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Former Jersey City graffiti artist KAWS' first solo museum exhibit opens

It was 97 degrees in Ridgefield, Connecticut, yesterday afternoon when friends of **KAWS** arrived at the **Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum**.

They disembarked a bus chartered by the artist -- **Jersey City native Brian Donnelly** -- waving pink and green fans in the shape of his iconic skull design. Marching down the hot pavement of a parking lot already at capacity, the artist's acquaintances entered galleries packed with dedicated fans armed with vinyl toys, stuffed animals and unblemished sneakers all still in their original packaging, all awaiting the artist's signature.

The capital letters K-A-W-S that Donnelly once anonymously scrawled on rooftops, bus stops and billboards in Jersey City and Manhattan are now a prized commodity. Scores of fans crowded beneath the former **graffiti artist's** largest work to date -- a double height mural of a segmented and abstracted SpongeBob SquarePants -- waiting for the courage or the opening to approach the artist with a pen in hand. The mural is rooted in graffiti but far less instantaneous. "Absolutely, it's connected," Donnelly said. "My joints hurt, I've been on scaffolding for two weeks."

Since the mural's completion, the Aldrich had kept the piece under wraps, the first image from the show released just three days ago.

As a teenager, Donnelly was quick to share his newest creations.

"I told them all the time," Donnelly said when asked if he told his parents when he tagged the neighborhood walls. "My mom would be upset about it but then my grandmother would say, 'You shouldn't be.'"

Soft-spoken in a black baseball cap and worn Vans, an unembellished buttoned-down shirt and dark denim jeans, Donnelly has more in common with the enigmatic

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monochromatic sculptures towering around him than the circling autograph seekers boldly dressed in the artist's designs, which are now resold on eBay as frequently as his prints and sculpture.

Not that KAWS seemed to mind. While he rejected the idea of spending the opening reception of his **first museum exhibition** signing items while seated at a table in the lobby, he was happy to shake hands and pose for pictures all afternoon, making his mark drawing smiles on the faces of his toy Bearbricks and for children sketching his Blitz character as quickly as its name implies. It had an effect; by the end of the day the Aldrich gift shop had sold out of KAWS merchandise.

While they're still in talks with Donnelly to create a limited edition work for the gift shop, the museum had two surprises in store: a sign-up sheet filled with a growing list of names to acquire the first monograph of the artist's work, "KAWS," to be published by Rizzoli in September -- only those who purchase through the Aldrich will receive an autographed copy -- and a previously unseen toy sculpture of Pinocchio and Jiminy Cricket manufactured by Medicom.

In a gallery focusing on the artist's relationship with consumerism, among ballet flats for Marc Jacobs and coin purses for Comme des Garçons, were old advertisements for Captain Morgan rum and CK One cologne defaced with the KAWS name and original skull design, both of which were conceived while tagging New Jersey walls and billboards.

"I don't think of boundaries like that when I create my work," he said.

While Donnelly hasn't created a work in New Jersey since graduating from New York's School of Visual Arts and moving to Manhattan in 1996, he hasn't ruled it out. "I love Jersey."

"KAWS" continues through Jan. 2 at the **Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum**.

Robb, Adam. "Former Jersey City graffiti artist KAWS' first solo museum exhibit opens." *The Jersey Journal*. Monday, June 28th 2010.