



KAWS

Monica Ramirez-Montagut , Germano Celant (Contribution by)

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A vibrant look at the celebrated artist and designer KAWS.

KAWS Details

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From Reader Review KAWS for online ebook

Helen says

This volume consists of a survey of the art work and commercial products of Brian Donnelly, aka KAWS, from his rise as a graffiti writer from Jersey City, to approximately 2010, when he was already a well-established "name" in the firmament of pop-sensational "fad" figures, commissioned by the likes of Pharrell Williams and Kanye West. In other words, he had attained commercial success - whether he was ever "accepted" as a legit artist, is however, another story - I suppose he considers himself the descendant of the Pop artists of the last century, or the later ex-graffiti sensations, such as Basquiat, Haring, or Scharf. I just do not think his early graffiti work, though, was in any way notable. His interventions in billboards and ads, though, were clever and he did manage to parlay the attention he received from these interventions - mostly "commenting" on fashion ads, liquor ads, into an actual career. No doubt many of the anorexic-looking models actually appreciated his serpentine interventions since despite the exposure/notoriety/fame from the ads, they probably did feel trapped in an eternally and infernally exploitative system of consumerism.

Ironically commenting on ads, or creating alternative/ironic ads, is always a popular trope - like Ad Busters. KAWS work is actually based on this irony, as applied to the world of children's cartoon figures, which makes his creations particularly poignant - since they take well-loved and even venerated cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse, the Michelin Man, the Simpsons, the Smurfs, even figures from Star Wars, and eviscerates them - sometimes literally. He also created his own "logo" or cartoon figure based on the pirate symbol or logo of the skull & crossbones, perhaps because one of his early, notable billboard intervention series was painting his tag on Captain Morgan billboards. The pirate symbol is obviously also perfect from the standpoint of graffiti being a transgression, i.e. illegal vandalism, in addition to being considered by many, an art form. However, KAWS tags, as I noted above, which consisted of giant interlaced typical lettering, really weren't anything special other than that he eventually tried to use his tag to "comment" ironically on ads or billboards, incorporating eventually the modified pirate logo symbol he devised as his own "trademark."

The KAWS sign - the modified skull and crossbones - of course refers not only to the outlaw nature of graffiti art, but also to death. Donnelly says he was raised as a Catholic in NJ, but preferred to be on his own which is how he got into skateboarding, rather than a team sport, and eventually into the world of tagging and so forth, skateboard culture in general including visual skateboard culture. The pathos of Donnelly's rebellion - which is what his oeuvre represents, in a way, is embodied in the use of his trademark, popping up in many if not most of his works, or in the pathetic modifications of well-known "perky" cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny or Mickey Mouse, so as to make them in some way, either more aged, sadder, and/or dead (since the crossed-out eyes is often the symbol for a dead character in the conventions used by cartoons). I think Donnelly is commenting on kids' world - the end of innocence, or "belief" in illusory cartoon characters that only really "live" in the imagination of their creators.

Donnelly's work is thought-provoking, which is why he is evidently still "popular" - he's about to have a one-day show at the New York Public Library Main Branch Gottesman Exhibition Hall even. It's a refreshing, if bitter, "take" on consumerist culture, which, despite the 2008 crash, continues unabated seemingly.

A word about Donnelly's development as an artist. He went to SVA and his first job out of college was working at an animation studio. There he became adept at painting on cels, using a special flat paint, perfecting the technique of painting in a completely "un-painterly" way - without any brushstrokes showing, that is totally flat, as if the paint were sprayed on. Donnelly has the technical proficiency of the Pop artists, many of whom similarly started as illustrators or store window decorators, that is, came from the world of commercial as opposed to fine arts. Donnelly is also interested obviously in making money, and hasn't shied

away from commercializing his trademark products, at least to the extent of producing limited runs of figurines or toys based on his rather sad take/modifications of well-known cartoon characters, such as Mickey (that is, a greatly modified Mickey with the skull and cross-bones figure grafted or blended into Mickey's head). The skull & crossbones character KAWS created - sometimes grafted onto a strangling or spiraling serpent - is practically a constant in his work; in later work, he also veers into totally entropic views of flat planes which the viewer can see once were cartoon scenes, that is, the world he always operated in, that world he always commented on, is exploding. The same can be said of a later trope he hit upon, that of the pair of disembodied cartoon character hands. I'm not sure exactly where Donnelly is at today, but judging from where he was at in 2010, it looks like he was trying to get out of the thematic room he had literally painted himself into. Donnelly notes that there are bootlegs of his work sold on Canal Street - he's also, or at least was also circa 2010 & before - popular in Japan, among the youthful crowd that follows pop culture sensations in the world of visual & musical expression. However, as Donnelly ages out of his cohort, it will be interesting to see how he handles entering eventually middle age; I'm not sure he can remain the "darling" of the "Hello Kitty" set etc., as an older man.

The question remains: Is Donnelly a fine artist, or is he a graffiti writer first, an industrial/toy designer, who saw a trend, and capitalized on it? The essays included in the volume obviously are highly laudatory - and I wouldn't think to take away from Donnelly the authenticity of his vision, and right to express himself visually exactly as he sees fit, or criticize him for in-authenticity.

He says his tee-shirt designs are sketches - but I don't see anything particularly notable about these designs, some of which seem to reference the anti-"cute" fad world of the old Cabbage Patch Kids, or even, the world of deliberately "revolting" or shocking cartoonists. I think Donnelly/KAWS got trapped by his own success. If he was really going to move on to another phase of his art-making, then he'd have to abandon the lucrative career/business of his cartoon-character based "Pop" art. This is a creative trap, unless Donnelly was willing to risk all, finally throw his "toys" away, and "grow up." I have no idea what exactly Donnelly did, after 2010 - in fact, I never really followed or was aware of Donnelly that much previously, although I vaguely remember hearing about this giant modified Michelin Man plastic sculpture installation way back when, since it did create a sensation and was covered by news outlets. I'm not sure I ever saw a Donnelly work at MOMA or PS1 - maybe his works have been shown there, maybe he's even had shows there, I just don't know. But in any event, the contradictions/tensions of creating "product" - as even he puts it - so that he & his partners can make money that is, exploiting the very consumerist system they are supposedly "rebellious" against by producing and commercializing anti-cartoon cartoon characters - and also being at least nominally a fine artist, that is, producing a creative output that won't necessarily "score" or be a commercial or even critical success - the contradictions must be excruciating, and it would be interesting to find out how KAWS was able to resolve them, if at all. He's technically proficient, that's for sure, and he seems to soak up knowledge of commercial production of toys, tee-shirts, bronze and chrome-plated sculpture, furniture making, tile & store design and so forth, instantly. Everybody seems to want to latch onto him - to use him, or an affiliation with him, or his "vision" as a way to perhaps indirectly "sell" or simply just comment on their trademarked goods/images, even if KAWS' goods "comment" negatively on well-loved cartoon figures (such as Disney allowing him to use Mickey as a basis for his work). I don't follow pop culture or fads or sensations that much - KAWS seems extremely savvy/facile, but I wonder if he himself isn't the most trapped by his own skull-and-crossbones shtick/symbol.

SeanTheRobot says

KAWS works from early street art up until recent art exhibits. Great book for anyone who likes this man's art.

Jesús G. says

It is a total disappointment that the pages of the book are made of cheap quality, and the pictures are too small. Do not waste your money on this book.

Andrew says

A nice look at the work of graf artist KAWS. The book design is beautiful.
