



KAWS, the Collector, Says, ‘I Don’t Feel Like Anything Is Mine.’

Some collectors treat artworks like poker chips and flip work by young artists. That’s not Brian Donnelly. Now his finds star in a show.

By [Travis Diehl](#)

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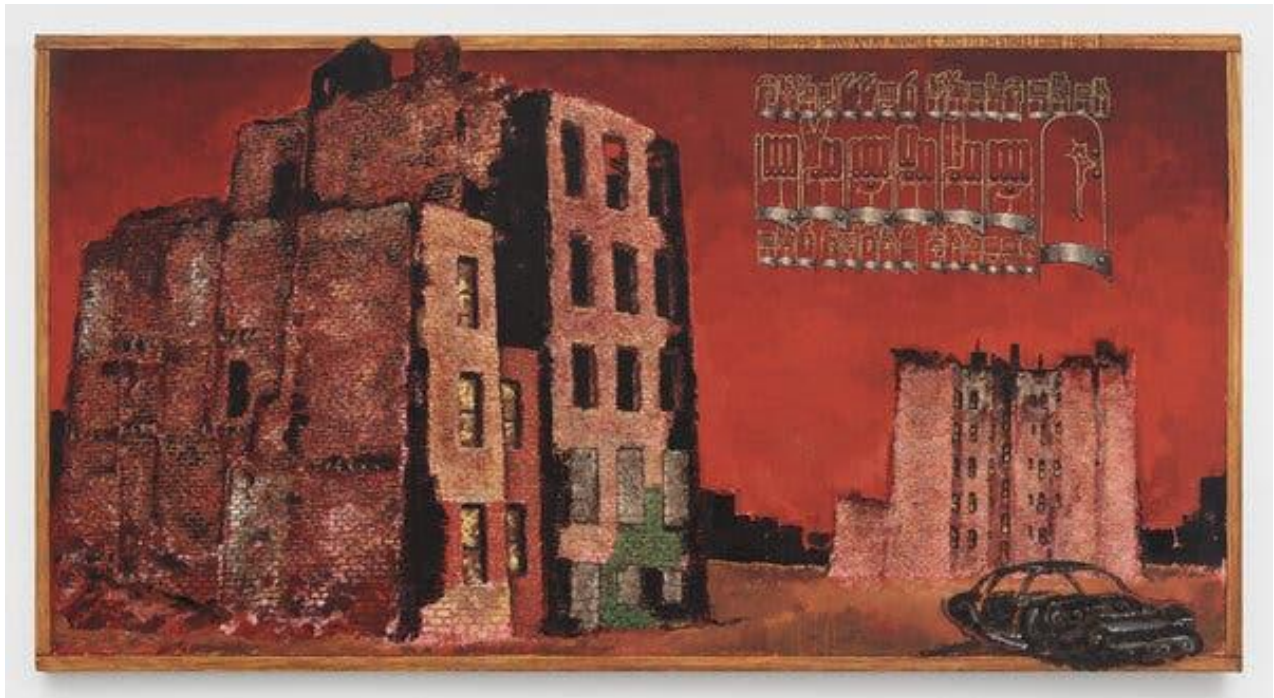
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As a young street artist, Brian Donnelly (now known as KAWS) would visit [PPOW](#) in downtown Manhattan to see work by the painter [Martin Wong](#). A tall Chinese American who loved rodeo clothes, Wong mixed with graffiti writers in '80s New York — he once kept the influential train tagger Lee Quinones as his personal chef — and painted shuttered storefronts with psychedelic intensity.

“At first I was just interested in the world he chose to focus on,” Donnelly told me. “The brick walls and the abandoned buildings and communities that existed around them.” Growing up in Jersey City, Donnelly would hone his spray painting skills in buildings like these.

Donnelly had little cash — the [X-eyed cartoon characters](#) featured in the statues and paintings he makes as KAWS hadn't yet brought him millions. But the dealers would let him look, he recalled, “and pretend like I was going to buy something.”

Now 49, Donnelly owns over 4,000 pieces, enough to curate a show from his collection at the Drawing Center in New York (on view through Jan. 19). His art, featuring Companion (resembling Mickey Mouse), BFF (Elmo), and Chum (the Michelin Man), is wildly popular even though critical opinion is divided. But he's broadly respected as a collector — especially of graffitiists, self-taught artists, and '80s New York downtowners. Several standout pieces in the show, like a prickling sketch of a cat by Wong, who died in 1999, and a multi-panel painting of cars and snakes by [David Wojnarowicz](#), a fearsome AIDS activist who died in 1992, he bought from PPOW.



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Martin Wong, “Stripped Trans Am at Avenue C and 5th Street,” 1984. Wong depicted the crumbling brick walls and shuttered shops of neglected New York neighborhoods, with psychedelic intensity. Credit...via PPOW

I wanted a window into Donnelly’s shopping habits. He suggested we go gallery hopping. One afternoon in late September, we began at PPOW’s current space in TriBeCa.

Donnelly, casually dressed in his usual black jeans, sweatshirt and cap, hadn’t seen the latest from [Robin F. Williams](#), a contemporary artist he collects, whose acid palette and crackling graphic style speak to the bold historical work Donnelly usually follows. The show featured expressionistic paintings that depict women in film roles — Meg Ryan in “When Harry Met Sally,” Eva Axén in “Suspiria” — where the characters veer between victims and heroines. A small gouache of Sissy Spacek in “Carrie,” sopping with blood in a bathtub, caught Donnelly’s eye. (The gouaches range from \$10,000 to \$25,000).

Wendy Olsoff, one of the gallery’s founders, soon joined us. “I’m going to have to talk to you because there’s a Martin Wong traveling show coming up,” she said, “a really good one. I got the checklist today.”

Whenever there’s a Wong exhibition afoot, Donnelly can expect loan requests. He’s usually happy to help. He bought his first three Wong paintings in 2014, including the moody, life-size “Untitled (Silver Storefront),” and now owns 36.

“Tell me soon,” he said, “because I just plucked all the stuff for the Drawing Center out of my house, and I’m about to rehang things.”



Robin F. Williams, “Carrie 1,” 2023, gouache on paper, at PPOW, in a show depicting women in critical moments of vulnerability, revelation or catharsis. Credit...Robin F. Williams and PPOW, New York, Photo by Ian Edquist

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DONNELLY'S DRIVER WAITED WITH THE S.U.V. in front of PPOW while we toured a few nearby spots. Gallery hopping was a special occasion — Donnelly stays busy in the studio and with his family. And he tends to collect in depth rather than browse. He likes to trace an artist's career.

"I like to nosy into back rooms," he told me. "I feel like that's where all the treats are."

Unfortunately, he said, a recent studio renovation has sapped his collecting budget.

We ducked into Bortolami on Walker Street for [a show of paintings by Deborah Remington](#) (1930-2010), who spent her last two decades withdrawn from the art scene. A gallery representative pointed out the variations in the three bodies of work on view — brushy in one moment, crisp and graphic in another. Next, at Kaufmann Repetto, we wandered among pedestals holding [pop ceramics by Magdalena Suarez Frimkess](#), who depicts characters like Minnie Mouse and Felix the Cat in lumpy tchotchkes and vessels. Born in 1929, in Venezuela, she had her first solo exhibition in 2013. ([A Frimkess survey](#) is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through Jan. 5.)

Then, back to the S.U.V. for a short ride to Andrew Edlin, on Bowery, a space that shares Donnelly's taste for self-taught artists.



Brian Donnelly at the Drawing Center, standing between details of two sculptures H.C. Westermann, "Swingin' Red King," 1961, (left) and "The Silver Queen," 1960. Credit...Lila Barth for The New York Times

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En route, Donnelly said that when [Laura Hoptman](#), the executive director of the Drawing Center, invited him to curate an exhibition, “I just told her, it’s hard for me to think of curating a show and not use works from my collection.” He’s happy with the show, naturally. “It’s just strange being like, look at all my stuff.”

As an artist, he said, you’re concerned about your work languishing in storage. On the other hand, “I would love somebody to just have my work and make it available when I need it for shows.” Collecting, at its best, is custodianship. As for his own collection, Donnelly said, “I don’t feel like anything’s really mine. I feel like I’m just sharing this time with it, then passing the baton.”

Donnelly said he’s lucky to see the art market from both sides, as an artist and a collector. Sometimes, he said, he’ll hold onto what he makes, or buy back his own work. His “Phone Booth” pieces from the 1990s, for example: snaky, skull-faced spermatozoa overpainted on models in pilfered advertisements and slipped back into the frames.

“I didn’t even think of them as something I own. You know, I just thought of them as serving a purpose of putting work out in the street.” Back in the day, they’d appear on eBay for a few hundred dollars. Now they go for \$100,000 to \$300,000, according to the artist — and Donnelly has his assistants bid, to avoid being gouged. “Slowly I’m managing to get a good amount. I think I have like 14 of them.”

The main room at Edlin displayed a suite of loose, abstract hairballs drawn by Dan Miller, an artist from the [Creative Growth](#) art center in Oakland, Calif., whom KAWS collects. But the real gems, he said, were in the gallery’s back room: a handful of paintings by the self-taught artist [Abraham Lincoln Walker](#) (1921-1993), who lived in East St. Louis, Ill., that Edlin had set aside. (The artist’s works are priced from \$10,000 to \$30,000.)



Margot Bergman, “Al Pine,” 1997, acrylic on found canvas, comprises a church in an alpine clearing turned into the nose of a giant face. Credit...Via Margot Bergman, Anton Kern Gallery, New York

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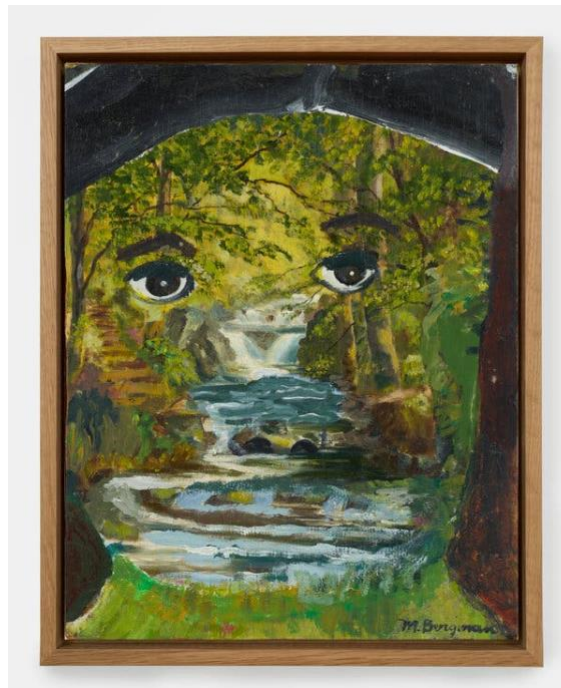
On each of the panels, phantasmic faces and figures emerge from thin squidges of deep but chalky earth tones, teals and aubergines. These examples didn't have the vibrancy of the pictures Donnelly pulled up on his phone. There was, though, an intense little painting by Joe Coleman, now in his 60s, an underground illustrator known for crisp but macabre portraits covered in narrative text, laid down with a brush one bristle wide. The dealer must know his client: Three Coleman works are part of Donnelly's Drawing Center show.

WE HEADED UP PARK AVENUE for one last stop at Anton Kern gallery in Midtown. The U.N. General Assembly was in session, and the traffic thick.

Why do you become a collector, I asked him.

"It's not something you go looking to be," Donnelly said. He collected comic books as a kid and stuffed animals before that. "I like learning about art by being with it day after day." Donnelly doesn't go for "trophy pieces," he said, although of course you want the best examples of an artist. "But then also, I like ephemera." The Drawing Center show features street artists' wide, thin sketchbooks, spread open in vitrines. "And I like the invites of all the graf guys in the '80s. When, like, [Lee Quiñones showed at Barbara Gladstone](#). And Crash showed at Sidney Janis. And these forgotten histories."

He acknowledged that some collectors treat artworks like poker chips and flip work by hot young artists. But that's not him. "Talking about money is my least favorite part of the process," he told me in a follow-up email.



Margot Bergman, "Gertrude," 1997, acrylic on found canvas, a forest scene centered on a babbling brook that resembles a head and given a pair of eyes. Credit...Via Margot Bergman, Anton Kern Gallery, New York

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One of the best parts of collecting, he said, is meeting other collectors — such as his fellow board members at the American Folk Art Museum, where he has been a trustee since 2019. “They’re just connoisseurs of the stuff they love. I might not know half of it, but you walk into their house and you’re just blown away by the obsessive accumulating of these artists.”

Through the windshield, a bubble-gum pink colossus emerged from the avenue’s yellow and gray: “BFF,” a 20-foot Muppet-like character by KAWS permanently installed in the lobby of 280 Park.

I asked if the small- and medium-size vinyl [statuettes](#) he makes of his characters are meant to be collectibles. Not really, he said. The gray “Companion” seen being [looted from a Melrose boutique](#) in a viral video from 2020, for example, might have one been from a store that would “buy them from my website and resell them.” Bootlegs abound on Amazon. He sighs when one of his editions hits the auction block. “Let them live,” Donnelly said. “Let them get thrown by a kid, you know?”

Finally, we were close enough to hop out while the driver circled. On view at Kern were old and recent works by [Margot Bergman](#), an artist from Chicago now in her 90s. Most were eerie faces made from trees, figures and other elements overlaid onto kitschy thrift-store landscapes and rural scenes. The effect is both seamless and artificial. In a way, they resemble Donnelly’s early alterations to phone booth ads and billboards.

He’d been overseas when the show opened and had bought two pieces (in the range, he said, of the total asking price of \$33,000), based on images. He indicated that “Gertrude,” from 1997, a forest scene centered on a babbling brook, resembles a head and given a pair of eyes. “That’s one of the ones I got.” The other, “Al Pine,” also from 1997, comprises a church in an alpine clearing turned into the nose of a giant face. Why that painting? Donnelly mentioned the small figures and large goats in the foreground, which complete the vertiginous mismatch of scale.

Downstairs at the front desk, Donnelly asked to buy a pair of Bergman catalogs. They were out of the smaller, older one, a gallery assistant said. But then he recognized KAWS. He produced a copy of the book and slipped it into the shopping bag.