



Cult Artist KAWS Finally Comes to Australia

Brian Donnelly's distinctive pop-culture-referencing work has appeared on everything from Uniqlo T-shirts to VMA trophies. Now, after three years of preparation, 150 of his most iconic works have arrived in Melbourne – an Australian first.

by Aleksandra Bliszczuk ART & DESIGN

Until April next year, visitors at the NGV will be greeted by an imposing seven-metre-high sculpture resembling Mickey Mouse, only with a skull and crossbones in place of the usual cartoon grin.

Those with even a passing recognition of contemporary art will recognise it as a work by Brooklyn-based artist Brian Donnelly, aka KAWS. The towering specimen, titled *GONE* (a larger version of his signature *Companion* character), took 12 months to create and is the biggest bronze statue Donnelly has ever made.

"It's transformative to see one of these figures seen as cute and cuddly at that enormous scale and cantilevered above people's heads," says Simon Maidment, curator of the NGV's new summer blockbuster, *KAWS: Companionship in the Age of Loneliness*. "It's quite a visceral experience."

The ambitious exhibition is the artist's first in Australia. KAWS and Maidment spent three years pulling together 25 years' worth of art in preparation. There was a lot to choose from. A prolific artist working in graffiti, painting, sculpting, fashion and collectables, KAWS's signature cartoon skull faces have been transferred onto figurines, Vans sneakers, Uniqlo T-shirts, Sesame Street dolls, VMA trophies, the Michelin Man logo and a Kanye West album cover. In 2017, his *Simpsons* parody of the *Beatles*' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* LP cover (featuring each character with Xs for eyes), sold at auction in Hong Kong for USD\$14.8 million – 15 times the estimated value.

Maidment says these examples of KAWS's appropriation and subversions of pop culture are about making – and leaving – a mark. From scrawling "KAWS" on New York City walls to infiltrating big brands, Maidment says KAWS

sees his presence reflected back at him in his own environment.

"All of KAWS's graffiti pieces say 'KAWS'," says Maidment. "They're actually the word, brand, moniker or name. Every one of them features it, so it's sort of like him going 'KAWS, KAWS, KAWS!' out there in the world."

While this helps make KAWS's work universally visible, this new exhibition focuses on the emotion of loneliness prevalent in the artist's more recent works.

Since he created his first toy in Japan in 1999, KAWS's characters have been given names like Chum, BFF, Accomplice and Companion. Many demonstrate despair or compassion despite their flippant toy-like form. One famously sits slumped with its head in its hands. In another work, two characters hug. Whimsical and childlike at first glance, his characters display a vulnerability, melancholy, and thirst for meaningful human interaction.

That can perhaps be traced back to the scene KAWS came from. The artist's rise to fame began in the '90s as Donnelly gained notoriety in New York graffiti circles. He worked as a cel animation painter after attending art school and soon forged an online following, engaging directly with fans and leveraging products via social media, years before his first solo show.

"He comes from graffiti, skateboarding and urbanwear – that's the scene he's in [in the '90s]," says Maidment. "His high-art gallery practice evolved from there, rather than it being the endgame. It's not like the success has built the entrepreneurialism, it's actually the other way around."

Maidment's task over the last three years of preparation for the exhibition has been to try and translate KAWS's vast multidimensional oeuvre into the NGV's gallery spaces.

KAWS: Companionship in the Age of Loneliness traces the chronology of the artist from his beginnings to the present. Starting with sketchbooks, the exhibition moves through over 150 artworks including posters, paintings, sculptures and "immersive rooms", where artworks extend onto the walls and floor using large-scale graphics.

There's also a custom-made 25-metre long cabinet filled with more than 300 objects, products and sketches selected by the artist.

Fans take note: an extensive KAWS collection is available online and at a retail pop-up at NGV International.

KAWS: Companionship in the Age of Loneliness is at NGV International until April 2020. Broadsheet is a proud media partner of NGV.

Above: KAWS, *ALONG THE WAY* 2013
Wood, 550 x 448 x 306cm
Photography by Jonty Wilde

Below: KAWS, *CHUM* (KCA6), 2012
Acrylic on canvas over panel, 213.4 x 172.7 x 4.4 cm
Photography by Matt Hawthorne

