

SKARSTEDT



VANITY FAIR

On Art

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KAWS (*and yes, that's a pietà*)
Photograph by **Christopher Sturman**

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Portrait of an Artist: Brian Donnelly KAWS

Dorian May tracks down one of the most iconic artists on the planet in his Brooklyn studio to find the man behind the brand.

by DORIAN MAY OCTOBER 4, 2018



Step into the Brooklyn studio of **Brian Donnelly**, known professionally as KAWS, and you feel as if you have ascended to his cartoon world. Sometimes on steroids, other times subdued, but always in his distinctly recognizable iconography, his designs straddle fine and commercial art, making him a pop culture phenomenon.

Yet Donnelly, who looks at least a decade younger than his age (44), is softly spoken and modest, and winces visibly at this description. Never mind that he has more Instagram followers than most artists on the planet (today's truest métier of relevance), that he is housed in some of the world's most celebrated collections, has floated his work in Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and even caused the Museum of Modern Art's website to crash upon the release of one of his limited edition toys. "I don't ever worry about not being cool," he shrugs and pauses, deadpan, "because everyone knows I'm not!" His laughter echoes through the studio.

Without question, KAWS has had an extraordinarily colourful career, often compared to Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who also started out as New York graffiti artists and married street, pop and fine art. After working in animation, he launched Original Fake, his iconic brand whose flagship shop in Tokyo helped catapult the cult of KAWS internationally. Hipsters clamoured for his Companion toys, with the skull and crossbones face, Mickey Mouse-esque body and signature XX eyes.

But Donnelly realized no one was seeing his original work. "I had written off the idea of galleries because I would meet people and they would like the work, but felt they wanted me to be a commercial artist or a fine artist. I was very guarded and wanted to make what I wanted to make."

Donnelly applies the same level of commitment to a toy, a character for a Dior runway show made of 70,000 flowers, or a 28ft floating sculpture. In the back of his studio, a 900kg bronze sculpture has just been completed and awaits naming. It is a greyscale Companion holding an electric blue "BFF" in the manner of Michelangelo's Pietà, an incongruous but striking amalgamation of the Old Master and the new.

"I wasn't looking at Michaelangelo or that sculpture when creating it. I wanted to make something that really felt like loss," muses Donnelly. In his day, Michelangelo was considered a sellout by skeptics who frowned upon his commissioned works for being commercial. When I suggest the two artists share a few things in common, Donnelly is quick with a self-deprecating reply. "Oh yes, me and Michelangelo. Did he make toys and T-shirts with Uniqlo too?"

