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KAWS

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It's hard to escape any form of communication in a world littered with signs and images. Offline or online, information or advertising, monologue or dialogue – every day is ruled by some form of exchange. So much so that we don't even realize it's happening. How has it become so subliminal? Perhaps we've become so used to this overload of data that we've developed an indifference to it. For sure is that it is under these conditions that graffiti thrives – building on a secret competition between rival signers. The act of spray painting is not necessarily political in the sense of criticizing current political issues. But it reflects a society driven by desires provoked through manipulation. Critics complain that graffiti is nothing more than scribblings and letters. But is it less meaningful than all those billboards and posters decorated with logos and brand names?

KAWS entered our urban landscape as a graffiti writer in the early 1990s. He left his mark on everything from water towers to freight trains. Then one day, he imprinted his writing on to advertising campaigns. Fascinated by their provocative appeal, he developed this approach further, eventually focusing on ads inside phone shelters and bus stops. The result is not necessarily more or less aesthetically pleasing, but rather, an intervention that questions our perception of everyday life. And it also puts the spotlight on the art, and KAWS himself.

Today, almost twenty-five years later, KAWS can barely believe how his life and career has evolved. He is now one of the pioneers of the Art & Toys movement, filling the gap between art and commerce through collaborations with brands such as A Bathing Ape, Supreme and Nike. He also opened ORIGINALFAKE, a store in Tokyo that sold art products and clothing, while painting canvases that exhibit in galleries and museums worldwide.

We sat down with the American artist to discuss the early days of his career, Pharrell Williams's influence, and doing business in Japan.

Wertical: Graffiti was still kind of a new movement when you started doing it in 1990. How did you get into it?
KAWS: It was actually just something that was obviously around. But at that time, it wasn't in galleries as part of exhibitions. Kids in my neighborhood were doing it, as well as the ones I skated with. It was there and accessible.

WE: And in fact unmissable for you. How long before you decided to go by the pseudonym KAWS?
K: Yes, quite soonish. I think, it was 1992, 1993 when I started with the name.

WE: Is there a meaning attached to it?
K: No. I just liked the letters and the way they interact with each other. Later on, I grew to like it more because I realized, with this name, it's not like being Brian Donnelly.

WE: Definitely not, that's for sure. Pseudonyms do hide your real identity, which you need within the illicit world of graffiti. Now you are working in the established world of art. People know both your pseudonym and your official name. Did this ever cause problems with authorities?
K: No, it's so long ago. I haven't done anything on the streets for more than ten years. And yes, it's graffiti, but not a real crime like murder. Plus, in the end, the advertisers were even happy that I painted over them, so attention that could have been threatening for me unexpectedly turned out to be positive.

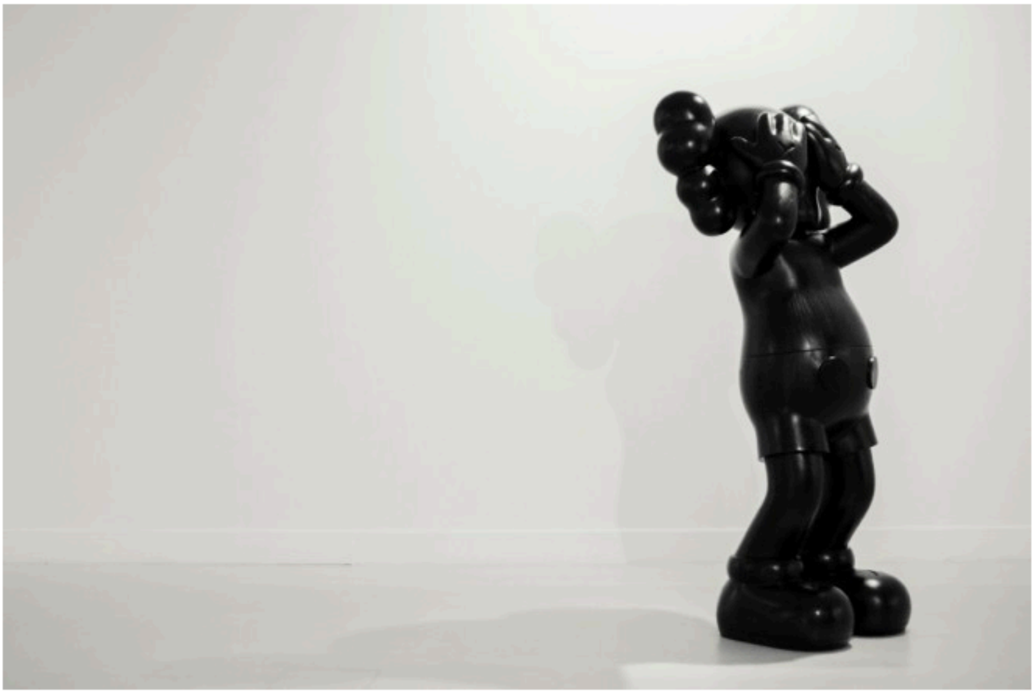
WE: How did you start painting advertising?
K: There were a lot of billboards where I grew up. One was directly on the highway. I always thought this one would be a great spot to do a graffiti piece on. One day, I just did it and decided to incorporate my writing into the ad instead of painting over it. When I looked at the result afterwards and compared it to other graffiti works, I liked the way the ad placed the graffiti within a time frame. When you see ads, you know from which time they derive from. Calvin Klein, Christy Turlington, for example, that was in the 1990s. You know that as it relates to a particular look and feel.

WE: Were you already thinking of capturing a certain time frame back then?
K: Yes, I was thinking how it relates to people when they walk by. In the 1990s in New York, there was a sort of explosion of advertising, with DKNY for example, that covered all the sides of buildings. Ads were everywhere and you saw the same ad over and over and over again. I thought, if you could interrupt it, put your work into it and infiltrate the campaign, it's maybe going to bring the advertisers back to thinking about their strategies and values they pass on.

WE: Was it kind of a trend within the graffiti world to work on advertising?
K: No, not really. Barry McGee was already changing bus shelters. But he did all that in his hometown of San Francisco. However, he was also the one who gave me my first key to open the shelters in Manhattan.

WE: So, it became less of a problem to take the posters. But how did you proceed?
K: I would steal a bunch, maybe about 10 to 15 posters, and take them home to paint them there. When I finished, I would go out, put my new posters up and take the existing ones out.

WE: So you didn't bring the posters back to the specific spots you got them from?
K: No, I brought them to locations where I wanted to see them, locations where I expected them to cause an interesting interaction.



WE: As a graffiti artist you have to work quickly. Working on advertising at home changed that. Did that influence your way of working?
K: Yes, I became less and less interested in what I could do in a few minutes on the streets. I started to become more interested in creating this sort of new imagery. And this isn't anything I would like to do under stress. I would rather created time-consuming interactions that looked like an advertisement to confuse people.

WE: With good reason. You made the interactions on ads look so perfect that some people maybe didn't even realize they were re-edited.
K: That was the point. At that time, there wasn't this frenzy of artists collaborating with companies. So you didn't expect an artist working on an advertisement at all. So it definitely stood out.

WE: And so the impact was still the same as with graffiti, but the method was different.
K: Exactly. The communication was the same. Also, the point of displaying your work to the public at surprising locations is the same.

WE: How did you choose which advertisements to paint on?
K: It's advertising that I like.

WE: For their aesthetics or their potential to criticize their own existence?
K: I really liked them for their good photography and strong imagery. The black and white ads by Calvin Klein were great. I was never entering them in the sense of ad-busters. People refer to me as doing ad-busters, but I am not.

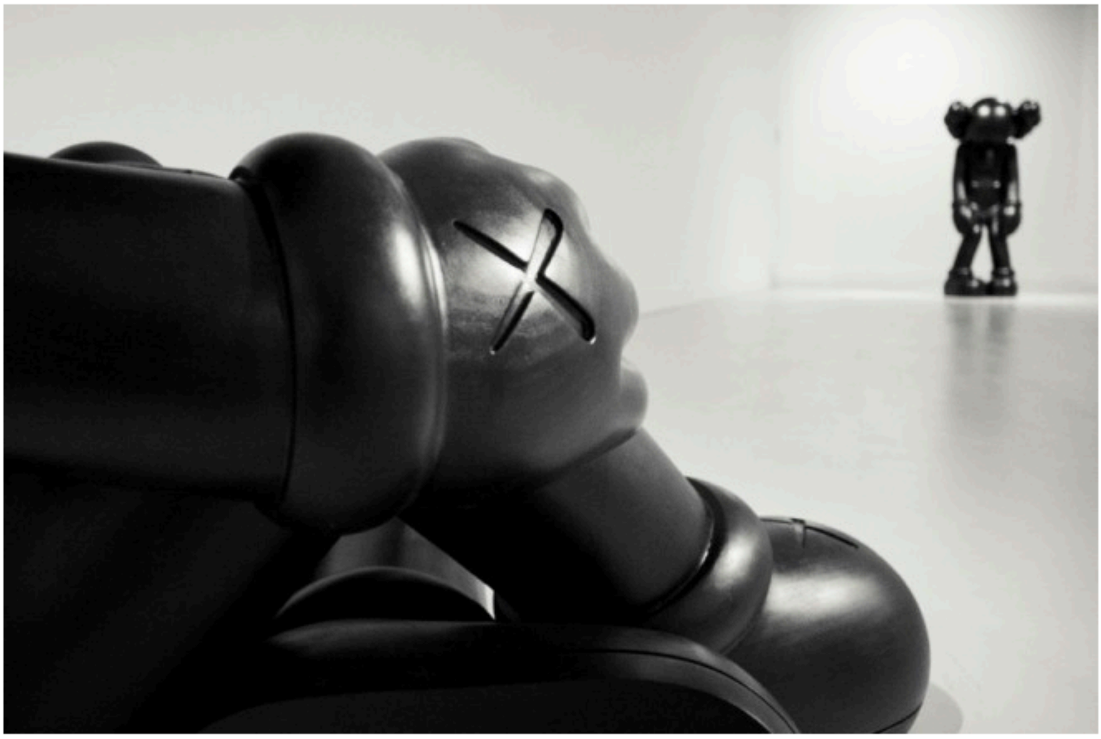
WE: At least not consciously.
K: Yes, you could look at them as criticism. But when you grow up in graffiti and work around in the streets, there is a possibility of getting arrested. Everybody says that what you are doing is wrong. And at the same time, you see advertisers doing the identical thing. So you ask yourself what the difference is, especially as it's the neighborhood you are personally living in. When I stepped out of my door and saw a five-story high ad, I started to wonder if I could put it as game.

WE: Which you finally did.
K: Exactly. But when I was invited to be part of the Thanksgiving Day parade, the game reached another climax. Next to the parade itself, I was working on the visual for the communication of the event. And they wrapped my graphics all over the MTA shuttle trains in Manhattan. I thought it was so ironic.

WE: Indeed. How long was it in traffic?
K: I think for more than even a month.

WE: Sounds like a graffiti dream.
K: Yes.

WE: Are you still doing graffiti today?
K: No.



WE: Other graffiti writers such as Futura or Rammellzee, who entered the official art market too, went more abstract. You are using shapes that remind one of the bubble style.
K: Yes, that can be. It totally depends on your point of reference. If you are familiar with graffiti, you'll see it. Other people don't see that at all.

WE: Do you collect art yourself today?
K: Yes. I like to keep other art around.

WE: What kind of art?
K: It's all over the place. A lot of the stuff I have is from Chicago artists. Or, for example, from Peter Saul, Mike Kelley… and the works of friends of mine like Erik Parker, Todd James and Barry McGee. It's whatever I find interesting. A lot of it are drawings, but I definitely go to different levels.

WE: Are the works you collect a source of inspiration?
K: Yes, indirectly. I love to have them around. And when you look at the original work, you kind of get to understand the process. It's so different than seeing them flat in a book. Some works are unprintable.

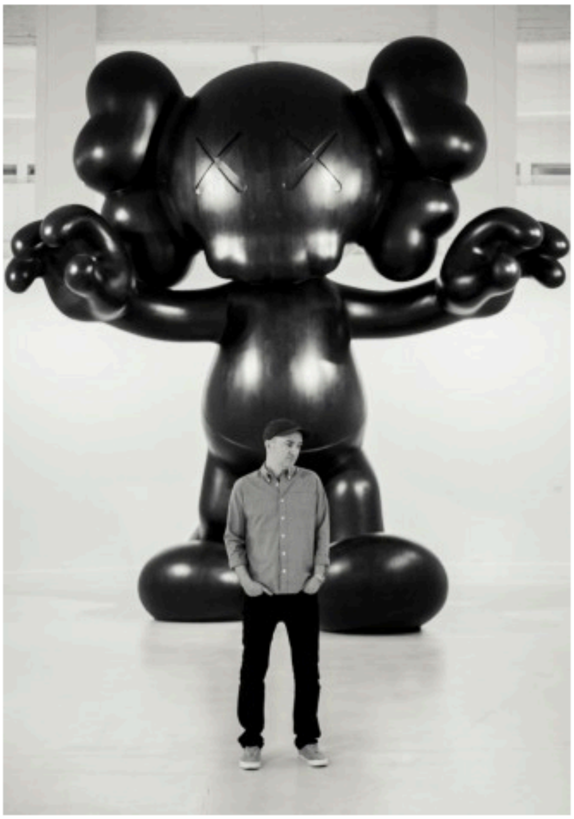
WE: Have you actually ever dreamed of becoming an artist yourself?
K: No, never. Honestly, when I was little, I sucked at school. My future didn't look bright at all. There was no plan for me. And once I got into art, I just saw it as a hobby.

WE: But it's definitely more than that today.
K: Strange to say, but yes, absolutely.

WE: Looking at your career from the outside, it seems like the perfect plan.
K: Yes. But there couldn't be a plan. I also get emails from artists asking me for advice. But I can't even give advice. It's the climate, the time – it all changed since I began. There are other things you need to look at now and think of.

WE: Do you ask for advice? Do you have a manager?
K: No, that would be a nightmare. Everything that I have done was my personal decision. For good or bad, there are some projects that I thought afterwards that were unexpectedly good and there are other projects that I wish never happened. I wish I could erase them. But the thought of having somebody else making those decisions is not an option for me.

WE: So what was one of your most far-reaching decisions?
K: To travel to Japan in the 1990s while people were asking me why I was wasting so much energy on Japan. They thought it was too far away and nobody would see what I was doing there.



WE: But there was definitely a shift of interest later on.
K: A profound shift. That was thanks to connoisseurs like Nigo and musicians such as Jay Z, Kanye West and Pharrell Williams visiting his house. Nigo influenced streetwear and its accompanying lifestyle a lot. And he had my paintings on the wall.

WE: What did Nigo do to be so influential?
K: At first, I didn't even understand what Nigo, the founder of A Bathing Ape, was doing when he was working on his shops. He treated streetwear as if it was Prada. In fact, I was even asking myself what he thought he was. But then I started to understand. He is a manifester of aesthetics, style and trend. And he was one of the forerunners of people collecting art toys, cars and other stuff. Collecting is a big thing about him. The only thing I was wondering about was that he and his fellow opinion leaders didn't collect art. None of them was even thinking about it. They would easily buy a toy or a sneaker, but at that time, they didn't know what to do with drawings. So I came up with the idea of the Package Painting series. It was a little experiment trying to bridge the gap between toys and art. So I packed unique works in blister packs, letting them become both – a product and art. That was the first time Nigo bought my paintings and that got him thinking about art. So the dialogue got started and he commissioned me for a 9 foot by 5 foot canvas. Through this, I got kind of an exposure in a gallery room, as Nigo's home was a place where people met.

WE: But how did you end up in an official gallery room?
K: It happened naturally as well. I met Honor Fraser through Erik Parker, and Emmanuelle Perrotin was at Pharrell Williams's house when he saw my paintings first. Pharrell called me and put him on the phone with me. It was so awkward, for me, but I think for Emmanuel, too. He didn't even know who I really was at that time. This was 2006. But Pharrell pushed it and curated a show with me at Perrotin's gallery in Miami in 2008. So that's how it all happened. And I know Pharrell through Nigo.

WE: Your current museum show at the CAC Málaga is entitled FINAL DAYS. That sounds so… final. Do you plan to stop working on the series or with wooden sculptures?
K: {Laughs} No, I just thought that the new sculpture had kind of a dark feeling. I feel like a lot of things nowadays have a dark feeling. I always feel like that though. It just seems like everything gets more and more ridiculous whether it's the economy or your country. When you grow up you have this impression like everything is bright and eventually, just all of it becomes just worse and worse and worse.

WE: Yes, there are definitely big issues that we as society urgently need to solve. But at the same time, you should enjoy life, too. And that – speaking of your professional life – is something you deserve. Everything looks so perfect. You would be a perfect marketing guy. At least your career makes you look like that. And your artworks are the perfect advertisement for yourself.
K: Yes, like back in the day. Because if you look at graffiti, what is graffiti?

WE: True. It's advertising for yourself, using your pseudonym like a brand uses a logo.
K: Yes, it's all just communication.