast audience in utterly direct ways, that are ultimately transformative. Kids who haven't been to a museum since some goof-off school field trip years ago, and have certainly never before enjoyed the experience of art, will line up to see KAWS' many shows this fall. This fact alone ratifies his work and gratifies him far more than however the consensus opinion of the academy may fall. Little seems to satisfy him more than scoping Instagram for kids taking pictures in front of his work with their hands over their eyes in his signature pose. It's a funny gesture that looks like a game of peek-a-boo, but is more a picture for a world in perpetual denial, an expression of frustration, fear, anguish, grief and anxiety rendered somehow benign through the properties of comic art caricature. "I always wondered why figures never had these kinds of expressive gestures, they were always proud super heroes standing tall or in other stiff poses," he says. "I wanted to create an emotional connection that could reflect our times and how I feel." We can relate to KAWS' "COMPANION," and that's the whole point. In this way, the commercial work -- an expansive field of production that has had KAWS co-branding with the best jeans, shoes, skate-and snowboard companies and reworking the most beloved icons of Disney, Warner Bros, Star Wars and Peanuts -- is as much a part of the equation as his installations in galleries and museums. "For me it's about cross-pollinating, it's that chance to bring kids who follow me into museums. When I was a kid my first introduction to art came through graffiti, skateboarding and the Pop Shop," KAWS recalls. "I remember the way Keith Haring's art made me feel comfortable walking into a gallery or a museum. I just want to make stuff that no one is ever too stupid to get."

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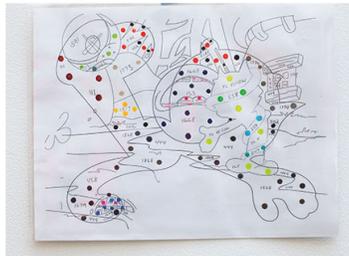
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