

ArtForum

Crow, Thomas: *KAWS*

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## KAWS

Thomas Crow on KAWS

Brooklyn Museum

By Thomas Crow ☒

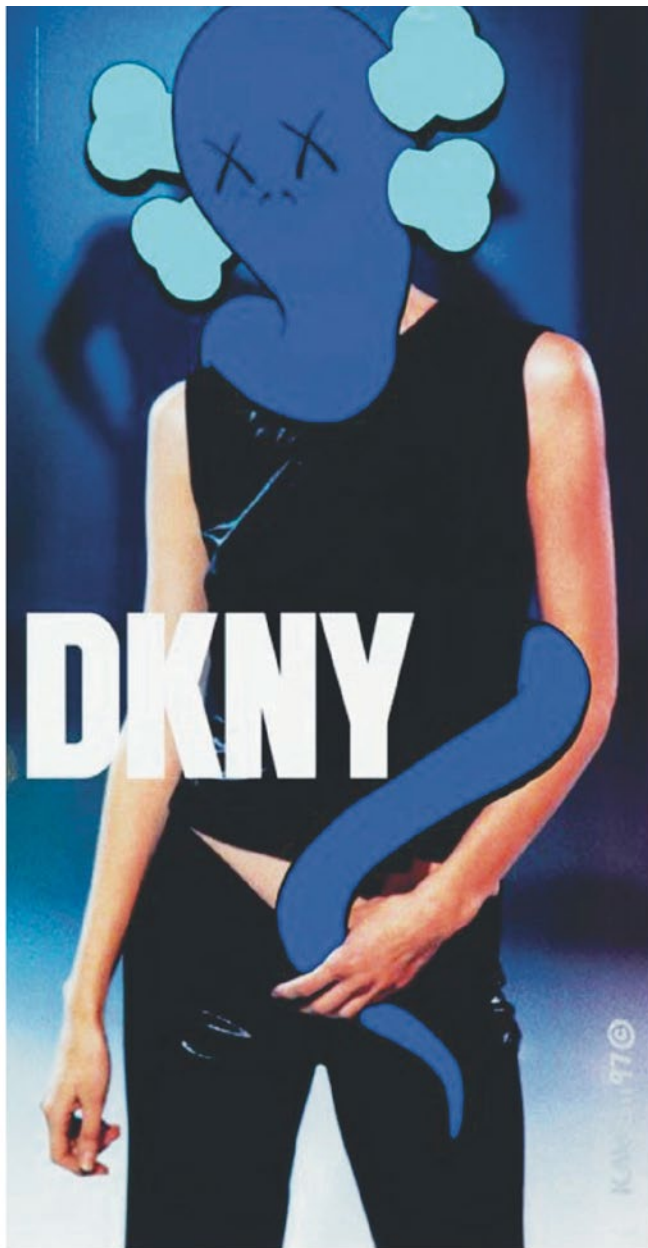


View of "KAWS: WHAT PARTY," 2021. From left: *M2*, 2000; *Companion*, 2010; *Companion (Resting Place)*, 2013. Photo: Michael Biondo.

Curated by Eugenie Tsai

**THERE IS A TRADITIONAL BELIEF** in Japanese households that deceased parents, siblings, and children linger close at hand, remaining nearby as members of the family and a comfort to the living. Newer, more eclectic sects hold that even departed pets stay with their owners as reassuring companions. The artist Brian Donnelly, known by his teenage graffiti handle KAWS, created his signature character and virtual alter ego, Companion, in the late 1990s at the invitation of Tokyo toymaker Bounty Hunter. There being the obvious antecedent of Takashi Murakami transforming the characters that populate his art into more modest collectibles in three dimensions, Donnelly's vinyl figurine—dressed in the buttoned shorts, white gloves, and oversize shoes of Mickey Mouse—distinguishes itself by being dead.

Not so dead, of course, that it cannot get around and engage in a range of affecting activities (Donnelly calls it “very much alive”), but tending toward understandable melancholy and occasional moments of utter loss and despair at being severed from the living. Companion announces its condition by possessing for a head a bald skull bearing the crossbones of toxic warning labels (and myriad other uses) as bulbous appendages that morph into suggestions of ears or clown-like tonsured hair. The single row of upper teeth forms a sort of scalloped fringe at the neckline, while a pair of incised X’s replace the eyes, this being a long-standing cartoon convention for indicating a dead character—or at least one knocked into deep unconsciousness. Donnelly underscored the morbidity of the sign by repeating it on the back of each glove.



KAWS, *Untitled (DKNY)*, 1997, acrylic on found advertising poster, 49 7/8 × 25 7/8”.

All the subsequent modes of Companion, as Donnelly merged it with a range of child avatars (e.g., Pinocchio) and pop-culture icons (e.g., characters from *Star Wars*), can be traced in the elegantly clarifying installation of the KAWS retrospective, curated by Eugenie Tsai, at the Brooklyn Museum. The first work encountered by visitors to the show, in the museum lobby, is *Along the Way*, an example of the transformation to a monumental scale that Companion had undergone by 2013. One upright figure, eighteen feet tall, consolingly supports a slumping, exhausted, or infirm twin, both versions fabricated from fitted, polished wood, in much the same way that Paul McCarthy grotesquely enlarged his related, more intricate travesties of Disney's *Snow White*. A suite of cognate wooden Companions occupies the rotunda gallery upstairs, which culminates the exhibition itinerary, all the earlier iterations in drawing and sculpture in varying scales, guises, and materials having made their appearances.

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At the show's outset, a vitrine presents Donnelly's impressive teenage graffiti designs on paper, along with some vintage photographs of their large-scale translation onto the billboards of his native Jersey City, followed by his first staging of the death's-head as signature motif via an inventive reimagining of places where a graffiti writer might make a mark. Dirty train yards and highway overpasses were one thing; clean transparent casings of ads on Manhattan phone booths and bus shelters were another, platforms ripe for the picking by an enterprising writer who possessed the purloined key. Donnelly's method was to lift the hinged outer frame, remove the sheet inside, take it back to the studio and alter it with acrylic paint, then reinsert it later. Passersby then encountered enticing fashion models entwined with snakelike creatures topped with the standard warning of morbid toxicity (he had hit on the motif while bombing a New Jersey billboard advertising Marlboro cigarettes).



KAWS, *Untitled (Captain Morgan)*, 1995, spray paint on billboard. Installation view, Jersey City, New Jersey.

Warm relations with other writers opened onto a network far beyond what the average illustration graduate of the New York's School of Visual Arts, toiling in a Manhattan animation studio, might have had in view, and Donnelly seized on it with little hesitation. In 1997, a bartered painting gained him passage to Japan, where his reputation went before him. Despite the language barrier, Donnelly found sympathetic allies amid the emergent street-fashion, manga-and-anime underground of Tokyo's Ura-Harajuku district, spurring the transmutation of his prehensile avenger preying on rapidly aspirational fashion into Companion, a benignly demonic inhabitant of the afterlife.

There is a charmed aspect to Donnelly's biography, whereby he appears over and over to fall into the right opportunity at the right moment. But the warm reception he enjoyed in Japan surely depended on the combination of attractive aptitudes he brought with him. The exacting aesthetics of streetwear brands such as A Bathing Ape in design, workmanship, materials, and provenance derived in part from a discriminating connoisseurship of vintage American brands (much the same phenomenon had occurred in the postwar UK). It could be said that in Donnelly young Tokyo designers had found that ideal sense of America in a person, a quality evident in his unfailing practical ingenuity, his demotic sympathies, his exactitude with detail, his reservoir of manual skills. Among the gifts he garnered in return was the metaphysics that allowed him to populate an afterlife in the way that supernatural beings, variations on traditional *yōkai*, haunt manga, anime, and Japanese occultism in general.



View of "KAWS: WHAT PARTY." From left: *New Morning*, 2012; *Gone*, 2020. Photo: Michael Biondo.

This affinity is brought to the fore in Donnelly's most dramatic variation on his signature character: Flayed Companion, whose skull, brain, body cavity, and rosy musculature are exposed on one side of its vertical axis. There arises the paradox that the character's outward marks of death seem to disguise vibrantly robust internal organs, including a nakedly staring eye. But secret health appears less the message than the revelation that these appealing mouse surrogates possess an inwardly monstrous and grotesque aspect akin to traditionally threatening demons. A black Companion, revealing its inner anatomy in bright, nearly Day-Glo colors, only intensifies that effect. The word *flayed* indicates a violence far from the friendly connotations of educational toys like the Visible Man—popular in the '60s and later emulated by Damien Hirst—which likewise exposed the organs under the skin. In the realm of anthropology, the flaying of a supernatural being recalls most forcefully the ancient Mexican Xipe Totec, god of both renewal and disease, whose annual rites culminated in a splendid, feted impersonator himself being flayed. *New Morning*, a 2012 canvas nearby, reinforces the sacrificial mood with its symmetrical representation of the Companion's Disney-esque gloved hands severed at the wrist, wounds gaping.

The black semi-skinned Companion perhaps qualifies as a double-natured demigod in its own right, taking an independent place alongside the new beings subsequently created by Donnelly to fill out his cast of characters, the similarly named Chum (based on the rotund Michelin Man) and BFF (a *Sesame Street* type in a feathery pink pelt). In one sculptural group titled *Gone*, 2020, Companion cradles a supine BFF in its arms, demonstrating that there can still be degrees of deadness in KAWS's proximate heaven. These consistencies distinguish the characters' appeal from the typical charms of Japanese *kawaii*, cuteness, chiefly by the necessary absence of wide, beseeching eyes. Companion is indeed in the habit of bringing its hands up to shield or cover its face, as in the huddled posture of *Separated* from the same year.



KAWS, *Mirror*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 90 × 72".

Tsai has placed a large embodiment of that pathetic figure at the lonely center of the outside gallery at the turnaround of the linear hang. This isolated, disconsolate Companion is overlooked by an imposing grid of identical canvases, all truncated, symmetrical views of Chum's skull face at its grimmest, crossed by multiple X-marked hands. In striking contrast to the Companion's dun-colored aspect, this array releases the intense saturation and contrasts of Donnelly's cartoon palette, both in the Chum panels and in the two large and impressive paintings that face them, which are composed of layered, less specific optical events. The visitor has been prepared for this shrine-like epiphany by a processional corridor leading from the advertising graffiti at the entrance, along which hang the well-known pastiches of popular television cartoons *The Simpsons* ("Kimpsons"), *The Smurfs* ("Kurfs"), and *Spongebob SquarePants* ("Kawsbob"), likewise distinguished from the originals by the signature X's for eyes.



KAWS, *Untitled (Kimpsons)*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 80 × 80".

Beyond ushering these familiar personages into Companion's nearby afterlife, Donnelly seemingly brings little to these subjects, but his translations boast an exceptional density of hue and precision of contour, both of which evoke the aesthetic of the traditional animator's cel painting—now a throwback in that computer-dominated industry. Retaining those qualities when rendering them on canvas at scale entails applying layer after layer of acrylic pigment to achieve what appear to be flatly uninflected areas, divided by fluent lines of subtly varying width that Donnelly applies by hand (his calibrations of color in order to represent shadows may be the most impressive component of the exercise). The outcomes of this exactitude, in contrast with the obvious comparisons to Murakami or Koons, eschew the complicit wink of irony, just as they largely sidestep sexuality and worldliness in favor of their own otherworldliness. Donnelly may be entering middle age by the calendar, but the art remains as it has always been, free of adult supervision, with no one to answer to and no justifications required.

*“KAWS: WHAT PARTY” is on view at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, through September 5.*