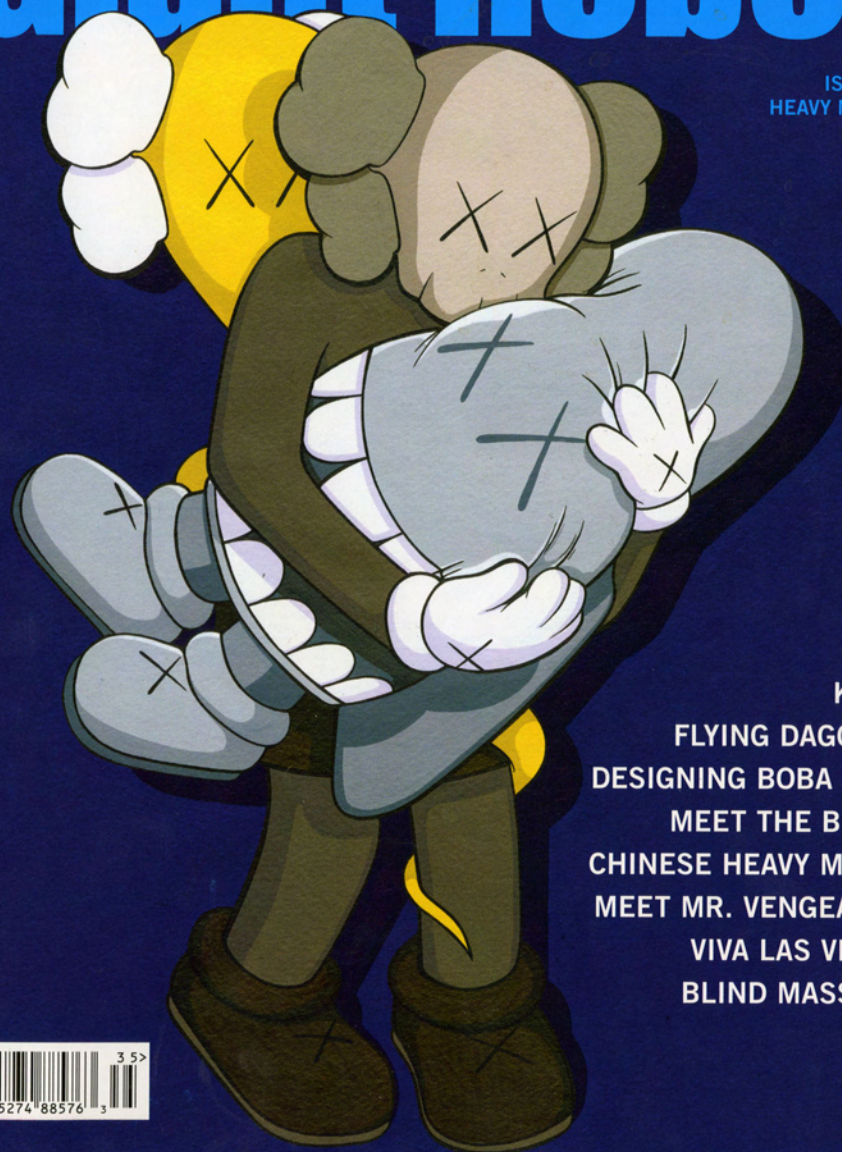


ASIAN POP CULTURE AND BEYOND DISPLAY THRU SPRING 4.95/US 6.95/CDN

Giant Robot

ISSUE 35
HEAVY METTLE



KAWS
FLYING DAGGERS
DESIGNING BOBA FETT
MEET THE BEAST
CHINESE HEAVY METAL
MEET MR. VENGEANCE
VIVA LAS VEGAS
BLIND MASSAGE



words and pics | Eric Nakamura
art | courtesy of KAWS

Old Skull

KAWS AND EFFECT

Over the course of a decade, KAWS has generated a mystique that started in Japan and trickled its way into the U.S. and Europe. Today, fans around the world covet his sculpture-like toys and co-branded items, which always push the limits of street art and design. His name is even used as a search word on eBay to lend design and street cred to auction items even if they have nothing to do with him.

Stepping into the 29-year-old artist's bamboo-floored loft studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, I'm surrounded by art books, designer figures, Pantone block toys, nice furniture, a real Chappie, and art pieces by Espo, Twist, Futura, and Pettibon. KAWS is youthful, soft-spoken, polite, and humble about his work. You'd never imagine he is behind the iconic bombs, bus shelter paintings, art books, high-end figures, and products which range from shoes and pillows all the way up to a bicycle.

SKULLS

GR: How did you develop your skull character?

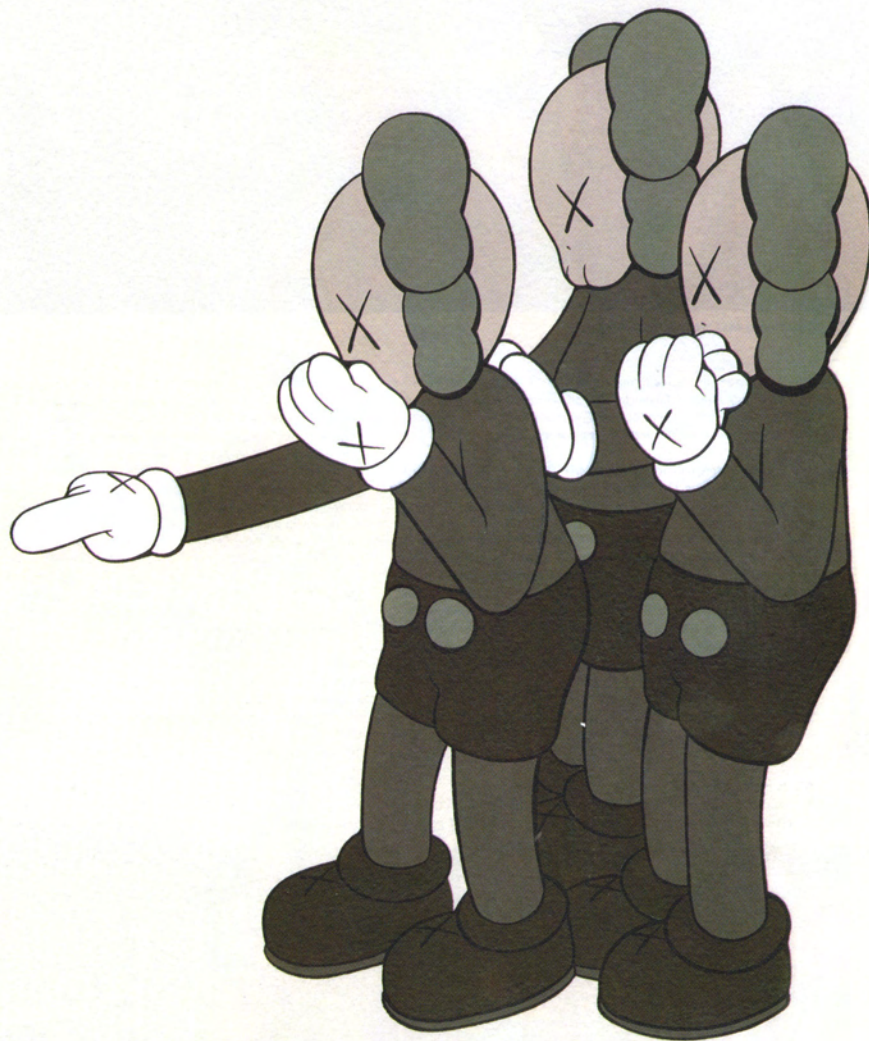
K: In 1992, I was doing just regular graffiti like "KAWS" pieces. Sometime after that, my friend and I were doing pieces. He was taking forever, so I started painting things around it. One of them was the skull. I started using it a lot on billboards. It changed. It once had super buckteeth!

GR: The toys came about later?

K: I didn't make toys until 1999. At first I was like, "What are you talking about?" Once I did the first one, I was like, "Shit..." I always liked sculpture, but it was so far out of reach. Doing editions in bronze or any other materials costs a lot of money. With toys, suddenly there are little sculptures in people's houses all over the world.



Untitled (2004) - Acrylic on paper, 15.5 x 19.25 inches





Freight train by WEST, DASH, and KAWS (Mid-'90s).

GR: What made you decide to make toys?

K: I have things around the house, things I like, and I try to picture how they were made years ago in plastic, and how they're still around and look brand new. I hope my items can do the same.

GR: Is there a story behind the characters?

K: There's a story, but I don't share it with other people. Just see how one relates to the next. You can talk to them. They're sinister but definitely approachable.

GR: You've made some derivatives of other people's characters. How do you choose them?

K: The first thing I did was paint over ads, other people's imagery. I thought if I were gonna do a toy, I'd start at the top. The best known character is Mickey Mouse. Also, I've always painted Michelin Man images, and I made a toy called CHUM that could be viewed as his strange uncle. With Medicom, I can't do that stuff anymore. I have to keep it clean.

GR: Have there been problems with using other people's properties?

K: We've had some inquiries, but nothing's ever gone anywhere. I'm up front about it.

GR: Is it supposed to be satirical?

K: I don't know. I think if people grew up with the imagery, then there's a pest of an image—a variation. I try to keep it close without getting sued. Can you imagine this going to court and them asking, "Is this Mickey Mouse?"

LIMITED EDITIONS

GR: How do you view the craze for limited-edition and rare things?

K: When I say something is an edition of 500, it's because that's what it is. I hate limited edition. I hate rare. I say that because if I don't, people will say there's 10 or thousands. It's sort of how an artist does a print. I just want people to know what they're getting.

Let's say two years ago, I wanted to blow characters out. I could have made a gang of money. There would have been a market for it. But I just do stuff I really want to do. Maybe that's why I've lasted. I'm not like, "18 characters in November, all in an edition of 1,000." That's a company attitude: With anything that is successful, they try to just redo it.

GR: You work with Medicom, right?

K: Yes. My relationship with them is that I design everything. They do the technical and work with the factories. I pay for it, and they distribute a certain amount. The majority comes to New York where my girlfriend and I send it out.

EARLY YEARS

GR: When did you start doing graffiti?

K: In '90 and '91, I was doing crappy tags. Then, in '93, I did a lot of murals. In Jersey City, it's easy to access billboards and stuff. In 1996, I moved to Manhattan. I started doing bus shelters because people can go to it and tap the glass. There's kind of like this supposed-to-be-here feel. I painted it with no brush strokes, so it has that screened feel.

GR: When did your work cross over into fashion?

K: The first ads were in 1993. I was painting on big billboards like Captain Morgan and Snoopy (Met Life). Then it was bus shelters and phone booths, the lettering dropped, and skull imagery came about. From painting over photography, things fell into working with photographers. It was all random and natural. It sounds funny, but I met people who I expected to hear bad things from, and they were totally cool. They were friends of friends. It was like, "Whoa, this guy shot the original for the item I painted over?" One photographer sent me prints to paint on. There are tons of rumors of me doing campaigns for fashion companies, but I've never done that.

GR: How did you decide to work on top of advertisements?

K: I started working over ads by chance. In Jersey City, me and my friend T.DEE were looking at a billboard that was in a great location but still

kind of quiet at night. So I decided to go back and try it, not really caring about the ad I was painting over. After it was finished, I liked it way more than the walls I was painting at the time. Ads like DKNY or the ones with Christy Turlington or the milk kid—if I felt my stuff could work with something and be humorous, then I'd paint over it. I've done a Snapple ad where a kid was holding up his own art, and I completely painted over the art. The first time I went to Germany, I did billboards on trains. In London, I did kiosks in the Underground. I've had fun doing it wherever I could.

GR: Ever have any problems?

K: I remember talking to workers who would say, "We're going to kick the shit out of that COWS kid when we meet him." They weren't psyched on it. They had to take the epoxy out of the locks and bindings, so it wasn't fun.

When I first did it, I was nervous. But now I couldn't care less. A cop pulled up once, and thought I was a worker. I kept working on and he rolled away. You have to understand: What was I doing? Switching a poster. To anyone else, it doesn't look like anything. I've gotten chased while doing billboards, but that's obvious. That's with spray paint. With ads, I'm just opening it, switching it, and leaving.

GR: Is your work still graffiti-oriented?

K: Honestly, when I was doing graffiti I wasn't thinking of it as graffiti. Of course, it was, but I never felt a separation between the stuff I made at home and the stuff I made outside except for the obvious risk factor.

GR: Are you still doing graffiti?

K: When it's fun, I'm not out there constantly, by any means. On my last two trips to Japan, I did a bunch.

GR: You came from the graffiti world. Are there those who say you fell off?

K: You mean kids hating? Yes and no. The thing is, I've kept it pretty tight-knit with those I've painted with. When I was doing the ad stuff, I heard things like, "Where's the letters and stuff?" Then when I was doing the toys, I was getting more bad vibes. Toy is the worst word in graffiti. Fuck 'em, you know? If they're not your friends, they'll fade away.

At the same time, there are tons of graf artists who want to make toys. I'm doing exactly what I want to do with quality. Any artist has to respect that. If they don't, then they have insecurities that I can't deal with. The "keeping it real" mentality is silly. To me, this work has a life. It goes across everything; little kids see it and freak, and adults do, too.

Left to right: Guess ad (NYC, 1997); painted paper ad (NYC, 2002); milk ad (NYC, 1997); Maidenform ad (NYC, 2000).





If I see someone who's willing to put their money into something I'm doing, the first thing is I ask myself is, "Can I just do this on my own?"

SCHOOL OF ART

GR: Do you worry about your figures or characters being too similar to each other or your work becoming repetitive?

K: No. It's like they're all a family. It's not like this is an action guy and that is a friendly guy. I feel like one is a reaction to the next one. I want them to look similar.

GR: Do you plan on doing work that's totally different?

K: I don't know... That's like casting off a family member.

GR: Do you draw things besides your characters in your sketchbook?

K: Sad, but no. I really enjoy drawing them. When my hands start moving they come out.

GR: Tell me about SVA, the School of Visual Arts. Would you say you had a classically trained background?

K: When I got out of school, I stopped doing it. Most of it was school assignment stuff, like realistic oil paintings. I'm not using form anymore. Occasionally I do watercolor paintings that have form. I loved learning that stuff. I went from the second-lowest GPA in high school

Iggy (2001) - (c) David Sims/KAWS, acrylic on B&W photo



to being a straight-up teacher's pet in college. By my second year, I had independent study with teachers. I was really into learning about painting and breaking down things you see and being able to reproduce it. It's just technical stuff.

GR: So you can paint a pretty good portrait if you wanted to?

K: That's a tough one. I haven't done it in years. But, yeah, I could do that.

THE YEAR KAWS BROKE

GR: Can you explain the significance of the year 1999 for you?

K: I was thinking about that. The first figure (Companion), first book with Colette (*Exposed*)... It was the first time I did a collaboration with Jun Takahashi for Undercover, which was little kid sneakers and some print stuff shown at Toho Studio.

GR: Was 1999 a before-and-after year?

K: I'd been working for a long time already, but I guess maybe things started to come together that year. As far as tangible things I was doing—street art and paintings—I got a lot of stuff out that year.

Kate (2001) - (c) David Sims/KAWS, acrylic on B&W photo



Chum (2002) - pink edition of 500

GR: Are there other milestones for you?

K: In 2002 I started making more toys: The Accomplice, Kubricks, and the first BE@RBRICK.

GR: Do you have any idea what you'll be doing in 5 or 10 years?

K: Not particularly, but this past year I've moved to my new studio, and I feel focused. Things feel easier to get done, as far as production. I feel like I know what's ahead. With the first figures, I was freaking out waiting around. Now it's a lot easier.

ART CRASH

GR: These days, there are a lot of art shows. It seems like some people seem to care about art, but a lot don't. Have an opinion?

K: There will always be good and bad shows. For some, it's their life. I don't know what's good or bad. Obviously, if someone really wants to work at something, it's a good thing.

GR: Do you think art is a trend?

K: Totally. Think about how many people are making toys this year. It's ridiculous. I hate that there are companies thinking about what urban toys to make to fill the market. It makes me feel weird about making toys. At the same time, I want to see my images in vinyl; I don't want to see them in bronze.

GR: Do you worry about the crash of art?

K: I don't see myself as part of this whole thing. I see it as work that I've been doing and will continue to do, and maybe there's a point where I won't sell as much stuff. I like painting, making toys, and making other products. It gives me many creative outlets.

Let's say a new toy is coming out in January, but in November everyone decides that they hate toys. I'll keep 1,500 of them in my house. I don't care. I have problems parting with them anyway. I think people who are really into what they are doing or are really trying to push it will always remain. You'll see artists come, have a moment, disappear, come back again, and disappear.

GR: Your moment has been long. Why do you think your art has such staying power?

K: I can't explain it. I think I'm the same age as my audience, so maybe there's something about the time that we grew up woven through it.

continued on page 71



Companies (1999) - black edition of 500



400% BE@RBRICK (2002)



BLITZ (2004) - green edition of 500

THE BUSINESS

GR: How do you pay bills?

K: It's all this—the paintings, the toys, the collaborations. There are a lot of things I like to make, even though I have no intention of being in that business-like the shoes with DC. I have no intention of being a sneaker company. It's great to create one thing and kind of forget about that world after a while.

GR: Do you take commercial work on the side?

K: If I do, it's KAWS collaboration stuff. Doing sneakers, T-shirts, a sweater for the Comme des Garçons store—stuff like that. I've done work for Supreme. It's KAWS with fill-in-the-blank. It's not generic. I don't have patience to do stuff outside of what I want to make. It's almost always with friends' companies; that's the incestuous sort of Japanese world. It seems like they're people I could have been friends with as a kid. It's sort of like a cool thing you do together—like a mutual trade-off.

GR: How did you get started in Japan?

K: Now there's a lot of people in the U.S. doing stuff, but in the late '90s, there wasn't shit going on. I'd go to Japan, and see kids my own age busting their asses making stuff. It was so inspiring. I just made a lot of friends and kept them.

GR: Is your work more popular there?

K: The audience here has gotten bigger, but I haven't put shows together. That's my downside. I've been doing so many commissions, people don't even get to see my paintings; they only see the toys. It's bad, but it gives me something to look forward to.

GR: Do you balance your personal life and work?

K: There is no personal life. I guess my personal life just walked by. [Girlfriend walks by]. Honestly, I'd see these people and ask, "Why don't they go out?" And now I kind of understand it. Going out gets repetitive, and you think about other shit you want to do at home.

GR: It seems like you learned to be a businessperson?

K: Definitely. By having friends who have companies, I get to see how things are done. If someone is making money off of my things, then it has to be me. If a company is making it and they're getting a percentage, that's fine, too. It just has to make sense financially. There are a lot of projects I'm interested in, but if companies aren't sounding fair with payment, then I just can't do it.

GR: It seems like you've got a tight system down. Have you done it all by yourself?

K: I've had zero financial backing. I've always been the decision maker. If I see someone who's willing to put their money into something I'm doing, the first thing I ask myself is, "Can I just do this on my own?" If they are willing to put money into it, then why shouldn't I? Like the first toy I funded—I put all my money into it, and it came back. Then I could do three toys. That sort of thinking.

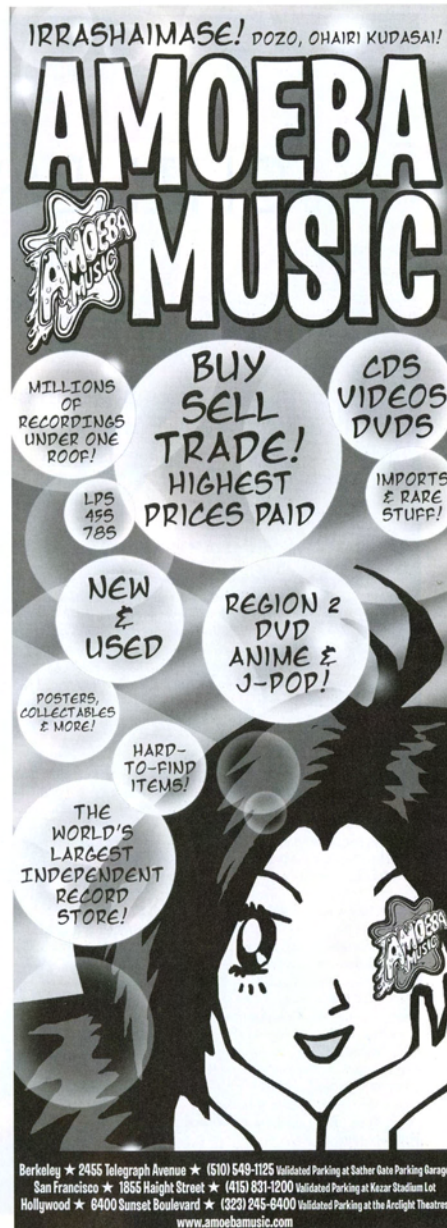
GR: Dumb question, maybe, but what's your name about?

K: There's no meaning. Not at all. It's nothing, when I used it in graffiti, I never thought I'd be making art as a living. There's no meaning, and they're good letters. They live well together.

After the interview, we walk upstairs to his studio, where I see his works in progress, including an 8' x 9' painting and some bus shelter ads. In an adjacent room, KAWS shows me part of his current works on paper, which are more narrative. Then we walk a couple of blocks to his storage studio. The KAWS archive includes one of everything he's ever done, including a huge lightbox with his Companion character on it, big flat files containing ads procured from bus shelters, and collaboration pieces. The facility is huge, but it's filling up fast. 🐼

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