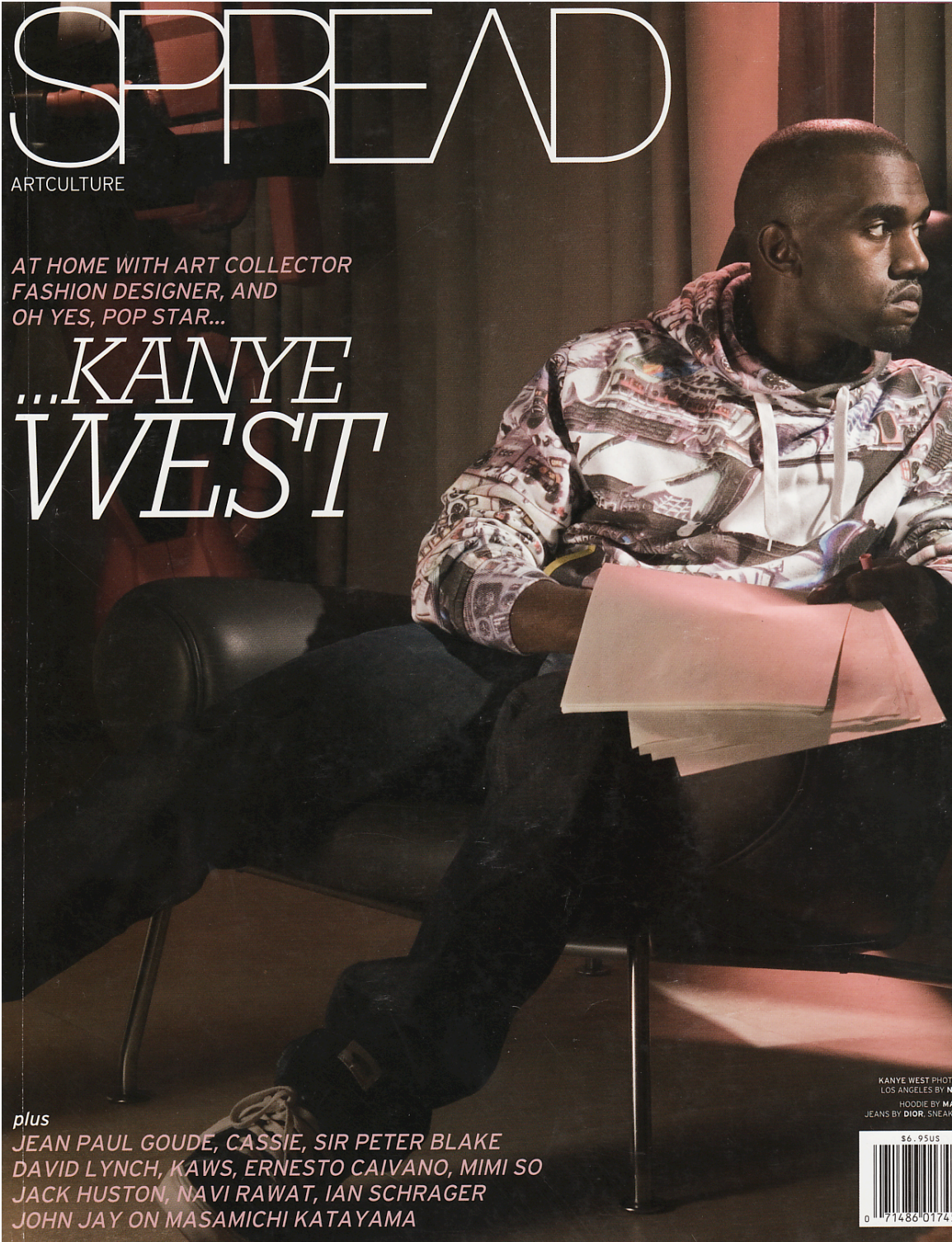


SPREAD

ARTCULTURE

AT HOME WITH ART COLLECTOR
FASHION DESIGNER, AND
OH YES, POP STAR...

...KANYE WEST



plus

JEAN PAUL GOUDE, CASSIE, SIR PETER BLAKE
DAVID LYNCH, KAWS, ERNESTO CAIVANO, MIMI SO
JACK HUSTON, NAVI RAWAT, IAN SCHRAGER
JOHN JAY ON MASAMICHI KATAYAMA

KANYE WEST PHOT
LOS ANGELES BY N
HOODIE BY M
JEANS BY DIOR, SNEAK



St. Pierre, Louisa. "Rebel with A..." *Spread*. Spring 2007. p. 68 – 71.

REBEL WITH A...

MULTIDISCIPLINARY "STREET" ARTIST KAWS HAS GONE FROM BOMBING TO HIGH-PROFILE DESIGN COLLABORATIONS TO OWNING A GALLERY/STORE IN ONE OF JAPAN'S CHICEST NEIGHBORHOODS. THIS REFUSENIK KNOWS *EXACTLY* WHAT HE'S DOING.

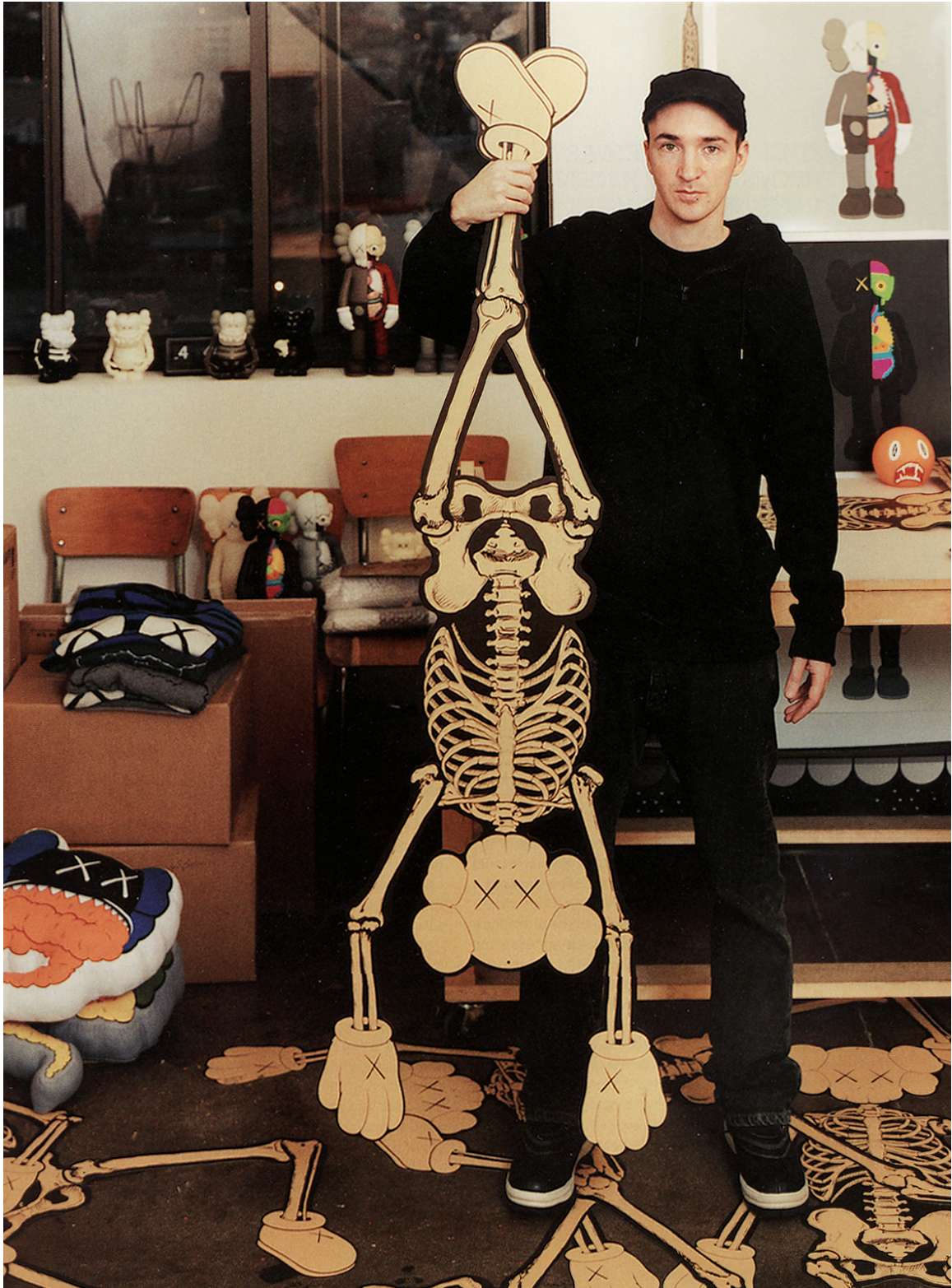
STORY LOUISA ST. PIERRE PORTRAIT JONATHAN FRANTINI ART KAWS

Recognized the world over for multiplatform work that transforms the mundane into the iconic, the phantom known as KAWS has embellished surfaces from bus kiosks to gallery walls to vinyl sculptures, all stops along his path to becoming a one-man empire. And while his X-eyed figures have become ubiquitous studies in what could happen if Mickey Mouse encountered the poison bottle, the artist's methods and persona remain largely abstruse.

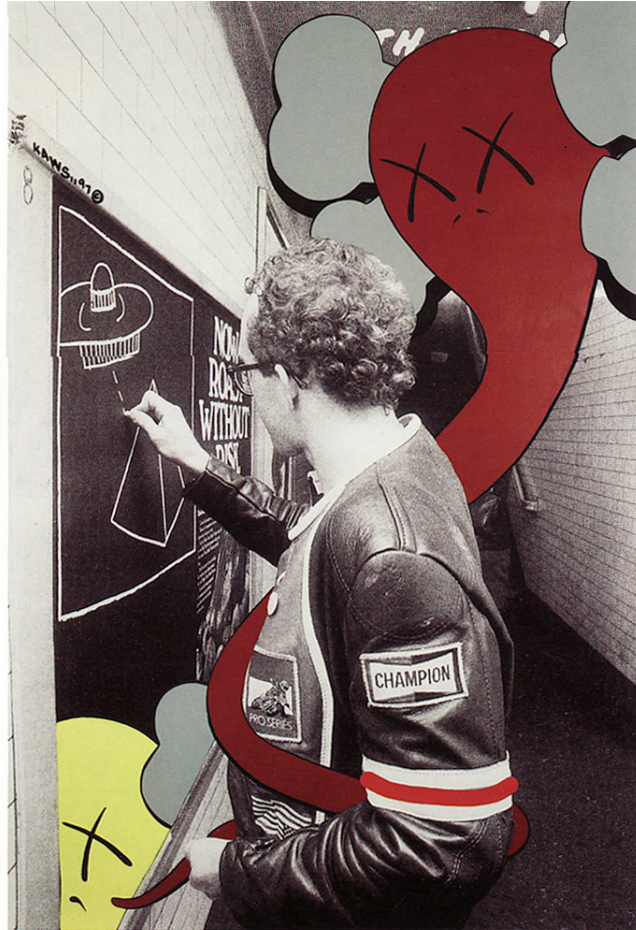
It's a classic tale: A rebel who always worked outside traditional methodology, KAWS was told by his high school career adviser that he would never get into art school but ended up graduating from the School of Visual Arts in 1996. He worked in oil, inspired by the likes of Magritte and Bouguereau, but first truly announced his presence in 1991 with his omnipresent graffiti bombing. The years 1993-2001 saw him lead the charge to the intersection of art and commerce by "liberating" billboards and print advertisements from bus shelters, taking them home, and meticulously interweaving recurring icons into the existing photographic images before returning the doctored ads to their original locations. And so it was that underwear-clad supermodels like Christy Turlington and Kate Moss found themselves disrobing with spermlike snakes constricting their bare stomachs. The posters KAWS chose to keep have now been shown in exhibitions in Paris, Mexico, Greece, Netherlands, London, New York, and Tokyo.

Today KAWS's workspace, an elegantly converted loft, all white apart from a distressed old staircase he found, is full of more than posters. With paintings, huge canvases, toys, bronze sculptures, a light-box installation from his window display at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo, and apparel from his clothing line all vying for space, it could very well serve as a gallery. The variety of his studio's contents attests to the diversity of KAWS's yield, which has quickly diverged from his roots in flat art.

In the late '90s, stimulated by the work of Claes Oldenburg and Jeff Koons, KAWS was ready to take on the third dimension. His first efforts in that realm, while collaborating with Hectic Clothing, gained him an invitation from toy company Bounty Hunter to create his first vinyl figure. Not only was his piece displayed in the window of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, but it also helped spark the designer vinyl toy movement that has become a mainstay of Western culture in the new millennium.



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The vinyl medium also suited KAWS because of his long-standing appetite for objects produced in series. An advocate of the "artist multiple"—a practice innovated in 1959 by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and sustained by the likes of Piero Manzoni, Marian Goodman, Andy Warhol, and Keith Haring—KAWS manufactures originals in groups. While closely related, the objects are not reproductions, retaining their individual value as "manifold within themselves," to quote Romanian artist Daniel Spoerri.

In the early '60s, multiplicity became the medium du jour for pop artists. In 1961, Oldenburg opened a store in the East Village, saying, "The goods in stores—clothing, objects of every sort, boxes, wrappers, signs, and billboards—for all these radiant commercial articles in my immediate surroundings I have developed a great affection which has made me want to imitate them." But the general public was slow to catch on, and it wasn't until 1980 that the movement really cohered in the *Times Square Show*, in which some 100 "outsider" artists from the East Village and the like not only plastered sex and violence across the walls of a former massage parlor, but sold those concepts in the exhibition's gift shop.

In the youth-marketing boom of the '90s, the artist-multiple notion was infused with skate culture, hip-hop, streetwear, anime, and manga—and suddenly, the idea that anything could be a canvas became acceptable. Cut to 2007, and we find ourselves in the KAWS world of vinyl figures, limited-edition collectors' items, and rampant cobranding.

It seems inevitable that KAWS has just opened his own store, called Original Fake, alongside A Bathing Ape, Prada, Hysteric Glamour, Comme des Garçons, and various other heavy-hitting retailers in the Aoyama district of Tokyo, where his largest and most loyal audience is based. KAWS's work for elite clothing label BAPE and his friendship with its visionary founder and art collector, Nigo, inspired and informed the Original Fake initiative, established in close partnership with Japanese toy company Medicom. The name Original Fake was borrowed from a KAWS exhibition at BAPE Gallery in Japan, one that perpetuated the artist multiple, exploring consumerism and the relationship between "original" art and "fake," bootleg product. Is product art? It is if you subscribe to the ideologies of Takashi Murakami or Warhol, as KAWS does, and it should be celebrated.



"Working with BAPE was almost like throwing out a net into the consumer niche community, introducing them to my work," KAWS offers. He collaborates only with trusted friends, has managed to retain complete creative autonomy and the rights to his work, and negotiates the store's deals almost single-handedly. KAWS attributes his entrepreneurial success and business savvy to a sense of entitlement and good old intuition. "I don't like giving handouts or doing work for free, and I have always been very protective," he declares. That's not to say he doesn't practice altruism, however—he enjoys "tactfully working with friends and fellow artists," as demonstrated by several shared projects with his peers: a book with Neck Face (*Satan's Bride*) and vinyl figures with Pushead and REAS.

In fact, KAWS counts on the Original Fake store to eventually represent an expressive forum for his contemporaries: "The intention is ultimately to build the creative community and facilitate opportunities for other artists," he explains, "publishing books and doing other interesting projects. But in the first season, I need to keep things simple and just focus on learning the basic operations of having a store."

KAWS contributed work to the world-touring museum extravaganza *Beautiful Losers* that opened in Cincinnati at the Contemporary Arts Center in 2004 and continues to travel to this day, and he has had work exhibited in group shows at Deitch and The DESTE Foundation in Greece. He chooses Original Fake as his very own postmodern gallery, catering to a broad audience with

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varying budgets and perspectives. His new collection of paintings will undoubtedly need to debut in a venue befitting its mystique—the series takes a fresh, complex direction, with montages that still carry his recognizable characters, including a four-by-five-foot canvas featuring a luminous pink skeleton—but KAWS remains noncommittal about where he'll show. Although there is more than enough work stored in his studio to flesh out a major retrospective already, all he will offer is: "Galleries are not the easiest world to navigate."

The completed product presupposes multiple variations on images, media, and themes, and the possibilities are what invigorate KAWS: "I always felt there was hypocrisy in the fine art world, in their snobbery about product. I'm never going to commit to doing just product, or just painting. I'm going to do it all at the same time and see where it leads." One series of paintings called *The Kimpsons* (KAWS's satirical spin on the beloved cartoon) employed the ultimate consumer presentation: canvases in an oversized, "off the shelf" blister pack. Each painting sold for \$1,000 in 2001; while the prices of his paintings and multiples have increased tenfold and more since then, his mini sculptures remain affordable even to collectors just starting out. Democratizing art, making it accessible to a broader audience, is a key trait of KAWS and like-minded artists.

KAWS's visual decisions, cast of characters, and the artist himself are all open to interpretation and dialogue. The thread of the aesthetic alone makes his output voraciously coveted and supremely collectible, but KAWS has so far deliberately avoided developing a narrative behind his images. Although he has only dabbled in film and motion graphics on his website and in his store—with such animated plots as the Bendy attacking the Accomplice and the Companion—his silent figures may find a voice someday. "I own all the rights to my characters, so it's like I'm creating actors—actors that never get old," KAWS reasons. But the gratification of static art and product, their longevity, and what they might represent to someone in the future are his primary incentives at the moment: "I'm more into objects. I'm more into the notion of a kid finding this thing in 30 years. The whole studio is like a time capsule." And while KAWS may not have a five-year plan, where he and his painted, printed, sculpted army will travel, and how they will continue to impact our consumer culture, are rich subjects for speculation. Even KAWS himself seems curious. "The one thing that would improve the quality of my life," he muses, "is a time machine." ■