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**Contemporary Art Star Brian Donnelly Mixes High and Low**

Mr. Donnelly, known as KAWS, has been forging his own path since his days as a teenage graffiti artist



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By *Alexandra Wolfe* Oct. 12, 2018

Brian Donnelly, also known as KAWS, has forged his own path since he was a teenage graffiti artist. Ignoring the conventional distinction between commercial and fine art, he has designed T-shirts for skateboard brands and created sculptures and paintings that command huge sums at the world's most prestigious art auctions.

His distinctive style—marked by giant cartoonlike figures with crosses for eyes—is instantly recognizable. His painting of SpongeBob with crosses for eyes sold for \$1.36 million, a record for his art, in an Oct. 5 auction at Sotheby's in London.

On Nov. 8, Mr. Donnelly, 43, will open a new solo show at Skarstedt Gallery in New York. "When I was doing graffiti I never would have imagined I'd make a living as an artist," he says. "I think the art market is brutal."

Like Keith Haring, one of Mr. Donnelly's influences, and Banksy, whose painting "Girl With Balloon" mysteriously self-destructed at a Sotheby's auction last week, Mr. Donnelly got his start on the streets, tagging walls, underpasses and freight trains in his native New Jersey and in New York with his self-selected moniker, "KAWS." (He says it doesn't mean anything; he just liked how the letters looked together.)

As a teenager in the 1990s, he painted murals with his tag in large, often colorful capital letters. His parents, a homemaker mother and stockbroker father, were "indifferent" to his graffiti work, he says.

He experimented with painting shapes over ads. His intent wasn't to deface them. "I'd always be like, 'I actually like all this imagery.'" A lot of the ads he painted over were "campaigns that I liked." He thought his graffiti enhanced them.

One day, he came up with the idea to do crosses as eyes, and it resonated. "I had some extra time, and one of the things that came to me was a skull with those 'x' eyes," he says. "Over time, they just stuck." He says that he's always gravitated toward cartoons because they're globally popular. "I like the way cartoons exist in every country," he says.

He attended New York's School of Visual Arts, earning a bachelor's degree in illustration in 1996. After graduation, he landed a job as an illustrator for Disney, where he painted the backgrounds for animated shows.

The gig allowed him to rent his first apartment, but his passion was still graffiti. He would remove ads from phone booths and bus stops, take them back to his apartment and paint characters such as "Bendy," a Gumby-like armless figure with crosses for eyes that wrapped around the models in advertisements.

He submitted his street designs to an art competition held by the liquor brand Pernod Ricard and won a \$10,000 grant in 1998, enough to pay his rent for a while, so he quit his job to focus on his own art full-time.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, his street art caught the attention of Japanese brands such as the toy company Bounty Hunter and the streetwear brand Hectic. Bounty Hunter produced his first toy, and Hectic carried T-shirts he designed. In 2001, the founder of Supreme, the skateboard-focused brand, invited him to design some of its skateboards,



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and three years later, the Japanese clothing brand Bape asked him to come up with graphics and patterns for their clothing and shoes.

His designs became especially popular in Japan, where he says people are more open to artists doing both commercial and fine art. “In New York, it wasn’t so accepted to make product,” he remembers. “You could be a fine artist or a commercial artist but no way could you be both.” In Japan, he felt artists could simply “make good stuff or bad stuff,” he says. In 2006, he opened a retail store in Japan that sold toys, clothes and other merchandise featuring his designs.

The line between commercial and fine art began to blur globally, he says, as fine artists such as Takashi Murakami, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst did brand collaborations, such as designing lines of handbags. “Having all these different artists make product kind of opened the doors,” Mr. Donnelly says.

In 2013, he closed his Tokyo store, which gave him more time to focus on fine art, such as large-scale paintings and sculptures. This fall, he’ll have at least a dozen fine art works up for sale in Sotheby’s and Christie’s auctions, although he says that he doesn’t pay attention to which ones are selling.

He also has his solo show on tap. Sitting in his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio, located in the one building with a modern steel and glass entrance on a block filled with traditional brownstones, he hesitates to describe the new show in detail. “It’s painting and sculpture at a space in New York,” he says. Any theme? “Tension,” he says before chuckling. “No, I don’t think I’d want to explain it to someone who hasn’t come to see it,” he says. “I figure that’s the reason you make paintings and sculptures, to speak through them.”

He continues to do work for brands. One of his next undertakings is a collaboration with Dior on a line of accessories, in which his cartoon bees with crosses for eyes will decorate items such as bags, wallets and key chains.

He says that he’s unruffled by critics over the years who have charged that his work feels overly commercial and bland. “I feel no need to please anybody in any capacity,” Mr. Donnelly says. “Everyone should choose how to use their voice in whatever way they want.”

