

SKARSTEDT

The New York Times

The Surprising Ascent of KAWS

Brian Donnelly went from tagger to blue-chip artist, riding the increasingly blurry line between commercial and fine art.



In April 2019, Sotheby's in Hong Kong held an auction of artworks from the collection of the Japanese streetwear designer known as NIGO. Among the 33 lots were rare sneakers from the brand he founded, A Bathing Ape, along with limited-edition cans of spray paint and digital prints depicting spray-paint cans, and more than 20 works by the artist Brian Donnelly, better known as KAWS. Lot 8 was a piece called "The KAWS Album," which Sotheby's estimated would sell

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for as much as \$1 million. The painting depicts the extended cast of “The Simpsons” posed as if on the cover of the Beatles’ 1967 record “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” — itself a gag used for the cover of a 1998 CD of songs from the show — only the characters’ faces are configured into cartoonish skulls and crossbones, a signature of the artist’s work for the last 20 or so years. At the bottom of the scene, dozens of pink-frosted doughnuts (the kind favored by Homer) are arranged to spell “KIMPSONS.”

According to the auction catalog, “The KAWS Album” not only is Donnelly’s “most accomplished work on canvas” but also displays a “prescient vision and affectionate irreverence for our times, manifesting as an iconic apotheosis of KAWS’s entire artistic and cultural lexicon.” Once the auction opened, a bidding war drove the price to nearly 15 times its valuation. An unknown bidder — [some believe it was Justin Bieber](#) — paid \$14.8 million for it.

Donnelly, who started out as a graffiti artist in the ’90s, often appropriates recognizable cartoon figures from pop culture, including “Sesame Street” characters, Mickey Mouse and SpongeBob SquarePants. In the last decade, his work has become an increasingly recognizable sight at major art institutions, though his embrace of popular media like streetwear and children’s entertainment have also marked him as a perpetual outsider within the elitist art industry. “The KAWS Album,” however, sold for so much money that it was no longer possible for the industry to dismiss him.

In a relatively short period, Donnelly had gone from tagger to in-demand designer to fine artist. In fact, he seems to be collapsing the distinctions between these categories. The successful sale of “The KAWS Album” solidified this reputation, and yet, in a sense, it also had very little to do with Donnelly. U.S. law largely restricts resale royalties on the secondary market for visual artists — who, unlike actors, musicians and even journalists, do not make money off the continued sale of their work — and the sale of “The KAWS Album” didn’t net him a dime. Yet the price of the painting also meant that he had become an emblem of all that was wrong with the art world: its absurd profit margins that favor shadowy collectors and deals, its abasement of creativity for the sake of selling out. [An article in The Art Newspaper](#) lamented “the sheer conceptual bankruptcy of KAWS’s work.” And of “The KAWS Album,” it concluded, “Not in their most LSD-addled nightmares would the Beatles have envisaged it would come to this.”

“I’m sure he’s a super nice guy,” an art adviser named Josh Baer told Artnet News, but “If you think that Paris Hilton and the Kardashians are important cultural figures, then you’re likely to think KAWS is an important artist.” One art reporter told me, when I mentioned I was writing an article about KAWS, that certain directors at Gagosian, the largest and most profitable gallery in the world, would automatically move anyone known to own a KAWS down on their waiting list to buy something. (A Gagosian representative denied this was true.) Bill Morrison, the former “Simpsons” illustrator whose work Donnelly appropriated,

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was in 2014, and it rejected him in its first sentence as a “mass-productionist.” In other words, having a work sell for eight figures doesn’t translate into positive reviews, and positive reviews don’t typically translate into high prices or actual fanfare. It is in fact unusual that an artist who shows in galleries and museums would be known at all to the public, which really does rank contemporary art somewhere below “Keeping Up With the Kardashians” in terms of esteem.

But Donnelly also has many more Instagram followers than most other artists (3.2 million) and a level of enthusiasm among his fans usually reserved for actual pop stars. In the summer of 2019, when Donnelly debuted a new T-shirt line with Uniqlo that featured his characters, the release caused [near riots in multiple malls across mainland China](#), with young shoppers captured on video literally ripping apart mannequins and beating one another to get their hands on all the clothing. He has some clear predecessors, the most obvious being Jeff Koons, an artist 20 years older than Donnelly, who, beginning in the '80s, deployed in his work a vast pop culture and brand symbol iconography — the Incredible Hulk, Popeye, Spalding basketballs, Michael Jackson in repose with Bubbles — and who has become both the world’s most expensive living artist and a favored punching bag for critics.

There is no clear precedent, however, among contemporary artists for this: All the tickets for the opening weekend of Donnelly’s first solo museum survey in New York, which opens this month at the Brooklyn Museum, sold out far in advance. Perhaps this wasn’t much of a feat in itself, given crowd-control restrictions due to the pandemic, but more impressive — or, depending on your worldview, disturbing — was that by January, scalpers were selling tickets on eBay at a 100 percent markup.

Donnelly, who is 46, has two studios in Brooklyn, each essentially compartmentalized into art-making and administrative work. I first visited the studio where Donnelly does most of his painting, on a surprisingly quiet block near the Williamsburg waterfront, in early December 2019. I nearly expected to walk into some kind of sweatshop, or at least something akin to the studio of Koons, who has been known to work with up to 120 assistants at a time. I was surprised when Donnelly himself opened the door, holding an actual paintbrush. “I’ve just got to finish this one thing,” he told me, “and then we can talk upstairs.”

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Donnelly in New York. Chris Buck for The New York Times

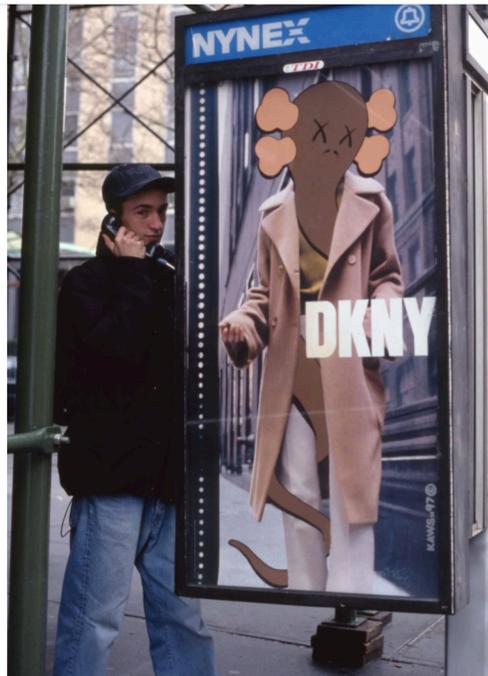
The door led directly into a big open room with high ceilings and skylights. There was only one other person present, a young woman crouching on the floor and working on a detail in the corner of a nearly finished painting. On the wall opposite her was the outline of a work in progress that featured one of Donnelly's recurring characters: Chum, who looks like the Michelin Man and was sprawled out on a rocky shore like a Siren. Donnelly, wearing what I would come to recognize as a kind of uniform — black pants, black sweatshirt, black hat, white sneakers — was using an overhead projector to broadcast an outline of the details of the rocks onto the painting, and was filling them in with acrylic paint, using a thin brush.

When we settled in the quiet office space on the building's second floor, Donnelly pulled out a large monograph published alongside a 2019 survey show at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia, and turned to a photograph of a Union Pacific train car parked in a freight yard. Under the company's motto — "We can handle it." — he had painted KAWS in green, blue and purple letters.

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“This was Jersey in 1994,” he said. “Jersey was a playground. I could paint a freight yard like this, and we wouldn’t get chased. We could just be out painting — sometimes in the day, but mostly at night. So, like, you’d paint and then come back in the light of day and be either pleasantly surprised or disappointed by the color combinations you chose.” Donnelly grew up in Jersey City and started tagging as a teenager. He chose the handle KAWS because he thought the letters went well together architecturally. It wasn’t until his last year as a commuter student at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan that he started developing his stylistic touchstones like the crossbones and skulls.

He turned the page to a billboard displaying a Marlboro ad with two cowboys riding galloping horses against the backdrop of a blue sky, onto which Donnelly had painted KAWS and, in the lower left corner, a pink skull with X’s for eyes and crossbones behind it. He said it was the first he had ever painted. This motif is now recognizable from Donnelly’s most frequent subject, a character called Companion, a cartoon figure — often, but not always, clothed in Mickey Mouse shorts and gloves, and often, but not always, rendered in a dour gray palette — whose head is a bulbous, balloon-animal-like skull and crossbones. In the Marlboro ad, the bones were more pronounced and the skull a little more macabre, but it was possible to see the roots of Companion here.



Donnelly with "Untitled (DKNY)" in 1997 in New York. Courtesy of the artist

Variations on that character — which art writers have described as [“a dream half-remembered,”](#) “a spectacle for mass consumption” and, in [a long ago piece I myself wrote,](#) “a dead Mickey Mouse” — have since appeared in paintings, on T-shirts, on tote bags, as 30-foot-tall sculptures of wood or bronze. Companion is featured in series of vinyl collectible figurines that Donnelly makes, some just

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inches tall; the line between fine-art Companion and collectible Companion seems to be somewhere north of about 15 inches in height. Some are much larger. Companion has appeared as a float for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and as a 121-foot-long inflatable sculpture in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor.

When the Beverly Hills estate owned by Dr. Phil's family trust, and occupied by the doctor's son, went on the market in January 2020, interior photos showed, in addition to a vast arsenal of automatic weapons, a Companion lurking in the corner of the opulently decorated living room. [There he was](#), too, toddler-size in the 2020 video for Drake's "Toosie Slide," a "Cribs"-ian tour of the material possessions contained within the rapper's Toronto mansion. Donnelly's work has long been sought after in the music world in particular. On a table between us as we talked was a gold MTV Video Music Award from 2013, the year Donnelly oversaw the ceremony's design, which featured Companion in astronaut gear, planting the network's flag on the moon.

However big Companion has become, Donnelly seemed to have genuine nostalgia for the billboards of Jersey. The one with the Marlboro ad was among his favorite spots. It sat above a wall near the western entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, and its vantage allowed him to see cops before they spotted him. He quickly learned to photograph everything he made, because he couldn't expect it would still be there in the morning. After he moved to New York, Barry McGee, another painter who got his start in graffiti, gave him a tool to open a tamper-proof bolt, which allowed him to unlock the advertising displays in phone booths. "Oh, you'll have a field day with this," McGee told him. Soon he learned that the casings in bus shelters had Master Locks. "So if you can get one off of a bus shelter and make a key for it, it would open up a lot of other ones," Donnelly told me. "I eventually learned how to pick Master Locks in a heartbeat. Probably the easiest lock to pick."

A lot of Donnelly's graffiti works now exist only in the artist's own documentation of them, and his photographs of this time provide a fascinating record of New York in the late '90s, a time when the streets were awash in high-profile ad campaigns and the city reveled in its growing commercial appeal. Images of these works serve as the introduction to the Brooklyn Museum show, titled "KAWS: WHAT PARTY." "His years as a graffiti artist were incredibly important for him, and really formed his artistic vision," said Eugenie Tsai, the show's curator. "I think his studio practice is one part of that, but it's still predicated on showing in public spaces."

His public works still take Companion as their subject and are now among his most ambitious — and because they are, unlike his graffiti works, legal, they are huge logistical undertakings. But in the '90s, Companion was more of a clandestine presence, subliminally haunting major cities across the world. There he is, green and dripping out of the nostril of Charles de Gaulle, on a bus-shelter advertisement for the French magazine L'Express. And again, on the side of a phone booth, covering the face of the model in an ad for Maidenform bras that

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says “inner beauty only goes so far,” while an oblivious delivery man walks through the frame.

These photographs tend to be some of Donnelly’s more celebrated works, as they were sharp reflections of — and, perhaps, judgments on — a post-Cold War, pre-Sept. 11 consumer culture. They did not, however, lead to meaningful success in the art world. At the same time he was making these works, he was supporting himself as a full-time animator, painting backgrounds for shows like “Daria” and “Doug.” (Incidentally, Donnelly kind of looks like a grown-up Doug.) In the galleries of New York, being a street artist, an animator and a toymaker, “it was like I had three strikes against me,” he said. If he wasn’t showing his work illegally, it was hanging on the walls of Lower East Side dives like Max Fish or bOb Bar. His first toehold in a real art institution was in the New Museum’s gift shop, which stocked his toys.

This eventually did lead to Donnelly’s first gallery show in 2000, at a small and long-defunct space uptown. Koons came to the opening, with some of his staff. He introduced Donnelly to the collector Dakis Joannou — a Cypriot businessman best known for owning a 110-foot superyacht, designed by Koons and called Guilty — who bought two paintings for a couple of hundred dollars apiece. “And I thought like, Oh, this is an entry point,” Donnelly said. “And I tried to talk to galleries, and I couldn’t get any play.”

As recently as the late ’90s, the art world was guided by stubborn traditions. The prices of living artists had been gradually rising since the 1970s, but they were generally not as valuable as dead artists, and someone who made toys belonged in a toy store, not a gallery. With a few notable exceptions, including Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, street artists were taboo, in part because the work was generally ephemeral and therefore impossible to sell — but also because it was seen as a lesser medium and not real art. It was only in 1998 that the auction house Christie’s held its first contemporary sale that focused on work made around or after 1970. At that sale, according to an article in the Times with the quaint headline [“Gamble Pays Off for Christie’s,”](#) a 1969 Gerhard Richter painting went for the awfully cute price of \$2.5 million, which was three times the artist’s previous auction record, as the article notes. [Richter’s record now rests at \\$46.3 million,](#) for the sale of “Abstraktes Bild [599]” in 2015 at Sotheby’s in London.

These auctions would become perennial celebrations of pure, uncut capitalistic hedonism. The sales made for grabby headlines, in which artists could be separated into categories of winners and losers — a not-uncommon metaphor among art-market reporters, whose numbers grew along with the prices — depending on whether their work sold and for how much above its estimate. Having two auction houses dedicated to the sale of contemporary art was not great for artists but it was for sellers. In order to compete over valuable lots, one or the other auction house would offer clients guarantees that if a work sold for less than a minimum price, the house itself would have to cover the difference.

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It's a policy that was adopted at both auction houses by 1990, and it created such an inflated, speculative bubble for contemporary art that people have been predicting ever since that, any day now, the bubble will burst.

It hasn't, and not even a pandemic has done much to change the top end of the market. The global financial crisis of 2008 slowed sales — as well as the practice of guarantees — but the art market recovered much faster than the American economy in general. By this time, Sotheby's and Christie's had effectively become private international banks for the world's richest people, who could buy an eight-figure painting over the phone without even having to publicly disclose their identities, and as a general rule, often refused to do so. (Despite various efforts on my part, even long after the sale, no one would confirm the identity of the current owner of the "The KAWS Album," including Donnelly, who said he texted with the buyer directly after the sale.)

In about 10 years' time, the market for living artists went from being an also-ran to Impressionist painting — which for years commanded the highest prices at auction — to becoming a kind of standard currency for billionaires, who found it was sometimes easier and less risky to park their money in paintings than in real estate. Art had been gradually commodified for decades, but now collectors were buying up these objects and hiding them away in European free ports, like money in an offshore account. In Asia, as economic policies began to embrace the free market, minting a new generation of wealthy investors, an art market that was less beholden to certain American snobberies — about the meaning of authenticity and the line between commerce and art — grew rapidly, and auction records in Hong Kong began to guide tastes in the West.

In the mid-2000s, Donnelly still didn't have gallery representation, but he had built enough of a following to open a store in Tokyo called OriginalFake, which became something like his personal showroom. Donnelly was successful enough by this time that there was a robust market of counterfeits for his toys and designs, and the store's name was a play on that. He had established himself at the center of an adjacent, artlike market for collectibles, one that would eventually converge with the actual art market, though at the time the store was a kind of admission that the mainstream art world was uninterested in him. OriginalFake, which closed in 2013, gave him a central location through which to sell his work — be it toys, clothing, editions — and also a place to experiment with large-scale sculpture. (He showed me an image in the monograph for the show in Australia of his store in 2006, with a 10-foot-tall Companion, bisected so that one half of him reveals organs and muscle.)

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Art writers have described Donnelly's Companion as "a dream half-remembered" and "a spectacle for mass consumption." Chris Buck for The New York Times

This boutique helped make Donnelly into a global brand: At a 2005 performance in New York, Jay-Z wore a jacket that KAWS made with NIGO's A Bathing Ape. Through NIGO, Donnelly became acquainted with Pharrell Williams, and his work was soon a fixture within a rarefied corner of the hip-hop world: Kanye West, who was already working with artists like Vanessa Beecroft and Takashi Murakami, chose him to do the artwork for the deluxe edition of "808s & Heartbreak." He then did the cover of the last studio record released by Clipse, a group Williams produced. When Williams's group N.E.R.D appeared on the cover of Complex magazine in 2008, Donnelly painted a Companion coiled around each member like a snake, in an image that looked a lot like one of his bus-shelter ads, only this time someone had asked him to do it. Still, the art world paid him

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little notice. I asked at what point that changed. “It’s still happening,” he said, and he laughed.

Over the 10 years Donnelly spent ostracized by the art world, his blurring of the line between fine art and collectibles became normalized and mainstreamed. Nowadays it’s commonplace for artists to juggle commercial and fine-art commissions and collaborate with popular brands on affordable prints. Part of this had to do with the art world’s own attempts at democratizing itself by breaking down longstanding barriers. Museums teamed up with streetwear brands to throw lavish parties at art fairs like Art Basel Miami Beach, and the hip-hop figures that were Donnelly’s oldest supporters were courted by old-guard art institutions to draw in younger audiences. In 2013, Jay-Z filmed a music video inside New York’s Pace Gallery, in front of an audience of giddy curators and art advisers. Williams began organizing shows at Perrotin. The producer Swizz Beatz, a collector of Donnelly’s work, was named to the board of the Brooklyn Museum in 2015.

But an artist’s work doesn’t become a shared cultural marker of status accidentally; the whole system needs to be synchronized, whether deliberately or not, to make that happen. Wealthy collectors are naturally intrigued by an artist who has independently shown that his work has the potential for heavy returns on investment, so art advisers help sell the work to them as trophy objects. This compels galleries, who want access to the rich collectors, to start showing this work as well. Museums become intrigued by all the interest from galleries and collectors, and this legitimizes the work and increase its value. By the time a piece of art is being resold, the specialists at Sotheby’s have had their way with it, transforming the art, to quote the auction house on the subject of Donnelly, into something that is “universally understood in a way that surpasses language and cultural barriers.”

I returned to Donnelly’s studio on several occasions over the next year. I noticed on these visits that the walls of the upstairs office — and the staircase leading to them — were covered in bona fide masterpieces from his personal art collection: a colorful but harrowing Peter Saul painting from 1982 that shows a violent encounter between the police and a group of subway passengers; an Ed Ruscha text work that said “Bail Jumper”; a Joyce Pensato depiction of Mickey Mouse, rendered in almost abstract scrawls of black paint; a portrait by Joe Coleman of Henry Darger, a now canonical self-taught artist who supported himself as a custodian, and which looked like a medieval icon painting. All artists who uncomfortably straddle a line between cartoonish and arcane.

There was also a large Martin Wong painting of a brick wall. Donnelly has one of the world’s largest private collections of art by Wong, another artist underappreciated in his lifetime (he died of complications from AIDS in 1999) but whose moving, personal scenes of life on the Lower East Side became celebrated after his death, in no small part thanks to Donnelly, who has lent the works in his collection to exhibitions and promoted Wong on Instagram. A

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paradox in the trajectory of Donnelly's career is that, record prices for his own work aside, he is arguably most celebrated by the art world as a collector. "I knew him as a customer before I ever knew him as an artist," Per Skarstedt, his dealer, told me.

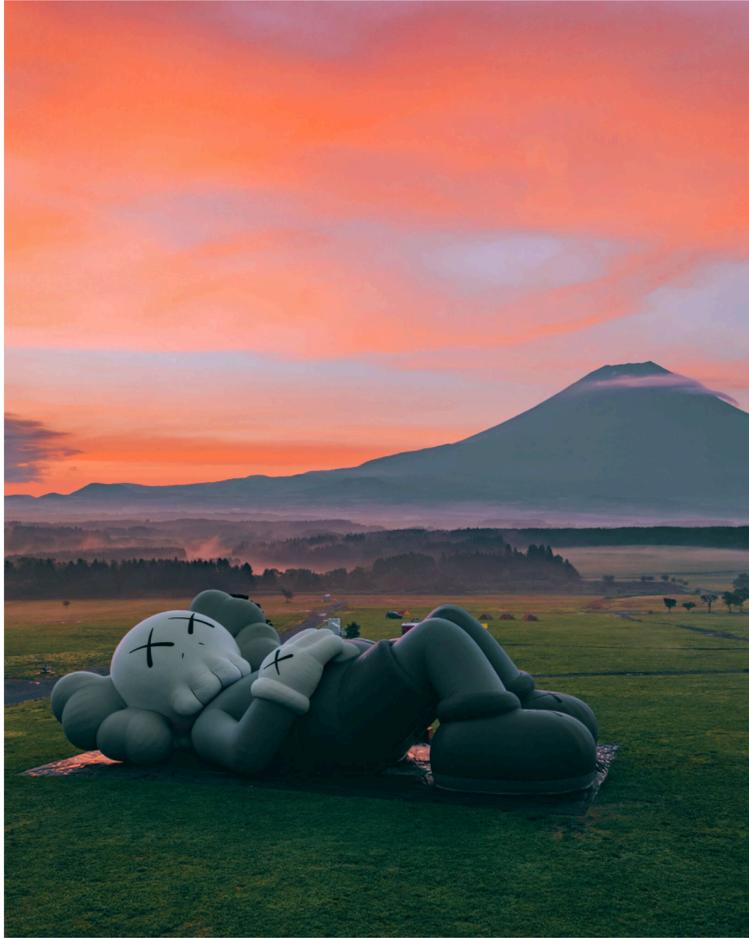
As he sat down in a chair across from me, Donnelly said he'd gone back and read the article I wrote in which I referred to Companion as a "dead Mickey Mouse." He took issue with this. "I was like, 'dead Mickey Mouse'? I don't mean to push your buttons, but I think of him as very much alive."

Donnelly's relationship to Companion is an intense one. Sometimes he would show me pictures of the figure and refer to it affectionately as "this little guy," as if it were one of his children. (He has two daughters, ages 4 and 7, with his wife, the artist Julia Chiang.) At one point, I asked him directly if he thought it was a self-portrait. There are versions of Companion covering his ears or his eyes with his hands, posed as if to say, in a kind of Gen X mantra, "This isn't happening," which seemed to sum up Donnelly's relationship to the art world. "I'd be lying if I didn't say it was very personal, but it's not like that's specifically me," he said. When he made the first one, he told me, "I didn't think I'd make a second one." He figured it was a one-off thing. "And then it just sort of, I don't know, evolved."

A more cynical interpretation is that Companion is a brand logo, and a successful one at that — not quite as recognizable as the Nike swoosh, but give it time. Its constancy in his work has allowed Donnelly to preserve something subversive about his roots while also capitalizing on them. If anything, it is the perfect distillation of this entire era of contemporary art, which is to say the very inanity of Companion is, at times, thrilling. Here's this funny character that was born as an almost literal interruption of the smooth flow of capital — a defacement of luxury advertising — but was eventually swallowed up in its unstoppable current, now bought and sold by the ultrarich, titillated by the provocation. Whether you think the joke is on them or on us or on Donnelly depends on your disposition.

When I visited him at the beginning of 2020, Donnelly told me about his various plans for that year, all of which have since been complicated by the pandemic: In May, he was going to make Companion into a hot-air balloon and fly him over the English countryside, while Donnelly, trailing in a second hot-air balloon, shot pictures. There was a large-scale Chum installation in the public plaza of the Seagram Building in Midtown, and an installation of a different character at 280 Park a few blocks south, plus another one planned for the holiday season in Singapore. He was also developing an augmented-reality app built around his characters, which produces lifelike images of the work that respond to the light, temperature and weather of a given environment. This was the only project that wasn't delayed in some way by the spread of Covid-19.

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"Holiday" an installation at the foot of Mount Fuji in Japan in 2019. Courtesy the artist

With the app, he could show up to any random place and create a large-scale sculpture that required zero shipping, zero waste, no insurance and no liability. But more important, he told me, it was a protest of sorts against his secondary market. The app itself was free, and the Companions that he virtually installed into public spaces would be free to access. But he would also use the technology to sell virtual sculptures in editions of 25, with a certificate of authenticity.

It's unusual for an artist to take such an active role in his market, but Donnelly has always had an unusual relationship to the traditional methods of buying and selling art. He already had a busy secondary market when he first found gallery representation with Emmanuel Perrotin, who started working with him in 2008. Though Perrotin helped him reach new collectors and set auction records, Donnelly has seen, by percentage, little of the upside. On Instagram the morning after that auction in Hong Kong, Donnelly put it plainly: "Do I think my work should sell for this much? — No. Did I arrive at my studio this morning same time I always do? — Yes." (Skarstedt told me that Donnelly's larger paintings sell for about \$500,000, a price that is generally split evenly between artist and dealer, and often subject to discounts.)

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“If your market’s really solid, don’t get psyched,” Donnelly told me. “Because it’s not. You didn’t do that. And if it’s weak, don’t get sad, because you didn’t do that either.” This was an enlightened view, which he summed up by saying, “Once you agree to sell something, you’re done. You know?” He connected it back to his graffiti years, in which he had to assume he’d never see a financial return on his work. “That’s a given,” he said. “You find a job to subsidize your painting. Like, what do I have to do to enable me to do this? And the work you’re doing, you’re not even guaranteed it’s going to stay up for a week. Sometimes, something would stay up for a year and surprise you. If you did something at night, you’d have to be there at dawn to get photos of it, and you have to make peace with it by the time you walk away from the wall.”

‘Did I think my work should sell for this much?— No.’

Donnelly stunned the art press in 2019 when it emerged that, a few months after the sale of “The KAWS Album,” he was parting ways with Perrotin and working exclusively with the smaller Skarstedt, which represents painters with a similar interest in pop-culture symbolism — but whose main business comes from selling works on the secondary market by the likes of Willem de Kooning, Martin Kippenberger and Pablo Picasso. Donnelly said he left Perrotin because he preferred Skarstedt’s sensibility. But it was also a way of taking control of his market. A dealer like Skarstedt, who has a history of placing high-value secondary-market works with collectors who do not then turn around and try to flip them at auction, might protect Donnelly’s prices going forward. Skarstedt, according to Donnelly, is “really conscious of selling the work and not just being like an open shop, but trying to take care of the work and hopefully put it in good places that will hold onto it.”

Once an artist reaches such a pinnacle as Donnelly did with “The KAWS Album,” one danger is that his prices have nowhere to go but down. This can ruin an artist’s career by making collectors nervous to buy the work in the first place. One of Skarstedt’s tactics for making sure collectors don’t flip Donnelly’s art is having them sign contracts with certain restrictions: If a buyer wants to resell the work within the next five years, they will sell it back to the gallery, rather than through an auction house. But these contracts aren’t legally binding.

Skarstedt pointed out that Donnelly’s situation is unusual, even at the top end of the art business. “He has two markets, really,” he said. “He has the one with the toys, the prints, and it’s always doing well. It’s a global market, and he can just put something up on his Instagram and reach millions of people instantly. That’s a market I’m not involved in at all. A lot of people think he’s very prolific as a painter and a sculptor, but as a matter of fact he’s not producing very much, because he doesn’t have to, because he has this other business. So that’s good for

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the market. It's about supply and demand. The demand is big and the production is small."

Because of this, Skarstedt said, it wasn't easy to get a KAWS painting on the primary market, which helps account for the huge price that "The KAWS Album" generated. "That can happen sometimes at auction," Skarstedt continued. "When you have two people with a lot of money and they decide to go for it and they have big egos or something like that. It happens, you know. It happens with a lot of artists."

Donnelly texted me in early September, telling me that he was finishing the installation for the sculpture at 280 Park Avenue. The following afternoon, I did something that I used to do every day but which the pandemic had made strange: I got on the subway in Brooklyn and took it to Midtown. I met Donnelly inside 280 Park, where a 20-foot-tall sculpture of his character BFF — a variation on Companion, only with pink, Elmo-like fur and a round nose — was standing looking over the lobby. As Donnelly and I talked, a camera crew that had been documenting him, for purposes he wasn't quite clear about, circled us closely. He must have noticed that this made me uncomfortable because, after a few minutes, he said, "Guys, I think we're good for right now," and the crew departed, asking a construction worker to take them up and down on a fork lift to shoot video of the sculpture. The size of Donnelly's work stretched the vehicle's capacity to the upper limits.

Donnelly said that his installation at the Seagram Building two blocks north on Park Avenue had been delayed because of a paperwork snafu, but that when it was completed (it would debut a few weeks later), there would be two enormous KAWS sculptures in view of each other on this corporate stretch of Park Avenue. He was bracing himself for the backlash.

But then again, maybe nothing would come of it. This neighborhood had changed so much in the period since I'd been talking to Donnelly. Midtown's glassy towers sat largely empty, and the sheer amount of people racing around with a sense of purpose, stopped in their tracks by an artwork that, knowing how people usually respond to Donnelly, would either make them very happy or very upset, had simply fallen off. Art installations in office-building lobbies always strike me as empty, mere proof that art collectors are also investors in Class A office towers. There's a red Jeff Koons bunny sculpture in the lobby of 51 Astor Place that feels about as futile as hanging a painting of a flower on a wall of the Death Star.

But seeing his work in this context, I finally understood something about Donnelly. Talking to him really did give me the impression that he was just a nice guy from Jersey, soft-spoken and a little shy, uninterested in explaining his success or making sense of why people had such passionate reactions to him. "People are people," he said at one point, in reference to his trajectory from tagger to one of the world's most expensive artists. "You just meet people you get along with, and you build those relationships."

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Donnelly and Companion hadn't changed much since their tagger days, but the world around them did. If the art market used to ardently avoid all things commercial and recognizable as anathema to its basic power structures, the industry was now unapologetically chasing after them. It no longer mattered that Donnelly was popular with hypebeasts and children. If there was profit to be made, it wasn't just that the old rules didn't apply; there weren't any rules at all.

There was still a question as to whether all this might fall apart, whether the money would dry up the way everyone always predicted it would and the machine would finally stop. A hometown show at a major museum and an installation in a corporate office didn't make this any less of a possibility. The sculpture made manifest just how closely his work has become lashed to the caprices of global capital.

But for now here he was, placing his art in an empty building, in a neighborhood that, for the time being, no longer had very many people in it anymore — no more office drones, no more European tourists, just the security guards, the construction workers, the homeless and Donnelly's own sculpture across the street to bear witness. This ridiculous, childlike, kind of sad stand-in for its creator was slouching and seemed to be saying, "I know how you feel. I can't believe someone's letting me get away with this, either."