

SKARSTEDT

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



KAWS, *SPOKE TOO SOON*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 98 x 104 x 1 1/2 inches.

By Jason Rosenfeld

The direction of KAWS's fourth show at Skarstedt in New York was intimated in the artist's recent *WHAT PARTY* retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, which closed September 5. The centerpiece of that show featured the COMPANION character in ten paintings titled *URGE* (2020) and, placed before them, a disconsolate, seated sculpture titled *SEPARATED* (2021) where he has his head in his hands—a melancholy installation connected to our shared COVID experience. But in a small, dark room to the left there was a large picture titled *TIDE* (2020) with COMPANION bobbing in a moonlit sea, arms outstretched, floating to an uncertain fate. It signaled a new approach to KAWS's roster of cartoonish characters, involving one of them, in a painting, in a presumed narrative. The Skarstedt display expands this gambit in five installations of 18 paintings and three sculptures on three floors of the gallery.

It was inevitable, perhaps, that the characters KAWS has meticulously crafted in plastics and metals and stone and acrylics would eventually participate in stories on flat surfaces. It had been happening in the sculpture for some time, but was limited to combinations of a couple of figures and often interesting juxtapositions of scale and environs, such as *SHARE* (2021), a monumental COMPANION holding a stuffed-animal-sized pink BFF, at Rockefeller Center this past fall. But in painting KAWS had resisted such narrational intersections, preferring seriality or wildly colored and designed figural abstractions—the latter some of the most intriguing pictures in Brooklyn. The present development is interesting, since in the inspiration for so many of these creations—Disney, *Sesame Street*, Bibendum—story, or at least character was paramount. The artist has said that he has no interest in making animations, but creating new pictorial mythologies to complement his widely recognized cast of heroes is a new wrinkle, and a welcome one.

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KAWS, *COMPANION 2020*, 2020. Bronze, paint, 17 1/2 x 92 1/2 x 46 3/4 inches.

These acrylic paintings, all dated 2021, range in size from just under two feet to nearly ten feet high. They are painted freehand, without masking. The imagery is clear and legible, and the coloration refined, with deep blue backgrounds and a limited palette of earth tones, all specially formulated by the artist. Only one work, *LIFT* (2021), brings in an expanded color spectrum. The exquisitely smooth surfaces recall the billboards and advertising poster surfaces the artist used to tag in his youth. The two paintings and one sculpture on the first floor all feature *COMPANION*, the skull-and-crossbones-headed Mickey Mouse-like ringleader of the KAWS pantheon. *COMPANION 2020* (2020) is a 92 1/2-inch-long sculpture of our hero lying flat on his stomach, face subsumed by the floor, and arms by his sides with hands up, resembling a relaxed body at physical therapy. If you look at him from behind his feet he appears to be flying, sans cape, but seeing him collapsed as you enter the gallery conveys a sense of communal exhaustion. The central painting is *SPOKE TOO SOON* (2021), in all caps, like all the artist's titles and character names. They are declarative and seemingly shouted, but the lack of an exclamation mark brings the tone down; they also feel like snippets of unspoken self-reflection, as in a cartoon word balloon. Here, *COMPANION* struggles for his life under an avalanche of cloud-like, multi-hued, rocks. Only his gloved hands are visible, the right one grabbing the rocks and the left reaching up for help. On the right, *NIGHT SWIM* (2021) seems related to *TIDE* discussed above, though the moon is gone and only the back of *COMPANION*'s dusky pink head is visible, the water up to his neck.

The second floor features two rooms with separate storylines. In the north gallery, three large paintings present a competition involving two of the artist's Michelin Man-like *CHUMs*. At the left, in *SO CLOSE* (2021), pink *CHUM* uses a branch to lift himself out of blue-colored, pudding-like muck with his right hand while gesturing with his left. The signature KAWS x'd-out eyes betray no emotion or distress, although slug-like peach squiggles emanating from his head reflect cartooning conventions of flung sweat and effort. Directly across the room, the same-sized *SO FAR* (2021) finds red *CHUM* in a similar predicament, except that his branch has snapped, and he sinks into the morass. Cartoonish force lines abound. Such pictures

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recall grand Romanticist scenes of nature posing a bodily threat, such as Girodet's *Une Scène de Déluge* of 1806 in the Louvre, with its family members desperately clinging to a tree amidst a great tempest. But the central painting, *NEW RIVALDS* (2021) finds the two CHUMs together, the red one exhausted, defeated, and seated on the ground at left and the successful pink CHUM contentedly sponging the blue goo off him at right. A blasted tree trunk—another familiar motif of the sublime and the power of fate and God from Romantic art—lies in the left middle ground. Miasmic pink and orange vapors flow across the scene in five segments, a decorative overlay on this strange scene that, admittedly, is closer to *American Ninja Warrior* reality TV competitions than analogic ruminations on the decrepitude of the male body politic from the 19th century, despite their Salon-sized, history painting scale. The other second-floor room presents a seven-image meta-narrative involving pink CHUM painting a portrait of red CHUM, who then takes a picture of pink CHUM on a cell phone pretending to paint the portrait, in addition to various versions of the portrait, some bobbing in water. If you think that sounds compelling and confusing in equal measure—it is.

The north gallery on the third floor continues the oppositional themes from below, in a playground face-off between two roughly six-foot-high bronze sculptures from 2021. In *TAKE*, the matte finish of the limp doll-like COMPANION figure in the left hand of the larger Grover-like BFF figure matches that of BFF's gloves and shoes. The dull sheen in BFF's pelt contrasts with the high shine of the white eyes, which glisten in the light like watery orbs. BFF torques his body, having ripped the doll from another's grasp, perhaps. Across the room, in *SHARE*, all is dark charcoal except for the small, floppy BFF figure's eyes and nose in the hands of the tall COMPANION, who stands rigidly, his right hand of the front of his waist, looking slightly upward, a reprise of the Rockefeller Center work. The sculptures not only inhabit gently ethical narratives, but also are high in craft, especially patination and polish. For KAWS, surface treatment is as important to his plastic work as it was to Japanese netsuke artists—and of course Japan was where he got the ideas for his designs and production methods. The artisanal nature of KAWS's sculpture—whether in small-scale toys, figurines, human-sized groupings like these, or monumental public works—is critical to the design.

Paintings on this floor, where COMPANION, like a modern Odysseus, wades through waters, climbs up an embankment, and then contemplates a grave-like pit, complete the journey. The show ends with *LIFT* (2021), in which a monumental purple CHUM crowd surfs above ten diminutive and variously colored CHUMs who bear him aloft. They are reminiscent of the joyous dancing bears in Grateful Dead iconography; multi-colored puffy clouds abound, and the mood is celebratory.

Will KAWS's broad audience appreciate the artist's attempts to complicate his creations through tales of situational stress, competition, meditations on modes of visibility and artistic creation, ethics of ownership, and strain leading to communal uplift? The upper floor ends up hopeful, buoyant, a corrective to the strife and exhaustion on the floors below. Like Disney before him, KAWS has developed a visual language that speaks, nearly universally, to our time—no small achievement. Whether he can channel that to transmit deeper truths and aspirations seems a worthy and unifying gambit in our fractious age.