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KAWS opening causes a commotion in Culver City

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Saturday night's opening for the pop artist KAWS at Honor Fraser Gallery in Culver City was a mob scene: more like a rock concert than any cultural gathering La Cienega's gallery row has ever seen.

The line to get in to see new works by KAWS — the Brooklyn-based graffiti artist turned subcultural celebrity who was [profiled](#) in The Times last week — began forming around 5 p.m., an hour before the gallery opened. By early evening, it was hundreds of people deep, thronged with young people in backwards baseball caps and high-end streetwear — the sneakerheads and street couture fanatics who are KAWS' primary constituents. The queue for the artist's first West Coast show stretched down La Cienega and around the corner onto Venice Boulevard, some 700 yards at its longest.

"I showed up half an hour before opening and the distended line had already snaked its way around the entire block," reads a posting on the online magazine [thehundreds.com](#). "The sidewalk was buzzing with anxiety, honking horns, swelling chaos.... I've never seen a commotion like this for an art exhibit."



On display were new works by KAWS (government name Brian Donnelly): his riffs on SpongeBob SquarePants and the Smurfs ("Kawsbob" and "Kurfs," respectively, painted with the artist's signature Xs for eyes). And there were sculptures as well, notably a 7-foot-tall "Chum," Kaws' reworking of the Michelin Man, rendered in bronze.

Among those who managed to skip the line and make it inside the gallery: rappers Everlast and Lupe Fiasco, actor-screenwriter Justin Theroux, pop artist Kenny Scharf, and Shepard Fairey, the street artist turned graphic designer behind the iconic Barack Obama "HOPE" election poster. And taking a break from cycling in the Tour of California, Lance Armstrong bought the largest painting in the show.

Tim Blum, co-owner of neighboring Blum & Poe gallery, has hosted his share of chock-a-block art openings – notably, one for the Japanese pop art painter Yoshitomo Nara in 2003 and another for the Tokyo-born leader of the "Superflat" art movement, Takashi Murakami, in 2004. But Blum said he couldn't remember a bigger turnout for an opening on La Cienega than what greeted KAWS on Saturday.

"They were as packed as any gallery shows I've ever seen," he recalled of the Nara and Murakami exhibitions. "But those crowds were a little older than this one. And there was no line like this."

Kim Light, owner of Lightbox Gallery, located just a few storefronts down from Honor Fraser, gave KAWS props for bringing new energy to the scene.

"I think this is fabulous," Light said, standing amid KAWS' exhibition Saturday. "He's doing something that bridges the street with the art world. And it's bringing people into the galleries at a time when there's a lot of doom and gloom. "

– Chris Lee

Photo: KAWS in the gallery. Credit: Michael Robinson Chavez / Los Angeles Times