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Former Jersey City graffiti artist **KAWS** has first solo museum show

Coming off the Turnpike only to brake in the crawl of Holland Tunnel traffic, there's little entertainment in the concrete valley of billboards and storage centers.

Stare long enough and you'll start to notice the faded **graffiti** tagged along the top floors of some surrounding factories, like the crude white letters spelling **KAWS** on two sides of a rooftop at 13th and Coles.

It's the tag of Brian Donnelly, arguably **Jersey City's** most celebrated artist to date, who painted his pseudonym there in the early 1990s so it would be visible from his classroom window at nearby St. Anthony High School.

Nearly 20 years later his name remains but Donnelly, now residing in Brooklyn, has moved on.

On Sunday he'll be honored with his first solo museum exhibition, at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

After studying art at St. Peter's College in his teens, Donnelly furthered his education at New York's School of Visual Arts, and over the last 15 years he's gone from defacing bus stop advertisements to displaying paintings at galleries including Honor Fraser in Los Angeles, Javier Lopez in Madrid and BAPE in Tokyo. He's been profiled in the documentary "Beautiful Losers" and on CBS Sunday Morning and has collaborated with "The Simpsons."

"KAWS does not so much blur the line between art and commerce as he marries the two," Julie Bills, a director at the Gering & Lopez gallery in New York who was quick to see his crossover potential, said. He "collapses the distinction between high and low art, making art accessible on the streets and in clothing stores, as well as in the gallery and the museum."

Donnelly has explored toy and clothing design, started his own fashion label and

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opened Original Fake, a boutique in Tokyo. He's collaborated with magazines like New York, i-D and Interview and brands including Vans and A Bathing Ape. He's created album art for Kanye West and guitar picks for John Mayer. Last year the artist was No. 70 on Fast Company's 100 Most Creative People in Business. On Sunday he takes another step in his evolution as his work moves from the walls of galleries to the galleries of a museum for a solo exhibit. There, the history of his collaborations and his evolution from graffito to fine artist will be surveyed.

"Originating at the crossroads of art, design, popular culture, and street savvy, KAWS's output is quite unique," **the museum states on its website.** "By playing off the different disciplines – namely street art, design, high art – and using each as an element in the other, the artist is revolutionizing the art world and widening the straightforward definitions of 'high art.'"

None of the works on view will be for sale. While the artist has turned to galleries to sell his original paintings and sculptures, prints, toys and clothing are sold in the most democratic way possible, going on sale simultaneously at boutiques and websites around the world, a tactic that has contributed to his universal appeal. The opening reception for KAWS at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum is from 2:30 to 5:30 p.m. Sunday; the show will run through Jan. 2, 2011. In September, the first monograph of his work, "KAWS," will be published by Rizzoli.



"In the Elements," acrylic on canvas, 2010, by KAWS, aka Brian Donnelly. Photo courtesy of Gering & López Gallery, New York.

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