

CRITIC'S PICK

BRIAN DONNELLY



The life-size fiberglass *Chum* and the bronze self-portrait *Permanent Thirty-Three*, both editioned sculptures from 2008.

Brian Donnelly's graffiti and product designs deploy knockoffs of emblematic characters—Mickey Mouse, the Michelin Man, the Smurfs, Darth Vader, the Simpsons, and SpongeBob SquarePants—but with their faces turned into blank death masks with x's for eyes. Such instantly recognizable designs made him a cult underground hit, better known by the tag KAWS, long before he ever considered having a gallery show. Now, a little more than a year after launching his gallery career, Donnelly is already slated for his first museum show, opening next June at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

Donnelly, 35, is modest and unconflicted about the way he conflates art and commerce. "I have always been just making the stuff I want to make," says Donnelly, sitting in his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio cluttered with his favorite merchandise, including the miniature severed heads—inch-high self-portraits in bright colors—that he gave away at his first gallery show, at New York's Gering & López, last November.

The tag KAWS was first spotted in the early '90s emblazoned across billboards in Jersey City, Donnelly's hometown. After graduating from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1996, he worked for a brief stint as a freelance designer for Disney and became known for adding his x-eyed cartoon characters to advertisements in bus shelters in SoHo.

Turned on by Tokyo's underground toy-trading scene, he created his own limited-edition collectibles and opened a boutique, Original Fake, in the Aoyama district to sell them. More recently, KAWS designs have been spotted on brand-name merchandise like Vans and Nike sneakers, as well as on gear produced in collaboration with Tomoaki Nagao, a.k.a. Nigo, the brains behind the Japan-based street-wear line A Bathing Ape.

Nigo helped create Donnelly's first paintings. Sold vacuum-packed, these small canvases spoofing the Simpsons led to much larger works, commissioned by people like hip-hop stars Pharrell Williams and Kanye West. But Donnelly did not want his creations hidden away, so when approached by Sandra Gering he jumped at the chance to mount his first solo show, where his paintings and sculptures were priced from \$25,000 to \$85,000.

Donnelly's latest commercial project brings his career full circle. In Times Square last winter, a giant billboard for West's new album, *808s & Heartbreak*, featured the musician swallowed up by Donnelly's serpents, skulls, and spermatozoa.

—Barbara Pollack



Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews.

TOP: COURTESY GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY, NEW YORK (2); BOTTOM: KAWS STUDIO