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The New York Times

A Coming-Out Party for KAWS at the Brooklyn Museum

The Simpsons, Snoopy and the Smurfs are all here in a survey of the artist Brian Donnelly's 25-year career.



A preview of "KAWS:WHAT PARTY" at the Brooklyn Museum on Tuesday offered a room of new work by the artist Brian Donnelly related to the pandemic. The wall of images is from his "Urge" series; the despairing sculpture is titled "Separated." Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

By Max Lakin

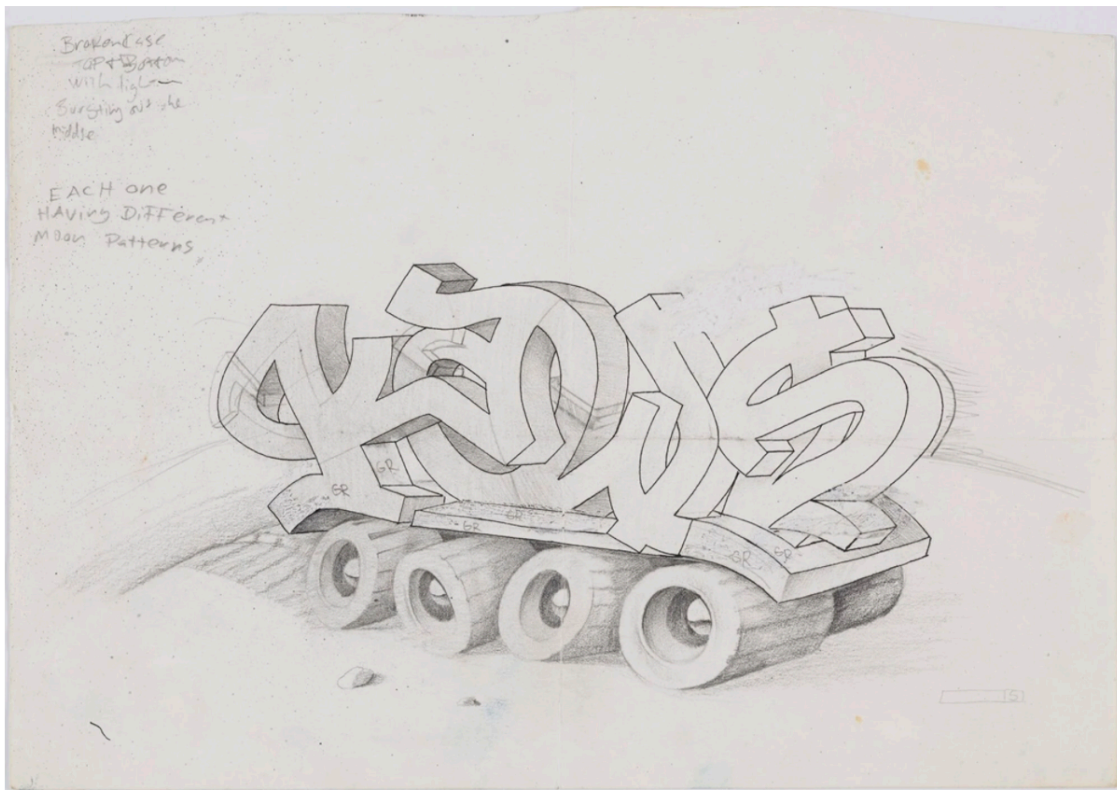
- Feb. 24, 2021

Marshall McLuhan suggested art is whatever you can get away with. Warhol, who was so expert at appropriation that the quote is often attributed to him, proved McLuhan right. Since then, many artists have accepted the idea as a personal challenge, draining appropriation of its thrill. Entire fashion companies are predicated on it. People like what they know.

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Brian Donnelly, 46, who has worked as KAWS since the mid-1990s, figured that out early on. He got his start colonizing walls and billboards in his native Jersey City with his kinetic graffiti tag, spray painting lettering that alternated between jagged and bloated (the word “KAWS” has no deep meaning; Donnelly chose the letters because he liked the way they looked together). Somewhere along the way, he became a market heavyweight, a favorite of both street-art enthusiasts and high-octane collectors.

“KAWS: WHAT PARTY,” a fast and tight survey of Donnelly’s 25-year career, opening to the public Friday at the Brooklyn Museum, is perfectly titled. Donnelly’s dominance is near total — his sullen sculptures guard Midtown office lobbies and waterfront condos and have been launched into space — so it’s somewhat surprising that this is his first major museum survey in New York, a coming-out party after the fact. Much of that delayed reception has to do with the prickly feelings his work generates institutionally, where the artist’s acid-colored output is regarded as the ultimate triumph of bad taste. That position is probably overblown, or at least incomplete.



“Untitled (KAWS),” 1994, pencil and ink on paper with his tag. KAWS and Brooklyn Museum

“WHAT PARTY,” curated by Eugenie Tsai, includes 167 objects in total. It begins with Donnelly’s early street work, which is the most interesting on view. By the late ’90s, he had landed on his visual language, trading in his lettered tag for a cartoon figure with X-ed out eyes and puffy crossbones plunged through its skull, which he applied to fashion ads in phone booths and bus shelters around New

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York. It was a less soured offshoot of the Situationist critique popular at the time among groups like the Billboard Liberation Front, which altered outdoor advertisements (Camel cigarettes, for example) to reveal their insidiousness. Donnelly's interventions are mostly apolitical, more an extension of the graffitist's desire to be seen than anything particularly anticapitalist.

They were also his canny unsanctioned collaborations, the faces of DKNY and Calvin Klein models supplanted by the artist's own avatar. Where early graffiti stars relied on trains to carry their names into the public view, Donnelly realized brands were a much more effective conduit. His swelling portfolio of collaborative deals with billion-dollar corporations may seem like a betrayal of his early work, but the idea of "selling out," once considered by some members of Donnelly's generation a fate worse than death, no longer applies. Viewed today, these interventions look more like auditions.

One of the first pieces in "WHAT PARTY," from 1997, is its most instructive: an image of Keith Haring drawing on a subway ad as one of Donnelly's cartoon slugs coils around him, peering over his shoulder, as if taking notes. Haring, who shared graffiti writers' goal of maximum exposure, wanted to make his art as democratically accessible as possible, and did so mainly through public murals but also the Pop Shop, where he sold inexpensive reproductions and tchotchkes. KAWS's project is effectively Haring's pushed to delirium.



KAWS, "Untitled (Haring)," 1997, in which the artist took an existing image of Keith Haring and overpainted it. KAWS and Brooklyn Museum



KAWS, "Untitled (DKNY)," 1997, a phone-booth ad that the artist appropriated. KAWS and Brooklyn Museum

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KAWS's world can be disorienting, a Bizarro version of our own populated by Donnelly's cartoon appropriations — familiar but not, all with Xs where their eyes should be, which in the cartoon tradition signifies death, or at least a state of incapacitation. The Simpsons, Snoopy and the Smurfs are all here, floating through a fugue state that refuses to lift. Donnelly worked as an animator for a time, and his fluency in cartoons' crisp lines and lucid coloring is clear, but his conceptual breakthrough came around 2000, during his time in Japan, where he found that cultural products like "The Simpsons" transcended language, functioning like an emotional Rosetta Stone.

Donnelly's "Simpsons" work is some of his most commercially successful and least altered from its source material, though Donnelly was not totally allergic to formalist experimentation: His "Landscape" series, made on canvas (2001), four examples of which are here, offers a single "Simpsons" character blown up and cropped so that its features resemble abstractions. They play with ideas of cool, calm Color Field painting and Hard-Edge, with its sharp, clear shapes, and especially recall Al Held's [Alphabet Paintings](#) of the '60s, which drew from advertising.



KAWS, "Untitled (Kimpsons #2)," 2004, acrylic on canvas. KAWS and Brooklyn Museum

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“WHAT PARTY” offers the opportunity to gawk at “The KAWS Album” (2005), a version of the “Simpsons” gag, itself a parody of the Beatles’ “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” album cover. (His painting sold at auction for nearly \$15 million in 2019.) A generous reading would be its ability to say something about how the regurgitation of mass-culture images renders them meaningless. At worst, it highlights the need for a wealth tax.

Japan is also where Donnelly first encountered otaku culture, whose adherents have a rabid appetite for manga and anime, and for collecting the related figurines that have become a kind of shadow market. He began adding toy making to his practice with his enduring characters, Companion, a skull-headed figure with Mickey Mouse’s puffy mitts and distended belly but otherwise sapped of color; Chum, a Michelin Man mutation; and BFF, who looks like a rangy, excommunicated Muppet. They have all proven endlessly fruitful, shaped into eight-inch vinyl and eight-foot fiberglass, among other permutations. More often than not, they appear alone, in states of dejection and existential malaise, though sometimes they’re paired, as in “Gone” (2018), a six-foot-tall Companion carrying a limp, cotton-candy-colored BFF, à la Michelangelo’s Pietà, for an effect that is both droll and dopey.



Joe Coleman, of Brooklyn, at the preview. At left is KAWS’s “The News.” At right is the sculpture “Take.” Kirsten Luce for The New York Times



Attendees in front of the piece “At This Time.” The museum’s preview for the exhibition was the first of its kind since the pandemic began. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times



Willem Grant, of Brooklyn, with “Chum,” left, and “M2,” right. Kirsten Luce for The New York Times



Left to right, Anais, Ajani and Amelie Pinard and their father, Andre Pinard, all of Brooklyn, looking at the piece “Companion (Original Fake).” Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

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The cognitive dissonance of those heavy themes rendered in the cheerful, splashy language of animation might explain their appeal to young men who are native to loneliness and anonymization and seem to represent a large part of Donnelly's true believers. His fans doubtless find the work's register more palatable wrapped in a cartoon coating. (Sometimes, as in two examples here, a figure's side is flayed open, a heavy-handed metaphor for emotional exposure). The Companion work presents little friction. Rather than antagonize the viewer they offer consolation, reaffirming the rightness of their nihilism.

There's also a room devoted to work made last year addressing the pandemic: "Urge," a suite of 10 roughly square canvases, disembodied hands dangerously close to touching a face; "Separated," a sculpture of a Companion figure, crumpled into a pile with its face in its hands; and "Tide," a painting of Companion adrift in a moonlit body of water, possibly drowning. The paintings are luminous, their rich pigment seeming to glow from within. But as a comment on the current moment, and its staggering loss, they feel mostly perfunctory. Their mood is morose but so is everything else.



KAWS, "Tide," 2020. KAWS and Brooklyn Museum

"WHAT PARTY" positions Donnelly as a bridge between art, popular culture and commerce, as if those places were isolationist states and not symbiotic parts of a totalizing machine of flattened taste, where cartoons and artists are interchangeable content to be printed on everything from luxury accessories to

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mass-market sneakers. Donnelly has intersected at all points, from Nike and Uniqlo to Comme des Garçons and Dior (the most horrific of these are the [chairs](#) done in collaboration with [Estudio Campana](#): plush toys molded into a modernist fever dream). His prolific participation in the art-fashion industrial complex, which lends cultural gravitas to consumer products and a rarefied level of exposure to the artist, isn't extraneous to his practice as much as it's the whole point. It also makes the decision to mount a KAWS exhibition less an act of courage than a sure thing.

The museum's rotunda is given over to Donnelly's most recent large-scale sculptures, including his "Holiday" project, a series of massive inflatable Companions that for the last few years have traveled around Asia in a kind of soft-power good will tour, plunked into Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor and lolling at the base of Mount Fuji.

It feels appropriate that a gallery of KAWS's most monumental work should feed into a gallery-size gift shop, a monument to his merchandising potency. It's not a stretch to view the shop as an extension of the show. This is the quality that makes people uneasy, the sheen of it all too slick. The art world prefers its commercial qualities whispered, its best worst kept secret — what is any art gallery if not a store? Donnelly's work is an attempt to make visible the hidden machinery of conglomerate art, but the work's strengths are also its weaknesses. It probably wasn't Donnelly's plan to become the conglomerate.

KAWS: WHAT PARTY

Feb. 26 through Sept. 5, Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn; 718.638.5000; brooklynmuseum.org. Advance timed tickets required.