

Press Release



KAWS (American, born 1974), *WHAT PARTY*, 2020. Bronze, paint, 90 x 43 5/16 x 35 3/8 in. (228.6 x 110 x 89.9 cm). © KAWS. (Photo: Michael Blondo)

Brooklyn Museum

Brooklyn Museum Announces **KAWS: *WHAT PARTY***, the Artist's First Major New York City Survey

The exhibition chronicles KAWS's twenty-five-year practice, featuring graffiti drawings, paintings, smaller collectibles, furniture, recent augmented reality projects, and sculptures, including a new major commission for Rockefeller Center

On view February 12–September 5, 2021

The Brooklyn Museum is the first New York institution to present a sweeping survey of KAWS's career, from his roots as a graffiti artist to a dominating force in the contemporary art world, tracing common themes in the Brooklyn-based artist's practice. Renowned for his paintings and sculptures of pop culture-inspired characters, as well as his playful use of abstraction and his meticulous execution, KAWS bridges the worlds of art, popular culture, and commerce while investigating our connection to objects and to

one another. With a practice formed outside of orthodox art-world channels and rooted in graffiti art, drawing, and animation, KAWS has expanded access to his art by allowing the general public to purchase editions of his work and to interact with it digitally. *KAWS: WHAT PARTY* highlights a range of works from the artist's diverse career, including drawings, paintings, bronze sculptures, smaller objects, furniture, and monumental wooden sculptures of the beloved *COMPANION* character, as well as a selection of new and existing works that have never been publicly displayed. Throughout the exhibition, visitors will be invited to directly engage with KAWS's work through Acute Art, an augmented reality app the artist has partnered with. In conjunction with *KAWS: WHAT PARTY*, a towering new sculpture by the artist will also be installed at Rockefeller Center's historic plaza in summer 2021.

"The Brooklyn Museum and KAWS have been working together since 2015, and we're excited to further that relationship by presenting his first mid-career survey in the U.S.," says Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum, and curator of *KAWS: WHAT PARTY*. "While participating in a cultural environment shaped by image and consumption, KAWS simultaneously emphasizes the constant presence of universal emotions in his work, such as love, friendship, loneliness, and alienation—an emphasis that is now more important and relevant than ever before."

KAWS: WHAT PARTY highlights five overarching tenets of the artist's evolving artistic practice. The first section brings together examples of KAWS's earliest work, including graffiti drawings and notebooks from the early 1990s, on view for the first time in the United States. These works are accompanied by the artist's early-career altered bus shelter and phone booth advertisements, which first brought him notoriety, as well as a collection of multimedia works that provide glimpses into his studio practice.

The second section focuses on the artist's appropriation, alteration, and abstraction of characters from popular American cartoons, and includes a selection of shaped canvases featuring characters like the "KIMPSONS" and "KAWSBOB." By extracting details from iconic cartoon figures and placing them at the fore, KAWS masterfully explores line, color, and composition to convey a sense of experimentation, exuberance, and play. KAWS's work often exudes overtones of childlike innocence while simultaneously retaining underlying, subtly menacing themes of transgression and subversion commonly found in many of his public installations.

The third section consists of all new work addressing the current social climate. Featured is a series of paintings and a grand, introspective sculpture, evoking ubiquitous feelings of sadness, grief, anxiety, and isolation.

"KAWS's new works speak powerfully to the isolation, fears, and grief of our times," says Anne Pasternak, Shelby White and Leon Levy Director, Brooklyn Museum. "It reminds us that there's a universality to our suffering."

In the fourth section, visitors enter a corridor highlighting KAWS's collaborations with other designers and brands in fashion and industrial design. A wide selection of preparatory sketches and furniture, produced together with the Brazilian design studio Campana Brothers, as well as toys and other products, showcases the artist's exploration of other creative industries as a way to expand both his artistic practice and the public's access to his work. By working with commercial industries to create products on a larger scale, KAWS continues to blur the boundary between populist and elite art, departing from the established notion that fine art must be exclusive or one of a kind. This accessibility, in turn, has gained the artist a large and dedicated global following.

The concluding section of the exhibition centers on KAWS's acclaimed *COMPANION* figure, in a number of forms. First appearing in the artist's early ad interventions, *COMPANION* serves as a consistent figurative element throughout his work. On display are a number of newly fabricated *COMPANION* sculptures from the artist's popular *HOLIDAY* project. These are juxtaposed with never-before-seen cinematic short films highlighting *HOLIDAY*, which saw the installation of monumental inflatable *COMPANION* figures in Seoul, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan, as well as a virtual installation in outer space. The result is an immersive experience that brings visitors into KAWS's world. By bringing *COMPANION* beyond white-walled galleries and into public spaces, KAWS ensures that the widest range of people can contemplate, interact with, and enjoy his work. Smaller versions of *COMPANION* are also on view in this section, showcasing KAWS's attention to execution, craftsmanship, and seriality through extreme variations in scale.

Throughout the exhibition, visitors are encouraged to engage with KAWS's work through the use of an augmented reality (AR) app. Teaming up with the digital art platform Acute Art, KAWS presents augmented reality sculptures, allowing visitors to digitally interact with his art on their smartphones to create their own experience. Through AR, KAWS continues to expand his reach and connect with audiences on a global scale. As an early adopter of social media in the art world, he frequently uses platforms such as Instagram to share new projects and connect with his followers. And now, through AR, the public can bring KAWS's work into their own world.

KAWS: WHAT PARTY also includes an integrated shop featuring the artist's products, acknowledging the ways KAWS investigates the space between art and commodity. His exploration of this gray area draws on a rich history of exercises in commodification in fine art, namely Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* (1961) and Keith Haring's Pop Shop.

A fully illustrated catalogue, co-published with Phaidon Press, accompanies the exhibition. Essayists include Daniel Birnbaum, art critic, curator, and director of Acute Art, and Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum.

In conjunction with the exhibition, KAWS is creating a new, monumental sculpture for Rockefeller Center that will be installed in the complex's iconic plaza in August 2021.

"We are thrilled to bring the magic of KAWS to Rockefeller Center, and to extend the footprint of the Brooklyn Museum's groundbreaking exhibition with this commission that was conceived for the Center," says EB Kelly, Tishman Speyer Managing Director overseeing Rockefeller Center. "The Center has long been a platform for public art, and we are especially proud to welcome KAWS, a true New Yorker who is inspired by our city. We believe that KAWS's new work at Rockefeller Center will instantly become the talk of the town."

About KAWS

KAWS engages audiences beyond the museums and galleries in which he regularly exhibits. His prolific body of work straddles the worlds of art and design to include paintings, murals, graphic and product design, street art, and large-scale sculptures. Over the last two decades KAWS has built a successful career with work that consistently shows his formal agility as an artist, as well as his underlying wit, irreverence, and affection for our times. His refined graphic language revitalizes figuration with both big, bold gestures and playful intricacies.

KAWS often appropriates and draws inspiration from pop culture animations, forming a unique artistic vocabulary that spans mediums. Admired for his larger-than-life sculptures and hard-edge paintings that emphasize line and color, KAWS's cast of hybrid cartoon characters are the strongest examples of his exploration of humanity. As seen in his collaborations with global brands, KAWS's imagery possesses a sophisticated humor and reveals a thoughtful interplay with consumer products. With their broad appeal, KAWS's artworks are highly sought-after by collectors inside and outside the art world, establishing KAWS as a uniquely prominent artist and influence in today's culture.

KAWS (b. 1974, Jersey City, New Jersey; lives and works in Brooklyn, New York) has exhibited extensively in renowned institutions, including solo exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia (2019); Fire Station, Qatar Museums, Doha, Qatar (2019); Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Michigan (2019); Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis, Missouri (2017); Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (2016), which traveled to the Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China (2017); Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Longside Gallery, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom (2016); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2015); Centro de Arte Contemporáneo, Málaga, Spain (2014); Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Overland Park, Kansas (2013); Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (2013); High Art Museum, Atlanta, Georgia (2011); and Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut (2011).

KAWS: WHAT PARTY is curated by Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum.

Presented by DIOR.

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