Maguire, Toby. “Kaws.” *Interview*, pp 84-89, 118, 119.

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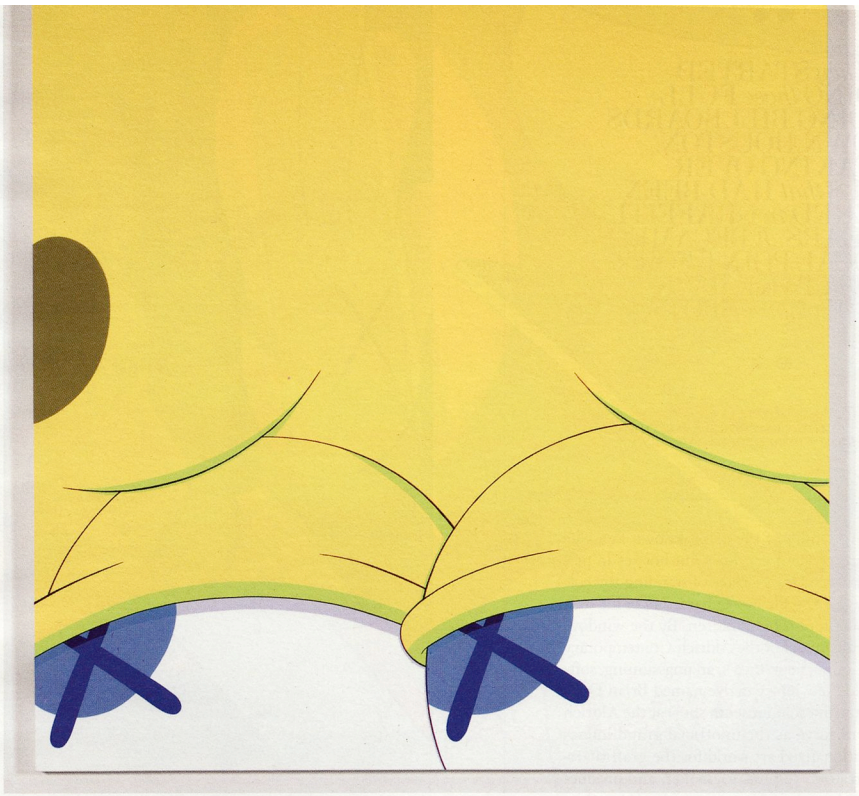


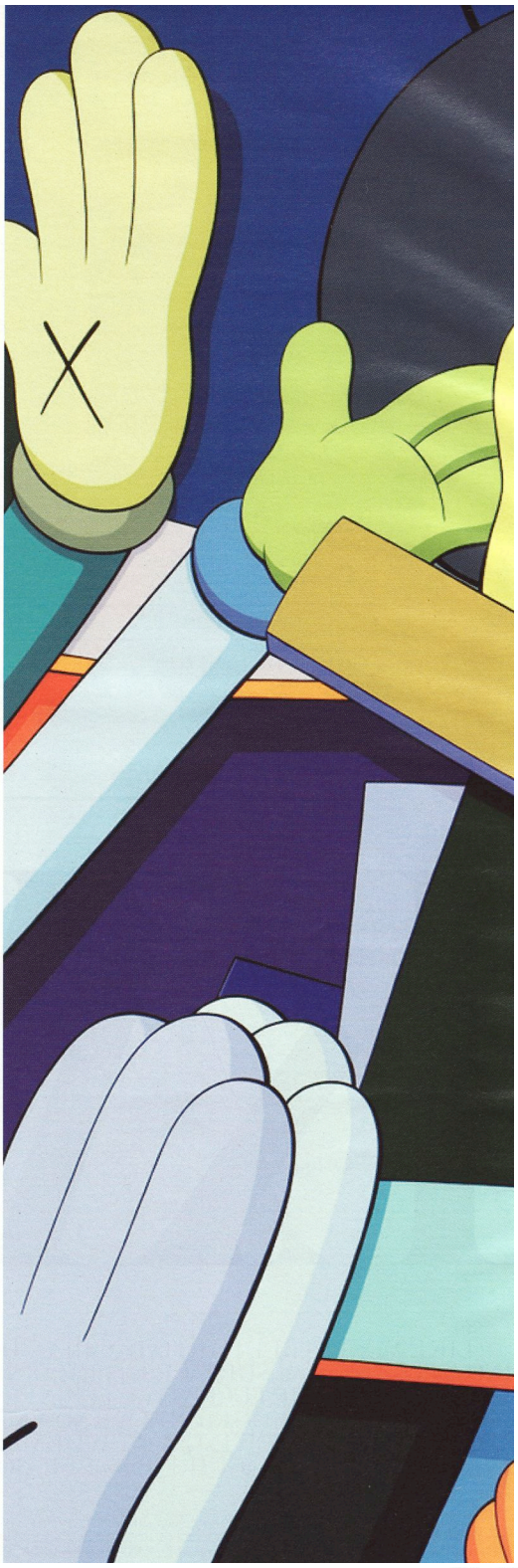
KAWS

LIKE MOST STREET ARTISTS, BRIAN DONNELLY STARTED OUT *as a* VANDAL, PLYING *his* TRADE *on the* SURFACES *of* BUILDINGS, BILLBOARDS, *and* BUS SHELTERS BEFORE VENTURING *into the* MORE LUCRATIVE BUSINESS *of* BIG-BRAND COLLABORATIONS *and* LIMITED EDITION TOYS. NOW *the* GUERRILLA KNOWN *as* KAWS *is* FINALLY GETTING *the* ART-WORLD TREATMENT—*and* SHOWING WHY WHEN *it* COMES *to* HIS WORK, THERE ARE *no* WALLS

By TOBEY MAGUIRE *Portrait* CRAIG McDEAN *Styling* KARL TEMPLER

THIS PAGE: KAWS'S *ALMOST OVER*, 2008. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE EMMANUEL PERROTIN. *OPPOSITE:* KAWS IN NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 2010. *ALL CLOTHING:* ORIGINALFAKE. *GROOMING PRODUCTS:* AVEDA MEN, *INCLUDING PURE-FORMANCE GROOMING CREAM. GROOMING:* MARK CARRASQUILLO/ART + COMMERCE. *SPECIAL THANKS:* MILK STUDIOS. *FASHION DETAILS PAGE 119.*

> *They* STARTED DOING *those* FULL-BUILDING BILLBOARDS DOWN HOUSTON, TAKING OVER WALLS *that* HAD BEEN COVERED *in* GRAFFITI *for* YEARS. *It* BECAME *a* FOCAL POINT FOR ME *to* TAKE BACK SOME *of those* SPOTS.



KAWS'S *CURTAINS*, 2008. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY.

The Williamsburg studio of the artist known as KAWS is neatly lined with racks of acrylic-paint bottles in primary colors and guarded by a cluster of standing toy collectibles—life-size 3-D comic book characters of his own design—like a platoon of robot children. By the window, there is a small-scale model of the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, in Connecticut. KAWS, an unassuming, soft-spoken 35-year-old New Jersey native named Brian Donnelly, is plotting his first solo museum show at the Aldrich next month. It will serve as the unofficial grand induction to the institutionalized art world for the graffiti artist, painter, illustrator, sculptor, toymaker, and product designer. Yet KAWS has a long history outside of the white cube. His street-born cartoonish graphics—specifically spermatozoa-shaped figures with x-ed out eyes—have achieved a subcultural iconography. He has applied this KAWS signature to his street art, a clothing line, heroically outsize toys and sculptures, and countless cobranding ventures with labels like A Bathing Ape and Marc Jacobs.

KAWS was a teenager growing up in Jersey City in the late '80s and early '90s, where he spent his high school years graffiti-bombing trains, walls, and billboards. He honed his street-art act in New York City, hanging out with the spray can–wielding skate kids in downtown Manhattan. He graduated to a more covert form of interventionist street art in the mid-'90s, when he began unlocking the glass panels encasing bus stop and phone booth ads. He stole the posters, added his own graphics to them in acrylic paint, and then surreptitiously put them back. These hits were so skillfully executed—brushstrokes are never apparent in a KAWS painting—that often no one could distinguish the artist's work from the original advertisement.

After graduating from New York's School of Visual Arts in 1996, KAWS traveled to Japan, pursuing his street-art projects with Tokyo subculture heavyweights Hectic and Jun Takahashi of Undercover. In 1999, KAWS made his first toy with Japanese company Bounty Hunter, a vinyl figure of Mickey Mouse with x-ed out eyes (as if Mickey just drank from a bottle marked POISON). Nigo, the tastemaker behind A Bathing Ape, asked KAWS to collaborate on a clothing line in 2001 and began collecting his pop paintings of cartoon characters like the Simpsons, the Smurfs, and SpongeBob SquarePants.

Channeling the commercialist attitude of Claes Oldenburg and, more recently, Takashi Murakami, KAWS has

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produced everything from x-marked sneakers for Nike to an album cover for a special edition of Kanye West's *808s & Heartbreak* (2008). To sell all the KAWS-mobilia, the artist opened a dazzling Masamichi Katayama–designed store in Tokyo in 2006 called OriginalFake. Although KAWS does not separate product from art or art from product, it was only a matter of time before the art world caught up with him. He found Los Angeles–based dealer Honor Fraser, who took on not only the paintings but the whole breadth of his work.

With a monograph from Skira/Rizzoli due out this fall and the Aldrich show at his doorstep, KAWS has gotten approval from an art-world establishment that he felt would never take his guerrilla act as its own. He bought a building not far from his Brooklyn studio, which his good friend, the interior designer Katayama, will convert into a massive studio that will become the creative hub of the KAWS universe. That's all in the future, but it is one KAWS can see from the seventh-floor window of his current studio—which is where the actor Tobey Maguire, a fan, friend, and collector, interviewed the artist.

TOBEY MAGUIRE: I'm interested in your backstory—how KAWS came to be. So let's start there.

KAWS: I was born in Jersey City, and I guess that's probably where it started. When I was young, I tried sports but never really got into them. I played ice hockey because there was a rink up the street from me, but once I grew out of my equipment, my parents were like, "Are you serious about this?" and I said, "Not really." I think I got into skating and graffiti mostly because they are both solo activities. You can take it where you want to without needing a team to play.

MAGUIRE: Did you have a drawing background? Did you take art classes as a kid?

KAWS: In elementary school I was a bad kid—not bad as in bad behavior but kind of illiterate bad. My fifth grade teacher told my mom, "Maybe he can pursue art?" But really, I had no background. Even in high school, art wasn't something that occurred to me to pursue. It was just a hobby that I had a heavy leaning toward.

MAGUIRE: So it was more that you were just immersed as a teen in the culture of skating and that led you to art?

KAWS: Definitely. Jersey City is so close to Manhattan. You took the PATH train in for a dollar, so it would only cost $2 for a whole day of skating—from Brooklyn Banks to Tompkins Square Park. I would meet tons of kids from different boroughs, and that parlayed into graffiti. I got mixed into that.

MAGUIRE: What was your family like?

KAWS: My mom's a housewife. My dad's a stockbroker. He didn't graduate from high school. He started by running coffee for the guys on Wall Street.

MAGUIRE: A hustler. A go-getter.

KAWS: Yeah. You learn to appreciate that as you get older. But when I first said that I wanted to go to art school, he was like, "What?" [*both laugh*] They sent me to look at [Borough of] Manhattan Community College. I'm not dissing that school, but I went over to look around one day and was like, "Fuck outta here, I'm not going." So when I got out of high school, I didn't go right to college. At this time, I was doing graf six nights a week, just painting a lot.

MAGUIRE: Were you going out and hitting walls?

KAWS: Yeah, mostly painting walls at the time. I graduated from high school in '92 and the first billboard I painted was in '93. But I was doing regular graf long before I hit the advertising stuff.

MAGUIRE: Where did the name KAWS come from?

KAWS: There's no meaning to it. It's just letters that I liked—*K-A-W-S*. I felt like they always work and function nicely with each other.

MAGUIRE: It's provocative, as in "to be the cause of

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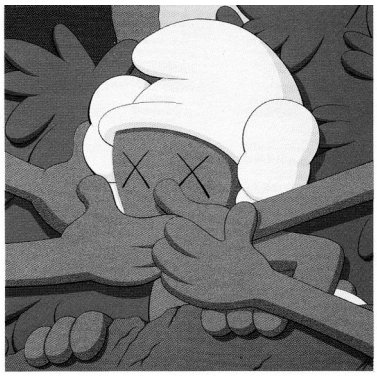

> *The* TOYS ARE ACTUALLY PART *of the* WORK. *It's* WHAT I WANT *to* DO. NO MATTER HOW THINGS GO *in* THE GALLERY WORLD, I'M STILL GOING *to* WANT *to* MAKE PRODUCT.

something." "To cause." There was none of that type of thinking when you came up with the name?

KAWS: No, I think I went with that name because I felt like it had no connection. Trust me, editors later had a field day with that. In every article it was like "KAWS and effect" or "KAWS célèbre."

MAGUIRE: But let's stop and think about that for a second. What is your cause? [*KAWS laughs*] I mean, at that point in your life, were you thinking about becoming successful, making money, or just sharing your art? What were you doing it for? What was your approach?

KAWS: I didn't know for a long time. The graf stuff was almost like a sport I fell into and was good at. I woke up wanting to do it and fell asleep thinking about it. When I was in school, my mind would be on painting. I guess that's the only thing I've ever really been focused on. When I started painting on advertisements, it occurred to me that the ad really set the work in a specific time. You could look at a dozen walls and an untrained eye might not be able to distinguish the difference between the '80s and '90s. When you paint over ads, it clicks—especially with the phone booths I was doing. There were these Calvin Klein ads of Kate Moss or Christy Turlington. I think that's when I realized it was more about communication. There was a dialogue to it.

MAGUIRE: A dialogue with other graffiti artists or with a broader audience?

KAWS: Both. It's strange with graffiti. You put a lot out, but you don't get that much back because not many people know who's doing it. You have your peers of about 10 guys who know you are the one painting. Like, this morning, I took my dog out, and I noticed my assistant hit the rooftop across the street on his way out yesterday. He's a new assistant and has been working for me for about two days, and I saw this tag over there and thought, Fucking god. I recognized his sign.

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MAGUIRE: Sounds like he's following in your footsteps. How did you choose the billboards and advertisements that you targeted?

KAWS: I think just visually. At the beginning, people thought I had political motivations, like I was doing an antiadvertising crusade. I'd get hit up from magazines like *Adbusters*. But that's not really my thing. I actually liked the visual nature of these ads. I really liked some of the photographers I was painting over.

MAGUIRE: So, in a sense, you were collaborating with them.

KAWS: In a forceful way, yeah.

MAGUIRE: Was that the beginning of a fine-art career?

KAWS: Well, after I took a semester off, I put a portfolio together and went over to SVA to apply. I didn't know then that they'll take anyone's money. Like, if you're not asking for a scholarship at art school, you can get in pretty easily. I went for illustration. I figured I could get a job doing that and still have my personal work. When I showed a teacher some of my graffiti, I remember he said, "Stop wasting your time. You need to focus." Obviously, I dropped his class.

MAGUIRE: I remember when I was a kid growing up in L.A., I would see graffiti on a regular basis, and over time, I would get to know the tags of the various artists. They started to have a presence. There was a whole mystery around them: "Who is this guy?" I know you said that you don't get to communicate with your audience, but if you do it enough and you're good enough, there is a lot of talk about you. There is an aura about KAWS and who he is.

KAWS: Graffiti is like building a career. And there is a dialogue with the other artists out there—mostly fellow writers because a lot of people who don't paint just see a blur when they look at it. After I started painting over the advertising, I began to take photos of the final images. When you do graffiti, you leave your work in the street, so I wanted to document it. [*KAWS shows Maguire shots of some early work on his computer.*] I shot that one at night and came back and shot it again in the day.

MAGUIRE: Is that the Got Milk? campaign?

KAWS: Yeah. That was in '97. It was right on Houston where West Broadway turns into LaGuardia. I loved doing that spot. I think another reason why the painting worked so well was that in the '90s, advertisements started to have a much stronger presence. They started doing those full-building billboards down Houston, taking over walls that had been covered in graffiti for years. It became a focal point for me to take back some of those spots.

MAGUIRE: But I like that you are actually working with the advertisement. You aren't just ignoring it and treating it like a blank canvas. You incorporated it—a forced collaboration. Did you ever get caught by the police when you were doing one?

KAWS: No, not doing graffiti. I once got caught putting up a sticker. I had to do a night in jail—not at Central Booking but at the Sixth Precinct downtown. [*laughs*] But eventually I got bored painting over ads. I started taking white paper and painting it in, so at night it would almost glow like a giant light box. Remember when Marc Jacobs did that show on Houston and Sixth Avenue [in 2000]? I remember the day before, they were setting up that whole basketball court and I hit both walls there. It was the perfect flood of people. Then I met this photographer, David Sims, who had shot a lot of campaigns I worked over. He invited me to ¬ *Continued on page 118*

TOBEY MAGUIRE IS A LOS ANGELES–BASED ACTOR. HIS NEXT FILM IS THE DARK COMEDY *THE DETAILS*. *THIS PAGE:* KAWS'S *KURF (SHHH . . .)*, 2008. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HONOR FRASER GALLERY. *OPPOSITE:* KAWS'S *HK CHUM*, 2001. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. *>SEE MORE OF KAWS'S WORK ON* INTERVIEWMAGAZINE.COM

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more KAWS

Continued from page 89¬ London and had made a lot of prints for me. So I started painting acrylic over actual photos. That led me to doing actual magazine stories. The whole project just started to grow, and I didn't put any boundaries on it.

MAGUIRE: So Sims and other photographers were actually encouraging your process and development to do your work over theirs.

KAWS: Yeah, and it was fun. I put the results in a few shows, but I never sold them. It was right around the time when I'd made my first toy.

MAGUIRE: How did you first get involved with making toys?

KAWS: I was always really into the pop artists and the editions they would make with Gemini G.E.L. I just didn't think I'd meet anyone who would actually ask me to do a sculpture. But in '97, I went to Tokyo and started developing a relationship with some guys there—making stuff with different companies. The opportunity came up to make a toy. There was a company called Bounty Hunter that was making some of the first toys that were a little bit different. Before that, my idea of a toy was, like, Kenner or Hasbro. But they were making small runs of 500 toys. As soon as I saw them, I thought, These are like those Gemini editions. It's just that people's perception of a toy is different. I had to figure out a way of seeing my work in 3-D. My project opened up. I did rotation drawings, and they came back with a sculpture that I would adjust.

MAGUIRE: Do you see a toy and a sculpture as roughly the same thing?

KAWS: The material and scale are different, that's all. I've been doing bronze sculptures where I auto-body-paint them different colors. Those materials are traditional. They are within the history of fine art. But, in my mind, it's the same dimensional process. I remember I took the toys to the New Museum to sell them on consignment. And Colette in Paris sold some for me. I took that money and produced my next toy. Then I started my own website in 2002 and sold directly to customers. That gave me enough money so I could continue making toys.

MAGUIRE: You were giving yourself the freedom not to follow the traditional route to a fine-art career but instead chose to cut your own path. Seems bold.

KAWS: I guess my goal has been just to figure out how to get through life making stuff.

MAGUIRE: You have your own store in Tokyo, right?

KAWS: Yes. We have accounts with a lot of different places, but we have one flagship there. I was doing a lot

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of different projects in Japan in the late '90s. There was a company called Hectic and then Undercover, which invited me to design a clothing line. And Nigo at A Bathing Ape asked me to do clothes. A lot of friends at the time said to me, "Why are you wasting so much energy in Japan? It's a throwaway." They thought of Japan as a place where people could make some quick money without losing credit, very *Lost in Translation*–style. But when I went, I met these guys around my age who were just killing it. They were working hard and making amazing stuff. To me that was where it was happening. Then it suddenly started creeping into the U.S. I think that had a lot to do with musicians like Pharrell really getting into it and spreading the word.

MAGUIRE: And eventually Pharrell started collecting your work.

KAWS: Yes. That's through Nigo. Nigo is one of my biggest supporters. The only paintings in his house in Tokyo are mine. Aside from my paintings, what he really collects is Bentleys. He has crazy cars. His house is out of control. Do you know that series of package paintings that I did? That was because I saw that these guys in Japan were collecting toys. I had friends that were spending $3,000 on a Star Wars prototype figure. They weren't collecting art, they were collecting toys. So I did those package paintings where I mass-produced the packaging around the painting, but the painting itself was done individually. That was my way of bridging the gap between those two worlds. Because I realized that these guys are absolute connoisseurs of the stuff they collect. They can look at a toy and say, "Oh, this is a '76. It came out in three versions." It occurred to me that that kind of obsessive collecting isn't any different than art.

MAGUIRE: How many package paintings did you do the first time around?

KAWS: About 40. Before that I really was just painting over ads. But then when Nigo started giving me commissions, I started doing really different large-scale paintings—like the Kimpsons series.

MAGUIRE: Yes, the Kimpsons. And what do you call the other characters?

KAWS: The Kurfs. Which is Smurfs. I like the Simpsons because they are such an instant read. You could be in a different country and go, "D'oh!" and everybody would know exactly what you're talking about. I thought that was amazing. It's also such an American cartoon.

MAGUIRE: What about SpongeBob? Where does he fit in?

KAWS: I started doing SpongeBob paintings for Pharrell. Then I started doing smaller paintings, which got much more abstract. And SpongeBob was something I wanted to do because graphically I love the shapes. But honestly, when I'm painting SpongeBob, I'm not thinking, Oh, I loved this episode. Honestly, I've never even watched it.

MAGUIRE: Did you think you'd finally get the attention of the art world?

KAWS: Art is its own peculiar little world. It was only in late 2008 that I really started to focus on a body of work for an actual show. My first one was at Emmanuel Perrotin in Miami. Then I did a show at Gering & López in New York. And then with Honor Fraser in L.A. in February 2009. I went from no shows to a show every two months. When I did the store, I loved designing the space. So now I really love designing the big show I'm having at the Aldrich.

MAGUIRE: You've had a lot of great support. How much of your success has been about sticking to your own vision and how much has it come from certain people saying, "Go ahead, take that step"?

KAWS: I've been really lucky to be able to find people who could understand my interests and give it a chance. Years back, when I talked to some people about doing

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shows, they came in and saw the package paintings and my toys and said, "This is very commercial." I think they didn't understand that it's not like I make these toys for the money. The toys are actually part of the work. It's what I want to do. No matter how things go in the gallery world, I'm still going to want to make product.

MAGUIRE: Is there an artist who particularly influenced you?

KAWS: I think the pop artists like Oldenburg and [Tom] Wesselmann. Then there were artists like Murakami, who really opened up a lot of doors on acceptance and crossover projects. That made what I was doing a bit easier to translate. And definitely Jeff Koons. I love his work. I appreciate his perfectionist mentality. It's so over the top.

MAGUIRE: Yes, audacious and beautiful.

KAWS: I did this weird show in 2000 at an uptown gallery, and Koons came and introduced my work to Dakis [Joannou]. Dakis bought two paintings. I was just like, "Holy shit. I made it! This is it!" And then I didn't show again for eight years.

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