

Los Angeles Times

Tag, this artist is definitely it



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KAWS becomes a brand name as his images appear on hip-hoppers' clothes and on gallery walls.

February 21, 2009

Over the course of a career that has variously infuriated anti-graffiti task force officers and enthralled Japanese street couture collectors -- meaning winning props from hip-hop superstars Kanye West and Pharrell Williams -- the pop artist KAWS has carved a unique niche for himself. The soft-spoken 34-year-old Jersey City native, born Brian Donnelly, created a new business model that bridges the high-low culture divide in ways that would have made steam come out of Andy Warhol's ears.

By parlaying vandalism into a brand identity as a purveyor of mass-produced collectible toys, KAWS became a bona fide subculture celebrity with a recognizable presence in street fashion.

But now, KAWS is at a career turning point. In spite of his renown in subcultural circles (which galleristas and museum directors have historically snobbed), he is now being mentioned in the same breath as pop art luminaries, such as Takashi Murakami, Keith Haring and Jeff Koons. And while KAWS has proven himself perfectly capable of trafficking his own pop offerings -- on skateboard decks, stickers, T-shirts and sneakers -- KAWS has infiltrated the rarefied world of institutional art after being held at arm's distance from it for much of his career. Pretty fly for a graf guy.

"When I grew up, I never thought I could enter a gallery," KAWS said over lunch at Chateau Marmont this week. "I looked at them as these pretentious places that did not welcome me."

On the heels of two exhibitions of his work at the Gering & Lopez Gallery in New York and Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin in Miami last year, an exhibition of KAWS' paintings and sculptures is set to open at Honor Fraser Gallery in Culver City tonight. "I Can't Feel My Face," a group show the artist curated, opens at the Royal/T gallery, also in Culver City, on Sunday. Later this year, KAWS' art will be included in a group show called "Plastic Culture" at London's Harris Museum and Art Gallery. And KAWS is scheduled to show new works in a solo show at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Connecticut in December 2010.

"Brian made the realization there's no distinction between the making of the art and placing it in the wider culture," said Harry Philbrick, director of the Aldrich. "It fits within a long tradition in the art world: Andy Warhol, Marcel Duchamp, artists who wanted to take art outside the confines of the museum and engage with the wider culture. Sometimes in commercial ways, sometimes in subversive ways."

Unlike Haring or Jean-Michel Basquiat, who were never accepted in the fraternity of hard-core graffiti artists, KAWS is an unreconstructed graffiti "writer" whose aerosol handiwork defaced billboards, freight trains and water towers.

But that changed in 1996 when one of his graffiti peers -- Barry McGee, a.k.a. Twist, another graf guy turned successful pop artist -- gave KAWS a skeleton key that opened up the glass advertising boxes on the sides of phone booths and bus kiosks. Concurrent with studying design and illustration at New York's School of Visual Arts, KAWS stopped writing his name on walls and began altering ads. He would steal ad posters and paint over them with a visual shorthand of symbols -- cartoon skulls with X-ed out eyes and serpentine spermatazoan shapes in pastel colors. Then he would carefully replace them.

That focus baffled his graffiti buddies but impressed the media, and KAWS' magazine clip file began to grow. Seeing no future in the ads, however, KAWS traveled to Tokyo in the late '90s. There, his underground renown resulted in a streetwear company offering him an opportunity to design a vinyl toy: Companion, a pop art-y send-up of Mickey Mouse with Xs for eyes. Saleswise, the toy took off. So KAWS went into business, paying manufacturing costs and selling the toys on his own website, kawsone.com. A lucrative cottage industry that cemented his reputation among hipster cognoscenti was born.

Around 2001, KAWS was brought into the sphere of Tomoaki "Nigo" Nagao, the visionary pop cultural maven behind the streetwear brand A Bathing Ape kawsone.com. After Nigo helped create packaging for an exhibition of KAWS' "Simpsons"-inspired paintings, KAWS and the designer collaborated on three seasons of BAPE (as A Bathing Ape is alternately known) clothing and shoes. And their wares began taking off in the hip-hop world. Circa 2004, Jay-Z, Jermaine Dupri and hit-making producer Pharrell Williams, among others, began appearing in videos and photo shoots wearing the candy-colored, limited edition street couture that Nigo and KAWS put out. Supply quickly outstripped demand, resulting in a glut of bootleg BAPE on EBay and circulating in sneakerhead communities.

Nigo has become one of the foremost collectors of the artist's work but also a close friend. "It was the best match of a creator with our brand of all the collaborations we've done," Nigo said in an e-mail. "I think it really helped that Brian already understood our brand before we started the collaboration -- he already belonged in our world."

Hip-hop's embrace of BAPE as a fashion flavor also injected KAWS' artwork into the culture. Suddenly, his most famous patrons became influencers like Williams, who owns dozens of pieces by the artist. Last year, the artist opened his up his collection to the Condé Nast advertising supplement Fashion Rocks. Pointing out KAWS' paintings inspired by SpongeBob SquarePants (with X-ed out eyes, naturally), Williams summed up the childlike appeal of much of the artist's work. "What I love about SpongeBob," Williams told the magazine, "is that he's basically a 6-year-old."

As well, Kanye West frequently bigs up KAWS on his blog. Last year, the hip-hop superstar commissioned him to customize a special edition of the album cover for his "808s & Heartbreak"; a billboard version wound up in New York's Times Square late last year, featuring pastel-hued KAWS serpents, skulls and squiggles enveloping the multi-platinum rapper-producer.

And the Virginia rap duo Clipse give the artist a shout-out on two songs they recorded for a recent mix-tape: "Now, X marks the spot on my graffitied walls / Statuettes' X eyes on those graffiti dolls / . . . / Say it's just be-KAWS."

Whitney Museum Council member Susan Hancock, a collector who owns several works by KAWS and operates the art space Royal/T, places his work in context of Murakami, a Tokyo-born pop savant whose work is inspired by Japanese manga comics.

"I consider KAWS the U.S. Murakami equivalent," Hancock said. "He is mimicking what is popular in today's world: SpongeBob, Smurfs, Simpsons, much like Murakami took off from the world of Japanese contemporary culture."

For his part, KAWS seems reluctant to characterize his emerging presence in the "art world" as a career reboot; he simply was ready to bring his paintings to an audience behind the sneakerheads and toy aficionados, he said. But he acknowledges that his new work appearing at Honor Fraser Gallery -- where pieces are priced between \$10,000 and \$85,000 -- represents a significant departure.

"This show is the first time there's nothing identifiable with my aesthetic except the palette and the way it's painted," KAWS said. "There's no X eyes. I feel like I'm at a point where I don't have to signal back to past works."

Then there are the heads in the show: three life-size, lifelike replicas of KAWS' noggin in his ubiquitous baseball cap, rendered in bronze and coated by Skittle-colored hues of auto body paint.

Was the aim to turn himself into one of his toys? "I wanted to put a personal part of myself into an object world," he said. "It's a severed head. You look under the neck and it's totally chopped. It's kind of like an offering."

By Chris Lee

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