

UP IN THE AIR

Hired by the sort of luxury brands he once defaced, former graffiti artist KAWS found international fame as a painter and toy maker—and now one of his iconic characters is joining the ranks of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade

BY HOWIE KAHN
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BRIAN DONNELLY, THE 37-YEAR-OLD PAINTER, designer and master collaborator who goes by the handle KAWS—a name he began tagging on walls, billboards and trains as a teenager in his hometown of Jersey City, New Jersey, because, he says, he liked how those letters looked together—has, for perhaps too long now, been tagged as a street artist. Donnelly certainly got his start that way. Long before he could sell a group of paintings for \$315,000, as he did earlier this year at the Paris-based Galerie Perrotin's inaugural Asian show in Hong Kong, or float an enormous balloon of his own design in this month's Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade—an honor previously bestowed on only four other living artists (Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Tom Otterness and Tim Burton)—Donnelly toiled in grittier territory. His work was no less public.

In the 1990s, he put his elaborate KAWS signature on roadside ads and across the lengths of Union Pacific freight cars. Beginning in '96, Donnelly would break into bus-stop and phone-booth poster cases, lift the ads—a glossy Calvin Klein underwear-clad Christy Turlington, for example—and take them back to his studio, where he would touch them up with Chromacolor paint, editorializing over the existing message with characters that quickly became recognizable on the street as his own. Donnelly's subversive approach had an insider's motive: "I wanted people to think what I did was part of the ad campaign," he said in a 2004 interview. "I painted

with no brush strokes, clean and unobtrusive, as if it was part of the ad." Rather than being vilified, Donnelly was rewarded. Realizing that powerful creative direction could come from the street, major brands responded to Donnelly by commissioning more art. "In the beginning," says Donnelly, "I thought if a company came calling, it would be with a lawsuit."

Under the KAWS banner, Donnelly has designed an album cover for Kanye West and detailed a Porsche for Pharrell Williams, who admits to being a KAWS obsessive. ("I can't even count how many pieces I have," he says.) Other commissions have found Donnelly



MAIDEN VOYAGE
The Macy's balloon version of Companion, one of Donnelly's recurring characters, photographed during a test flight in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

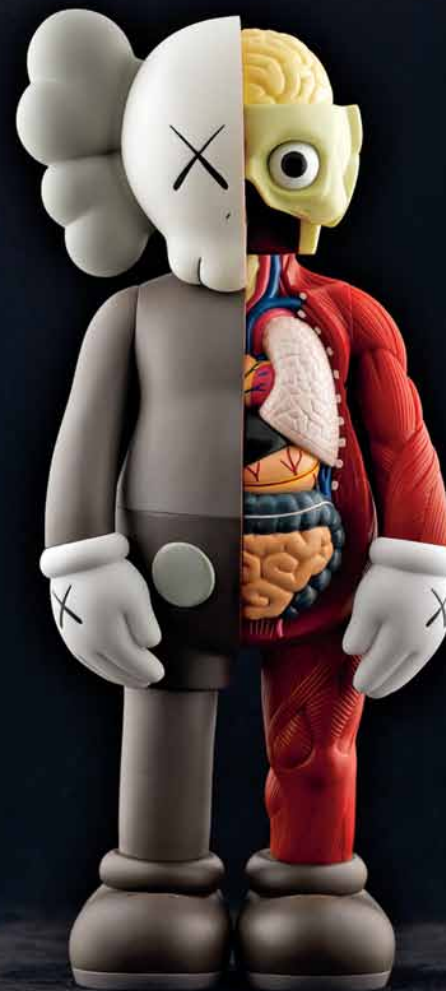


printing graphics on Comme des Garçons wallets and applying his signature touches to a limited-edition pair of Marc Jacobs flats. More recently, KAWS has earned acclaim as a contemporary painter, producing large-scale canvases that nod to the surrealist style of the Chicago Imagists. Amping up the playfully saturated palette of animation, the work reimagines popular cartoon characters—the Simpsons, SpongeBob SquarePants—in a visual language that's become increasingly fragmented and abstract. Emmanuel Perrotin, Donnelly's gallerist (the latest KAWS exhibition opens at Galerie Perrotin, in Paris, on November 3) likens the artist to Andy Warhol for his prolific collaborations and to Takashi Murakami for his concern with sculpture of all sizes.

What makes Donnelly uniquely appealing to Macy's is the fact that he's a world-renowned artist with a cult following as a toy maker. In Tokyo, where his clothing line, OriginalFake, has a flagship store, collectors line up for new KAWS releases, which also sell out in a matter of hours on the Internet. "I get hate mail," says Donnelly, "because they sell out so fast." Donnelly issued his first limited-edition figurine in 1999 in collaboration with a Japanese collectible line called Bounty Hunter. "When the idea first came up," says Donnelly, "I'd never made my work in 3-D. But I always wanted to do sculpture, and I was looking at Claes Oldenburg and H.C. Westermann, all these editions they were doing, and it's just a world I wanted to get into. After making that first toy, it was eight inches tall, but in my head, it was like I'd just made a building or a boat." Its name was Companion. Its body bulged and bent, arms akimbo, and atop its vinyl shoulders sat an oversize skull and crossbones for a head. There were Xs slashed over the eyes and the recognizably Disneyesque gloves. As with his advertising interventions, the gesture seemed more intimate and knowing than mocking.

"Companion has been a recurring character for me," says Donnelly. In the past decade, it has been both a toy and a monumental sculpture. A 16-foot steel version went up in Hong Kong's Harbour City in 2010 and, later, outside of New York's Standard hotel. Painted gray, white and brown, the figure poses in a seated position, hunched slightly and covering its eyes. "I was thinking, God, if I had to sit there all day and have a million people pass me and stare, I'd be mortified," says Donnelly. "That would be the worst experience ever. That's

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CHARACTER STUDIES

Clockwise from top left: KAWS graffiti, 1995; Jiminy-Cricket and Pinocchio, 2010; phone-booth intervention, 1999; Companion, 2006; Kimpsons #2, 2004.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: KAWS, 1995; FREIGHT TRAIN, NEW JERSEY; UNTITLED (CALVIN KLEIN), 1999; PHONE-BOOTH INTERVENTION, SILK SCREEN ON MYLAR, 50" X 26" IN.; NEW YORK; KAWS (ORIGINAL FAKE) COMPANION, 2006; VINYL, 14 1/2" X 6" X 4"; BROWN COLORWAY; KIMPSONS #2, 2004; ACRYLIC ON CANVAS; 80" X 80"; COLLECTION OF NICO; JIMINY-CRICKET AND PINOCCHIO (DESIGNED BY KAWS); ORIGINAL FAKE, 2010; VINYL, 2 1/2" X 1 1/2" X 1" AND 10 1/2" X 5" X 5"



BRIGHT IDEAS
Donnelly at his studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The character at left is *CHUM*, 2012.

where the pose came from.” A variation on that Companion will fly on Thanksgiving. “I think this is a first for the parade,” says Macy’s lead designer, John Piper, standing in a roomful of brightly colored clay prototypes at Macy’s 75,000-square-foot parade studio in New Jersey. “It’s the first time we’ve had a character that’s shy.”

Parade executives approached Donnelly a couple of years ago, and the 40-foot-long balloon, made from urethane-coated nylon, has been in process ever since. “It’s exactly like making a toy or a sculpture,” says Donnelly. “I give them drawings. From that, they make a clay sculpture. I adjust it. We get it to a point where it looks right. If it looks good as a model, it should look good scaled up. I give the color directions and then a seamstress makes the patterning for the balloon.” It took six tries to get the coloring right. “Brian’s colors are not the industry-standard Pantone colors,” says Piper. “Mixing these very subtle shades of grays and browns was the big challenge with his balloon.”

While the models were first cast and the paint was first mixed in New Jersey, the actual balloon was manufactured in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with the help of a 3-D scanning program and a special machine that seals urethane panels. “It’ll hold about 4,500 cubic feet of helium,” says Piper. “That’s considered a medium-sized

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balloon.” More than 30 people have worked on the balloon over a period of roughly seven months, including those in Sioux Falls who hand-painted every inch. “Brian came in and made some revisions on the model,” says Piper, “on the ears and also on the Xs on the hands and the eyes.” In August, instructions for inflating the balloon were already sitting beneath the model, which was suspended by aircraft cable from a cane-shaped model stand. Points of inflation were all mapped out. The final steps read: “Allow head to rise” and “Fly **KAWS** tipped at about a 45-degree angle.” It brought to mind an image of an artist literally lifting off the ground and ascending. “It’s definitely the most massive piece I’ve ever done,” says Donnelly.

“It’s hard to take an artist who has international recognition and find some way to put them in awe,” says Piper, who has been with the parade for 32 years. “But when they see their balloon, suddenly, they’re a kid just like everyone else: When Murakami came, he did a whole blessing with rice and wine over the balloons while they were being inflated; Tim Burton was speechless. Even with somebody who works in the field and understands scale, renderings and models, when they’re finally next to their creation, in the form of a real Macy’s balloon, it always takes their breath away.” ♦