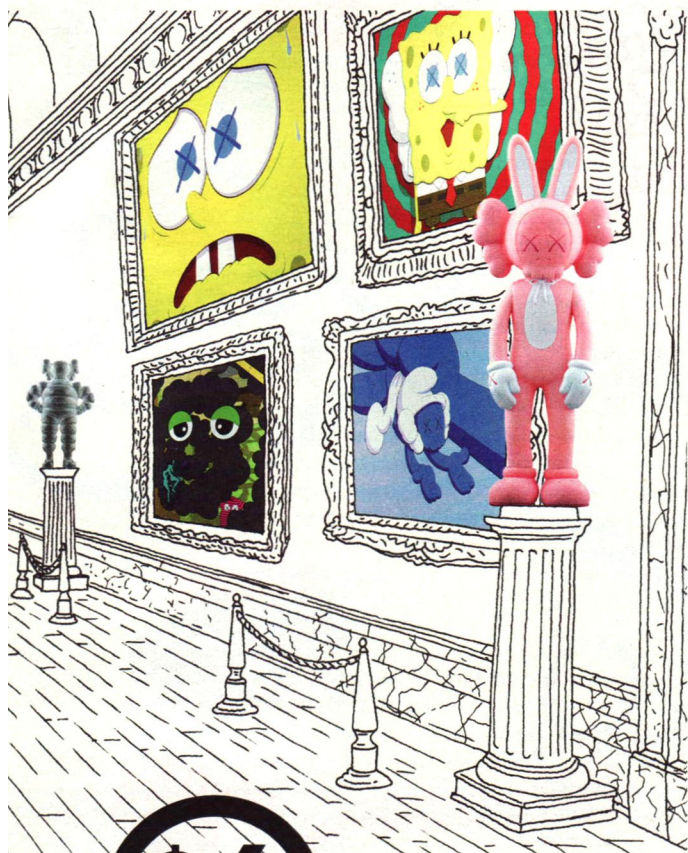


New Looks

An art entrepreneur makes his way into a new realm — the art world.



KAWS

At 33, Brian Donnelly is enjoying a successful art career. Working out of a studio in Brooklyn, he has sold paintings to Pharrell Williams, the rapper and producer; Nigo, the designer-entrepreneur; and Takashi Murakami, the international art star, among others. He has also created a variety of products including toys, apparel and even pillows — and indeed he has his own store, Original Fake, in Tokyo. He has also been widely known in the “street art” world for years; one of his early altered-phone-booth-ad posters recently traded hands on eBay for \$22,000. One thing Donnelly had not done until lately, however, is forge a relationship with a dealer or art gallery. This wasn’t because he shunned or had a problem with the traditional gallery system. He says it’s just that “nobody asked.”

But that has changed. Donnelly, who works under the name KAWS, has been taken on by the Gering & López Gallery in New York, where he’ll have a show this November. He will also exhibit a batch of paintings at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin in Miami in September and will have another solo exhibition early next year at Honor Fraser in Los Angeles. Sandra Gering, of Gering & López Gallery,

had not heard of Donnelly before another artist she works with included him in a group show last summer, but she is clearly smitten with Donnelly’s bright, clean, slightly off-kilter canvases that often riff on pop-culture figures like the Smurfs or the Simpsons. And she figures there’s another market for his work. “I think it needs to get out there in the art world,” she says.

It seems odd that someone already making a good living as an artist is only now being introduced to “the art world,” but Donnelly’s story may say something about the different ways creative work can acquire value these days. He studied painting and majored in illustration at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and during the 1990s he gained a certain underground notoriety for removing ads from Manhattan bus shelters and altering them — often adding a slightly disturbing skull-like image, with X’s for eyes — and then putting them back. Visits to Japan brought him into contact with a subculture of hustling young creators blurring the lines between design, art and business, and in 1999 he began producing plastic, toylike versions of his characters in addition to collaborating on products with companies like the skateboard brand DC Shoes and the fashion line Comme des Garçons. He gradually built a clientele for his paintings on his own, and images of his work traveled widely online.

John Jay, executive creative director at the ad agency Wieden & Kennedy, remembers meeting Donnelly in Japan and thinking that he had somehow skipped a career step. “But people don’t always understand,” Jay adds, “you don’t have to have a gallery to sell to international stars anymore.” Edward Winkleman, owner of the Winkleman Gallery in New York, offers a slightly different take. At edwardwinkleman.blogspot.com, he offers thoughtful observations and practical advice about overprotective gallerists, studio-visit strategies and the like. While the Internet is helping a growing number of artists get noticed, he says, most upstart artists still prefer to rely on a gallerist to connect with appropriate consumers (collectors). And Donnelly’s reputation-building and connection-making is pretty much what Winkleman advises many of his readers to do; he just did it in a different context — one in which selling your creativity is part of the job.

So why bother with galleries at all? Winkleman notes that it remains much harder for artists who operate outside the art-world structure to end up in museum collections, which is still seen as “the quintessential validation” by many. And surely a new market is part of the equation. Gering has been introducing Donnelly’s work to her clients since last summer, and “we’ve sold every painting we’ve brought into the gallery,” she says. The November show will consist of new sculptures (including 33 bronzed, painted renditions of his own head) and paintings; the works will be priced at \$25,000 and up.

Donnelly, who is surprisingly low-key and humble in person, adds a different point about wanting his work in a gallery: hardly anyone has seen his privately sold paintings up close. Even the work that shows up on the Internet, he says, ends up looking as if it could have been executed on a computer. “People really have no idea what they’re looking at,” he says. “I want them to be able to stand in front of the work.” ■

Illustration by Peter Arkle