

# KAWS: FAMILY

Brooklyn-based artist Brian Donnelly, better known as KAWS, has forged his own distinct path through the art world for the past 30 years. An interplay of fine art, popular culture, street art, advertising, branding, graphic design, and fashion, KAWS's multidisciplinary practice defies simple categorization.

In his Canadian museum debut, KAWS invites us to consider the concept of family. Family can be something we are born into, something we choose, or something we create. The KAWS family of figures—with features he appropriates from the pop-culture zeitgeist—recur throughout his paintings, drawings, small-scale figurines, and larger-than-life-size sculptures. Though not quite human in form, these figures express a range of human emotions and pathos in their gestures and poses—from companionship to loneliness, from melancholia to unbridled joy. The cast of characters that populate the KAWS universe speaks to the complex reality of life in our contemporary world.

All works courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario.

The KAWS: FAMILY exhibition is on view on Level 2 of the AGO and spread out across three galleries: Gallery 224 (Signy Eaton Gallery), Gallery 223 (Galleria Italia), and Gallery 252 (Al Green Gallery).

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by Canada Council for the Arts

Painting featured at the AGO Welcome Desk on Level 1:

KAWS

born Jersey City, New Jersey, United States, 1974

UNTITLED (BAM)

2013

acrylic on canvas

Before KAWS established himself as a force within the art world, he made his mark on New York City's urban landscape with graffiti and advertising interventions. In 2013, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) commissioned him to create a largescale mural of this work on the wall of a building in downtown Brooklyn. This scaled-down canvas could be the model for the mural.

Elements of KAWS's signature iconography, like the double X's, are present in this seemingly abstract work. Describing the inspiration behind his style, KAWS said: "A lot of times I look at traditional art, animation, books, comic books, but everything I wind up drawing often comes out in this cartoon aesthetic. It's just an aesthetic I like."

Sculpture featured upon entry to Gallery 224 (Signy Eaton) on Level 2:

FAMILY

2021

bronze and paint

## Who is KAWS?

Born in 1974 in Jersey City, New Jersey, Brian Donnelly (KAWS) began his artistic journey as a graffiti writer. Young Donnelly would venture across Jersey City spray-painting building walls, freight trains, and billboards with his tag, “KAWS”, which eventually became his artist moniker. Why KAWS? He simply liked the way the letters looked together. After graduating from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan in 1996, he took a job in an animation studio but continued his public art interventions throughout the 1990s. These guerrilla takeovers greatly informed his ideological approach to art: it should be accessible to everyone.

After a transformative trip to Japan, KAWS deftly commodified his work, adding clothing, toys, and collectable package paintings to his roster. His approach of appropriating popular cartoon figures in his art led to the creation of his own family of characters, which are on view in this exhibition.

URGE (KUB3)

2020

URGE (KUB10)

2020

## Branding and Collaboration

KAWS began exploring the relationship between art and commodity in the late 1990s. His first trip to Japan, in 1997, became the catalyst for the KAWS brand. His early clothing partnerships with Japanese streetwear companies Hectic and Undercover led to collaborations with major fashion brands ranging from Uniqlo and Supreme to Comme des Garçons and Christian Dior. KAWS also collaborates with musicians and other creatives: his vinyl record box with K-pop phenomenon j-hope of BTS is on view here, and his work with American artist Kid Cudi is on view in the secondary exhibition space, Gallery 252 (Al Green Gallery).

The shoes in this section are the result of a triple collaboration between luxury Japanese fashion brand sacai, KAWS, and major global sportswear brand Nike. The drawings for each shoe on view highlight KAWS's skill and knowledge of colour theory. These detailed colour charts are part of his preparatory process.

Twelve objects displayed inside wall case:

1. UNTITLED (NIKE)

2020

ink on paper

2. UNTITLED (KAWS x SACAI)

2020

ink on paper

3. UNTITLED (NIKE x SACAI)

2020

ink on paper

4. J-HOPE, JACK IN THE BOX ALBUM

vinyl record

2022

5. SACAI x KAWS x NIKE BLAZER LOW (NEPTUNE BLUE)

2021

sneaker

6. Preparatory drawing for SACAI x KAWS x NIKE BLAZER LOW (NEPTUNE BLUE)

2020

acrylic and ink on paper

7. SACAI x KAWS x NIKE BLAZER LOW (PURPLE DUSK)

2021

sneaker

8. Preparatory drawing for SACAI x KAWS x NIKE BLAZER LOW (PURPLE DUSK)

2020

acrylic and ink on paper

9. SACAI x KAWS x NIKE BLAZER LOW (REED)

2021

sneaker

10. Preparatory drawing for SACAI x KAWS x NIKE BLAZER LOW (REED)

2020

acrylic and ink on paper

11. SACAI x KAWS x NIKE BLAZER LOW (TEAM RED)

2021

sneaker

12. Preparatory drawing for SACAI x KAWS x NIKE BLAZER LOW (TEAM RED)

2020

acrylic and ink on paper

## **Pop Culture and the Art of Appropriation**

I do start with familiar things and that's primarily to make the work more approachable for people—it's an entry point.

—KAWS

In the early 2000s, KAWS began appropriating popular cartoons in his work, starting with America's favourite cartoon nuclear family: *The Simpsons*. Work on his KIMPSONS series—the transformation of the characters employing his signature skull-and-crossbones motif—began after a trip to Japan.

While wandering around Tokyo, he noticed the high volume of Simpsons merchandise. The cross-cultural register of the cartoon stood out to him. "I found it weird how infused a cartoon could become in people's lives," he said in a 2007 interview, "the impact it could have, compared to regular politics."

He would later appropriate imagery from *The Smurfs*, *Peanuts*, *Fat Albert*, *Sesame Street*, and *SpongeBob SquarePants*. These works contain elements of childhood nostalgia while also tracing the evolving story of American animation.

UNTITLED (KIMPSONS)

2004

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Larry Warsh

UNTITLED (KIMPSONS #2)

2004

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Larry Warsh

KIMPSONS SERIES

2005

acrylic on canvas

Private Collection

SMALL K LANDSCAPE

SMALL B LANDSCAPE

SMALL H LANDSCAPE

SMALL M LANDSCAPE

2001

acrylic on canvas



## GOOD INTENTIONS

2015

bronze and paint

Collection of the Madison Group, Courtesy Corkin Gallery

In this two-figure sculpture, KAWS casts COMPANION—one of his signature characters—in the roles of parent and child. Partly hidden, the child peers out from behind the adult's leg. In its role as parent and protector, KAWS imbues the adult figure with a sense of assuredness. Through the lens of parenting, “good intentions” can have positive associations, but also darker ones. Can a parent truly protect their child from the harsh realities of contemporary life? COMPANION, with a supportive hand on the back of its small offspring, is figuring it out along with the rest of us.

Series of three paintings displayed inside wall case:

## UNTITLED (KIMPSONS), PACKAGE PAINTING SERIES

2001

acrylic on canvas in blister package with printed card

Private Collection

## UNTITLED (KIMPSONS), PACKAGE PAINTING SERIES

2001

acrylic on canvas in a blister package with printed card

## UNTITLED (KIMPSONS), PACKAGE PAINTING SERIES

2002

acrylic on canvas in blister package with printed card

In the center of the gallery:

## GONE

2020

bronze and paint

## COMPANION

2020

vinyl

COMPANION, the first member of the KAWS family of figures, may look familiar. With its cartoonish gloves, oversized shoes, and large-buttoned shorts, it bears (intentional) resemblance to Walt Disney Studios mascot Mickey Mouse. The notable exception is the mouse head, replaced here with a soft skull and crossbones with X's for eyes—iconography KAWS began employing in his early years as a graffiti artist.

COMPANION originated as a toy, much like this one. In 1999, KAWS collaborated with the Japanese company Bounty Hunter to create a figurine unlike any other on the market. Said KAWS: "I always wondered why figures never had these kinds of expressive gestures—they were always proud superheroes standing tall or in other stiff poses. I wanted to create an emotional connection that could reflect our times and how I feel."

## From Line to Form

Brian Donnelly began his artistic journey at the age of 12 with graffiti—a style of art that breaks convention. He began tagging the streets of his hometown, Jersey City, eventually branching out to Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. This was the formative period when he developed his artist persona KAWS and several of his signature motifs. In 1993 he enrolled in Manhattan’s School of Visual Arts, where he received technical training.

This salon-style hang of works reveals his love of drawing and his dedication to refining his skill.

KAWS’s time as a graffiti artist was foundational to what would become the ethos of his current practice: claiming public spaces, communicating with broad audiences, and canny self-promotion.

All drawings are ink on paper.

LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM

ROW 1

1. UNTITLED (SEPARATED)

2020

2. UNTITLED (HOLIDAY)

2019

3. UNTITLED (KAWS)

2008

4. UNTITLED (CINELLI)

2008

5. UNTITLED (BEST OF NEW YORK)

2009

6. UNTITLED (COMME)

2007

7. UNTITLED (CHUM LINES)

2008

8. UNTITLED (KIMPSONS)

2007

9. UNTITLED (TOGETHER)

2017

ROW 2

10. UNTITLED (COMPANION DISSECTED)

2016

11. UNTITLED (SEEING/WATCHING)

2018

12. UNTITLED (REAL)

2006

13. UNTITLED (CLEAN SLATE)

2015

14. UNTITLED (TAKE)

2018

15. UNTITLED (FAMILY)

2021

16. UNTITLED (SHARE)

2018

17. UNTITLED (HOLIDAY SPACE)

2020

18. UNTITLED (FAKE)

2006

19. UNTITLED (KACHAMUKKU)

2021

20. UNTITLED (THE PROMISE)

2022

ROW 3

21. UNTITLED (ALONG THE WAY)

2018

22. UNTITLED (SHELTER)

2022

23. UNTITLED (KAWS PINOCCHIO)

2010

24. UNTITLED (BOO BERRY)

2022

25. UNTITLED (FRUTE BRUTE)

2022

26. UNTITLED (SWAK EMMOC SED SNOCRAG MUFRAP)

UNTITLED (KAWS COMME DES GARCONS PARFUM)

2007

27. UNTITLED (COUNT CHOCULA)

2022

28. UNTITLED (FRANKEN BERRY)

2022

29. UNTITLED (BOBA FETT)

2013

30. UNTITLED (SESAME STREET)

2017

31. UNTITLED (CHUM CHAMBER)

2009

ROW 4

32. UNTITLED (KAWS)

2018

33. UNTITLED (TIME OFF)

2022

34. UNTITLED (GONE)

2018

35. UNTITLED (KAWS)

2022

36. UNTITLED (ORIGINALFAKE)

2007

37. UNTITLED (KAWS)

2022

38. UNTITLED (DOVER STREET MARKET)

2008

39. UNTITLED (COMPANION RESTING PLACE)

2012

40. UNTITLED (NO EXIT)

2020

## MAN'S BEST FRIEND

2014

acrylic on paper

In this large black-and-white grid of acrylic works on paper, KAWS references Snoopy, America's most iconic black-and-white cartoon dog. Creator Charles Schulz debuted Snoopy and friends in 1950 via his daily comic strip, *Peanuts*. The Peanuts universe expanded beyond the comic to include television specials, syndicated programs, and even books. On his interest in the cartoon, KAWS explains: "I think Peanuts is part of being a kid in America. Whether it's the Great Pumpkin on Halloween or just seeing a different cartoon in the paper, it's sort of around everywhere."

Here, across 50 individually framed compositions, KAWS moves in and out of abstraction to fragment Snoopy's form and figure,

playing with Schulz's cartoon-black line in a daring but controlled way. The works—along with the vinyl backdrop, which extends the composition out onto the gallery wall—emphasize the centrality of the drawn line in KAWS's practice.

CHUM

2002

acrylic on canvas

SHARE

2019

bronze and paint

TAKE

2019

bronze and paint

In 2016, KAWS welcomed BFF to the family. BFF joins COMPANION, ACCOMPLICE, and CHUM as a figure that recurs throughout his oeuvre. With bulging eyes atop its head, a round yellow nose, and a fuzzy, almost cuddly frame, BFF resembles *Sesame Street* Muppets like Cookie Monster and Elmo. KAWS debuted BFF as a bright blue sculpture like this one, but it has appeared in several colours and iterations since. Here, BFF clutches a small COMPANION, resembling a child hugging a beloved toy. The sculpture in the opposite corner, *SHARE*, is the inverse of the two characters: a small blue BFF hangs from the hand of a large COMPANION.



## Lost Futures

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent extended lockdowns inspired KAWS to paint this group of works between 2020 and 2023. The imagery captures the essence of the lockdown experience, from the sensation of floating adrift with no end in sight, to feeling locked up. Perhaps intentionally, KAWS casts the most jovial member of his family, CHUM, as the protagonist.

In a 2002 painting, also on view in this exhibition, KAWS presents CHUM in a motivated, mid-run stance, imbuing it with can-do attitude. Yet even the pluckiest among us struggled during the pandemic, dealing with unprecedented loss and feelings of hopelessness. In these works, CHUM grapples with loneliness and fear, embodying the emotional toll of the global crisis.

### ORANGE BOX

### BLUE BOX

2023

acrylic on canvas

In 2021, KAWS collaborated with General Mills to create a pair of cereal box designs for Reese's Puffs. In the orange design, the COMPANION figure relaxes in a bowl of Puffs. In the blue design, only COMPANION's gloved hands are visible, flailing out from under the cereal. Like the Andy Warhol Foundation, who worked with the Campbell Soup Company to release a set of 50th-anniversary Warhol soup cans, KAWS brought his art to the grocery store shelves for a limited time.

While these paintings feature the original box designs, the physical cereal boxes were a launch pad for KAWS's first

augmented reality game with Acute Art. The game *KAWSPUFFS* invited players to “break” pieces of cereal raining from the sky to save COMPANION from falling into a cup of Reese’s Puffs. KAWS and Acute Art team up again for this exhibition, bringing an augmented reality sculpture experience to Galleria Italia (Gallery 223).

KAWS and Estúdio Campana

GANG SOFA

2019

plush toys, stainless steel, and NFS bronze

This unusual sofa is the brainchild of KAWS and Estúdio Campana, a Brazilian design company founded by brothers Fernando and

Humberto Campana. Like KAWS, Estúdio Campana investigates ideas of reinvention and transformation through design and use of unconventional materials. In this instance, they are plush-toy adaptations of characters from *Sesame Street*.

*Sesame Street* is a children’s television mainstay, particularly in North America, and the five Muppets KAWS includes in *GANG SOFA*—Bert, Ernie, Elmo, Cookie Monster, and Big Bird—are some of the show’s most recognizable characters. KAWS’s first foray into *Sesame Street* was a collaboration with Japanese clothing retailer Uniqlo. In 2018, they released a KAWS x *Sesame Street* capsule collection that also included plush toys of five beloved characters—the same five characters that comprise the sofa.

## SEPARATED

2021

bronze and paint

## WHAT PARTY

2020

bronze and paint

Since its creation in Lyon, France, in 1894, the Michelin Man, or Bibendum, the Michelin tire company mascot, has undergone several cosmetic changes to reflect the contemporary moment. Similarly, KAWS's CHUM figure, a nod to the cheery, rotund Michelin Man, has changed with the times.

In 1999, KAWS introduced CHUM to the world in two distinct poses: in an energized mid-run stance, and standing proud, hands on hips. A "chum" is, by definition, a close friend or pal.

In its early iterations, CHUM embodied good humour and optimism. In 2020, almost two decades after its debut, KAWS brought CHUM back in a decidedly un-celebratory mood.

Here, it stands downcast, shoulders slumped, arms hanging dejectedly by its side. In *WHAT PARTY*, CHUM reflects back to us the emotional discord of 2020, a year marred by a global health crisis and socio-economic upheaval.

## LOST FUTURE

2023

acrylic on canvas

HOPELESS HORIZON

2022

acrylic on canvas

THE PORTRAIT

2021

acrylic on canvas

ADRIFT IN THE ABYSS

2022

acrylic on canvas

Displayed in Gallery 223 (Galleria Italia):

KAWS

born Jersey City, New Jersey, United States, 1974

TIME OFF

2023

vinyl

## **Sculpture in Wood**

Composed of hardy Afromosia wood, these larger-than-life sculptures appear at home among the soaring Douglas fir beams of Galleria Italia. KAWS began experimenting with wood in 2005, recalling the warmth and feeling of the wooden toys he had growing up. Of his large wood figures he says, "I want the viewer to feel like they should somehow help or console the work, despite its towering gaze."

FINAL DAYS greets us, hands spread in an eerie pose. With ALONG THE WAY, we encounter two figures with heavy heads and perhaps heavier hearts, holding each other's backs in support. The figure in AT THIS TIME stands with its head tilted back, hands covering its face, in a state of exasperation or perhaps despair. As with all KAWS characters, the poses and gestures of these figures convey a wide range of emotions.

**KAWS**

born Jersey City, New Jersey, United States, 1974

**FINAL DAYS**

2014

Afromosia wood

**ALONG THE WAY**

2013

Afromosia wood

**AT THIS TIME**

2013

Afromosia wood

## **KAWS x Acute Art: Augmented Reality**

COMPANION (EXPANDED)

2020

WATCHING

2018

augmented reality

Courtesy of the artist and Acute Art

KAWS began his partnership with virtual and augmented reality production house Acute Art in 2019. On the possibilities of augmented reality (AR), a technology that enhances the user's existing environment, KAWS remarked: "When I realized the quality that could be achieved and experienced in AR, I was immediately drawn to its potential. I have been creating objects and exhibiting works in public spaces throughout my career, and this allows me to expand on that in a whole new arena."

To activate the AR experience, approach the empty platform. Follow the instructions below and watch KAWS's COMPANION (EXPANDED) figure appear here in Galleria Italia.

Scan the QR code

1. Download the Acute Art app using the AGO's free Wi-Fi
2. Allow the app access to your location and camera

3. Select KAWS: FAMILY

4. Select COMPANION (EXTENDED)

5. Stand approximately 1 metre (3 feet) from the platform and point your phone's camera towards it to see the AR sculpture appear

Acute Art app requirements: iPhone model 8 or later | Android model 7 or later

Follow these same instructions to view WATCHING at the second platform.

Displayed in Gallery 252 (AI Green Gallery):

ACCOMPLICE

2010

fiberglass and paint

Like many of KAWS's figures, ACCOMPLICE seems inspired by an amalgamation of characters across the pop-culture landscape: from the mischievous and clever Bugs Bunny, to the suave Pink Panther, to the sinister rabbit from the cult film *Donnie Darko* (2001). Closer inspection of the figure reveals varying shades of pink between its head—KAWS's signature skull and crossbones—and its body. ACCOMPLICE's skin is not in fact its skin, but a bunny suit, complete with a cotton-ball tail.

What is ACCOMPLICE—by definition, one who helps another commit a crime—hiding under its costume? Of his characters, KAWS once said, "I feel like each figure I make is in reaction to the existing ones." Is ACCOMPLICE the trickster alter ego of the

KAWS COMPANION? Is it friend, or is it foe? Perhaps deliberately, its motives are difficult to parse.

UNTITLED (CALVIN KLEIN)

1997

acrylic on existing advertising poster

UNTITLED (HARING)

1997

acrylic on existing advertising poster

By the late 1990s, KAWS transitioned from graffiti tagging to more covert public interactions, like these advertisement interventions. American artist Keith Haring (1958–1990), whom KAWS credits as a pivotal influence, once said, “The public has a right to art ... Art is for everybody.” This principle is fundamental to KAWS’s practice.

KAWS developed his artistic vocabulary as he made his interventions. First, he took the posters out of their vitrines and brought them home.

There, he carefully painted over them, ensuring no brushstrokes were visible and making his intervention appear seamless. He then put them back in their cases for public consumption. It was around this time that he fine-tuned his motif of the soft skull and crossbones with X’d-out eyes. Here, his amoeba-like character BENDY snakes around Haring, who is pictured making his own intervention in a New York City subway station.



UNTITLED (DKNY)

1999

acrylic on existing advertising poster

NEW MORNING

2012

acrylic on canvas over panel (two parts)

CHUM (KCC3)

2014

acrylic on canvas over panel

SEEING

2018

bronze and paint

WATCHING

2018

bronze and paint

UNTITLED (SPACE)

2020

ink on paper

KAWS MTV MOONMAN

2013

black chrome plated, cast pewter, aluminum nameplate

SPACE

2021

stainless steel

KAWS and IF & Co.

UNTITLED (SPACE CHAIN) Commissioned for Kid Cudi

2021

white gold, diamonds

UNTITLED (SPACE SEATED)

2022

ink on paper

KID CUDI, MAN ON THE MOON BOX SET

2022

vinyl records

## SPACE

In 2013, MTV invited KAWS to reimagine the iconic VMA Moonman award in a special limited engagement. The Moonman received the full KAWS treatment, down to the skull-and-crossbones head and oversized gloves. KAWS continued to explore space in several future collaborations, including a *Man on the Moon* limited edition box set and related merchandise with music artist/actor/designer and friend Kid Cudi.

For *SPACE*, the life-size stainless-steel sculpture on view, KAWS puts his COMPANION in an astronaut suit, complete with hoses and valves. The idea for this sculpture originated in 2020, when KAWS collaborated with Hong Kong-based company AllRightsReserved Ltd. to organize an out-of-this world experience for his COMPANION figure. KAWS put it in a gold suit and launched it 40 kilometres into the Earth's stratosphere while a panoramic camera recorded the journey for viewers.

### The KAWS Family

Here, KAWS's COMPANION and BFF figures sit solemnly, flanking a painting of CHUM. They appear resigned, while CHUM seems motivated, running towards us mid-stride.

How do these characters move through the world, and how do they relate to one another?

KAWS's cast of characters—the family—appear throughout this exhibition in a range of materials and sizes. On his relationship with them, KAWS has said: "They talk to me. And it's really annoying. They all exist in this grim little way." While his creations serve as an extension of the artist himself, they also act as mirror for daily life in modern society.

## THE NEWS

2017

acrylic on canvas

This series of nine circular canvases, or tondos, highlight KAWS's cartoon-inspired colour palette and polished painting skills. A "tondo"—a

Renaissance term derived from the Italian "rotondo" or "round"—refers to a circular artwork that allows painters to emphasize the middle of an image by containing a scene within a frame. With each of these works, KAWS upends this notion by painting a zoomed-in, chaotic focal point of what appears to be a wider scene. Although the works appear abstract at first glance, a closer inspection reveals glimpses of X'd-out eyes, multihued teeth, gloved hands, and other identifiable features. It is up to us, the viewer, to imagine how these characters might extend into a different universe, a place beyond the limitations of the circular frame.