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Barrie, Thomas: *KAWS: 'When somebody looks at my work and talks about "street art", I wonder what they're looking at'*
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KAWS: 'When somebody looks at my work and talks about "street art", I wonder what they're looking at'

In a world of grail-buys and commercial collabs, one artist rose above the rest. But for all the blue-chip auctions and superstar buyers, KAWS tells GQ he could never have planned it – not in the 1990s, when he made New York his urban canvas, and nor still today, as his ubiquitous 'Companion' enters the stratosphere

By **Thomas Barrie**

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KAWS

Were you to ever visit the home studios of K-pop sensations and BTS members Suga, J-Hope or RM – living out the wildest dreams of a legion of teenagers in the process – you might be surprised to find their shelves, bedside tables and cabinets decked out not with Grammys or MTV Awards, but with pint-sized vinyl statuettes of a character who looks a bit like the basement-dwelling cousin of Mickey Mouse. The bandmates own dozens, enough to assemble a plastic Lilliputian version of the Terracotta Army. Known as Companions, the figurines are the work of the artist KAWS and if a plethora of fan sites are to be believed (and these stans do their work; there are pictures), then RM alone owns KAWS collectibles numbering somewhere in the mid-double figures. It would be safe to assume KAWS was BTS's favourite artist.



KAWS

“They’re fascinating,” KAWS says of the group, whom he met in Korea after the septet posted their collections on social media. “Oh, my God. Their reach is beyond... When you become aware of it, you’re just like, ‘Oh, my God.’ People are fanatical about them.”

People are fanatical about KAWS too. An artist working at the tectonic intersection between branding, couture, installation, sculpture and retail, he can count Shepard Fairey, Virgil Abloh and Takashi Murakami among his close peers. Kids around the world covet his creations; Pharrell Williams and producer Swizz Beatz each own KAWS pieces and Justin Bieber is rumoured to have anonymously spent millions on his work. Consistently taking recognisable icons of pop culture – The Simpsons, say, or Mickey Mouse or SpongeBob SquarePants – and reinterpreting them in playful and subversive ways, KAWS understands how to turn heads at a time when human attention is at a premium, perhaps better than any other working artist. If branding and concept are the two most important elements in becoming a world-conquering artist in 2021, then KAWS is one of the few to have mastered both and he pairs them with an in-depth, academic understanding of the history of art.



KAWS

And yet, for someone as high profile and sought-after by collectors as he is, KAWS is quick to dismiss questions about the value of his work. “You’re not making the work to sell it at auction,” he explains. “That work – if you’re talking about a particular work that went for a record price – was made over ten years before.” “The KAWS Album” was created in 2005; of course he wasn’t thinking about possible 2019 auction prices. “This is my body of work. And everything I make falls into that history of the work. You have to guide that, because it’s going to be stuck with you, 20 years from now.”

For KAWS, although he might not want to acknowledge it openly, every collaboration is a chance to increase or decrease his reputation. Hit gold with a sneaker collaboration and rappers will drop your name into their verses; release a dud with a brand that feels forced or overly focus-grouped and the queue to cop your next vinyl toy might be that much shorter. With that in mind, KAWS says he turns down projects every week. “I’m interested in making good things. I’m not interested in just creating buzz for a company. You can do a bad project with a global brand and totally take away from your image.” In previous interviews, he has spoken about treating his characters as protectively as if they were members of his family.

Ask KAWS about his influences and he’ll reel off a list of 20th-century and contemporary artists, most of whom have recognisably graphic styles: “Martín Ramírez. Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. HC Westermann. Chris Johanson. Harry Dodge. Robert Crumb. Peter Saul.” He pauses. “I’m just looking around. Ken Price. Lee Quiñones. Joyce Pensato...” It’s a deep breadth of knowledge that belies any notion that KAWS is somehow not a “serious” artist because he works with brands. When I put the names of three artists mentioned as comparisons to him in other profiles, he’s incredulous. “Can you promise to abandon all the stuff you read?”

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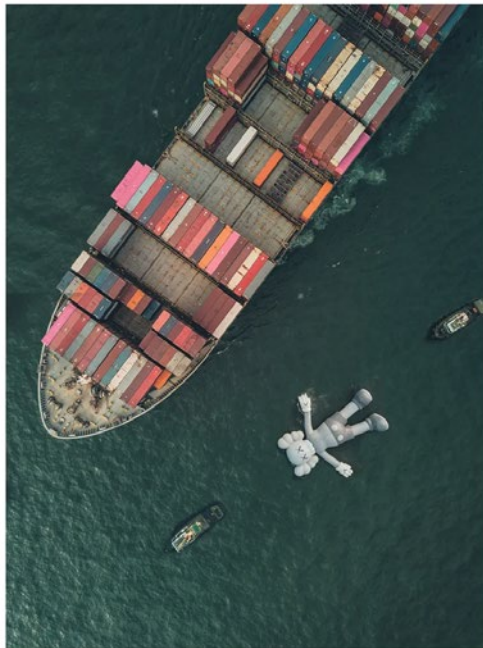
The same goes for the labels attached to what he does. “I went from being called a graffiti artist to a ‘street artist’,” he says, “and it was just other people’s words.” So was the street-art label an attempt by commercial galleries to legitimise graffiti? “Honestly, when somebody looks at my work now and talks about ‘street art’, I just wonder what the fuck they are looking at. I don’t get offended. I just feel bad that they’re so tunnel-vision.”

That makes sense. The world moved on years ago and so did KAWS’ practice. The difference between shop, street and gallery is now minimal. In the catalogue for a new retrospective of his work published by the Brooklyn Museum, *What Party*, curator Anne Pasternak writes about how “KAWS’ practice recognises that artworks can occupy multiple realms – the aesthetic and the transcendent, the commodified and the free”. This is certainly true, but it might be more accurate to describe his artwork as occupying all realms at once.

In 1995, if KAWS threw up a tag on the side of a Jersey City skate shop, chances are nobody outside Jersey City would ever see it. Now, he might do a limited run of sweatshirts with that same shop and they can be in the hands of a teenager in Singapore within hours. His work is hyper-commodified and utterly global and though the context might change, the iconography – the Companions and the pop culture references – remains the same. And that global appeal can be seen in the way the reception of his work has become more homogenous over the past two decades. Where once, he says, streetwear brands in Japan were more amenable than American labels to the idea of collaborating with an artist on an item of clothing, now there’s no discernible difference. “I don’t think there’s a brand that really doesn’t approach artists, at this point.”

Pasternak, the museum curator, goes on to note KAWS’ three million followers on Instagram. His output is about as online as art can be without being literally virtual and he has always been quick to embrace new media to raise his profile and to distribute the work (even as far back as 1996, KAWS says, he was active on the early online graffiti message boards Art Crimes and 12ozProphet. “I remember kids being like, ‘You’re crazy for talking about what you’re doing online, because you’re gonna get arrested’”).

It's a surprise, then, when KAWS admits he has no interest – yet – in getting involved in the art world's latest tulip mania, NFTs. "I love that it exists. I think there'll be tons of really intelligent uses for it. I personally haven't wanted to make an NFT. I wouldn't be opposed to it, but I don't feel the impulse to jump in for the sake of time." He has, however, been dabbling in another virtual medium. In March last year, about a fortnight before Covid-19 hit in full, KAWS launched a collaboration with the augmented reality platform Acute Art via its app. Free to download, the app allows users to turn the space around them into a virtual gallery by dropping KAWS artworks onto surfaces recognised by their phone's camera (they can also choose from works by Olafur Eliasson, Lu Yang and about half a dozen others). "I was always sceptical about working digitally," admits KAWS. "I didn't want to make something that seemed like a cliché, but meeting the guys from Acute got me really interested. Suddenly, everyone has access to the sculptural thing through their phone." KAWS did a similar collaboration with Travis Scott – fans could "place" his design for the cover of the rapper's single "The Scotts" somewhere and they would hear a sample of the new song.



KAWS

And when you think about it, augmented reality is the closest most people will ever come to owning a work by KAWS. In one move, the master of mass distribution expanded his market infinitely, starting a whole new dialogue with the public. And it's not hard to imagine seven teen idols rushing to download the app during their downtime in Seoul. "It really opened my eyes to the possibilities," says KAWS. "I just think there's so much potential for fun."