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Esquire



Who Doesn't Know KAWS?

Brian Donnelly has taken his art to Arkansas to get more eyes on his work. In an interview with *Esquire*, he speaks about expanding his reach (as if he isn't already a household name)

BY [JOSEPH FURNESS](#)
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I am telling Brian Donnelly (AKA [KAWS](#)) over Zoom about my recent encounter with a watch collector who wrongly assumed he was introducing me to the artist's work for the first time.

The horologist had just discovered the very famous 50-year-old American painter and sculptor via the [Audemars Piguet x KAWS Royal Oak](#) timepiece that launched at the end of last year.

Though Donnelly revels in hearing about people finding his work for the first time, it doesn't happen often these days. His X-eyed gang of creations – [Companion](#) (the Mickey Mouse-esque chap, inspired by the artist's time as an illustrator at Disney, with the bones sticking out either side of his head), [Accomplice](#) (that's the bunny suit dude), [Chum](#) (the absolute unit of Michelin man build), [BFF](#) (the furry fella) and friends – have well and truly broken out of the art world and into the mainstream.



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art KAWS Take (2019)

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As an artist does, Donnelly ships them to galleries worldwide.

More than that, he inflates them to ridiculous sizes and plants them in public spaces – Bristol, England, in 2021; Southern Java, Indonesia, in 2023; [Bangkok, Thailand next month](#). (This series is named “KAWS Holiday”.)

You might also recognise them from fashion collaborations (with Dior, Uniqlo, Comme des Garçons, [The North Face](#), Nike and more), augmented reality apps (the artist partnered with [Acute Art](#) to allow smartphone users to bring the KAWS artwork to them, wherever they are), your Instagram feed (if you're one of Donnelly's 4.4 million followers) and maybe even the home of your artsy pal's place where they might exist in the form of plushes and figures which fetch astronomical prices on [StockX](#).

So, like... Who *doesn't* know KAWS?

For his art, that is, as Donnelly's personal presence is deliberately low-key.



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art KAWS Separated (2021)

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“I'd rather not have attention on the street,” he confesses in his usual prosaic voice. “I'd rather the work is known and I sort of... disappear.”

A penny plain uniform helps. “If you've seen an image of me... it's this outfit.” [I needn't describe the outfit as it is the same outfit he wears in the hero image of this article.] “It just keeps it simple. It allows me to focus on other things.”

Even at the forefront and centre of this video call, Donnelly is purposefully outshined by his brainchildren that populate the room.

Any army of KAWS-ified [Elmos](#) make up a statement chair (you can see the same one in Serena Williams' AD house tour) to his left.

To his right, there's a big blue BFF.

A little further to the right revealed a cluster of colourless prototypes. He allows me a glimpse only for a moment before snapping back the webcam with a cartoonish chuckle.

“Through them, I communicate with the public.”

Your latest exhibition is in Arkansas. Why there?

The [Art Gallery of Ontario](#) [AGO], where it was originally presented, put forward the option to travel the show to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. It's an incredible institution, and I'm all for getting my work in front of those who I haven't had the opportunity to get it in front of yet. America is so big, and I feel like I generally lean into the coasts, just because that's where the opportunities normally are. Being able to show in a place like Arkansas, or, like, when I did a show in Fort Worth, means creating connections outside of more popular locations in a more intimate way. For someone to see my work in person – not in print or digitally – is what's most important to me.

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Tell me about the exhibition itself, KAWS Family

It was curated by Julian Cox and it's more of a survey than anything. We've had a couple of surveys in the last few years and, for this one, we wanted to focus on [...] the community I've built in the body of work I've created. The title of the show comes from the title of a sculpture within the show – this is usual for one of my exhibitions. Family is a sculpture of four figures and an extra little one – that was the guiding light.



Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art KAWS Family (2021)

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You have two children. Do they have a favourite character from the KAWS universe?

No, not really. They know what I do and they sometimes acknowledge it and sometimes don't. For them, it's just Daddy Stuff. It's been around since they were born, always in their peripheral. They are not running to tell me about their favourite work.

How about your wife [Julia Chiang]?

Well, she's an artist as well, we're very supportive of each other's practises, and we try to help out with whatever each other needs. I see her body of work as a part of her and it's hard to separate one thing from the next. For some, I would imagine it could be a conflict having a creative partner, but it's so far, so good, knock on wood.

Let's talk about your fashion family. How is it seeing Pharrell, a long-time friend of yours, do his thing at LV?

Whether it's Pharrell or anyone else, you love seeing the people that you know grow into the people they become. It's interesting to watch somebody take opportunities and make them bigger – fill in the space and be the best selves they can be. Pharrell is constantly working and pushing: he's always talked like nothing is an obstacle. And suddenly you realise he's blowing through boundaries like no one else. To me, that's inspiring.

Regarding Kim Jones' exit from Dior, an era you helped launch, what are your thoughts?

He's such an amazing talent. I'm very curious about what he's doing next. He hasn't told me. I was very fortunate to have that opportunity to work with him for that first collection and [we did the thing for Chinese New Year that was in stores just recently](#). It's a gift to be able to work with people you admire and people who are talented at what they do. I would work with [Kim](#) all day, every day, no matter where he goes.

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Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art KAWS Gone (2020)

Perhaps your most famous collaboration is with Uniqlo. Why do you continue to work with the high street retailer?

Doing a project with Dior or AP is incredible but doing something with Uniqlo... the reach is so different and you see the work everywhere. I was in The Met the other day and this kid was walking in front of me with my shirt on and it's just there – it has such a presence.

I always think back to when I was young, about how I interacted with art so I can communicate in those same ways. How do I keep the work disseminating in all different lanes at the same time? It's about finding the balance.

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Any fashion partnerships in the pipeline?

Honestly, I'm really enjoying focusing on painting and sculpture. It's nice to retreat back to my studio and focus on intimate works. Though, I'm happy to go in and out of fashion when opportunities arise.

How do you decide where you take the KAWS Holiday franchise?

I mean, I keep it pretty open [*Laughs.*] It's basically places I haven't been and want to check out. Where opportunities open up, if it's a place I can create a new bridge to another community I don't have a presence in, I see that as a plus. And I like interesting landscapes that I can have a working dialogue with.

Last year, you presented some of your art at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh alongside some of its namesake's most iconic pieces. How did that come about?

When I was originally approached for that show, it was meant to be a solo show. It turned into a show with [Warhol](#)'s work over time. It was a tall order but I jumped at the opportunity to do it. It was fun but I would like to digest that before getting into anything similar.

What artists are you excited about right now?

I've been really excited about facilities like [Creative Growth](#) that are working with artists with developmental disabilities. There is a lot of pure, good art coming out of that. I don't know if I'm necessarily excited about any individual new artists, though. Doing a show at [The Drawing Center](#) [in New York] last year made me stop and focus on a lot of stuff I've been collecting. When an artwork is made, it sits in this timeless sphere – I can be just as excited about something that someone made in the 1920s or 1930s, something by Louis Wain, for example, than anything new. It's all just a matter of when you get into it – when you discover it.

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Oh, yes – I spotted you posted a photo of a Louis Wain piece on Instagram just a few days ago

Louis Wain, I've been collecting for a bit. I hung that painting in my daughter's room and then took a photo of it. I've also been thinking about the work of Adolf Wölfli. Something could be made over 100 years ago but it could still be new to you.

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What are you working on right now?

I'm working on a show for Berlin in June with [Galerie Max Hetzler](#).

You embrace technological advancements in your work. Would you encourage fellow artists to do the same?

I wouldn't like to preach to anyone about what they should do but, yeah, why deny yourself the opportunity to try something new, learn something new and make work in different way? Even if it's not exactly the trendy thing, if you're interested in a medium, you should still explore it. You might be successful in that thing, or at the very least, it'll lead you to other ideas and take you to new territories.

Are you referring to your experiences with augmented reality?

That was such a fun project to work on. We were doing it all pre-Covid and then Covid hit almost to the day of our launch. To have a way of putting work into the world, and having people interact with the work... I felt blessed to have that at that time. And then we did the Serpentine show which focused on AR and placing works in the video game *Fortnite*. There are so many different pockets of interest to tap into and I find it interesting to cross-pollinate. And look what happens: a watch guy will try and introduce you to my work.

KAWS: Family is showing at [Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art](#) until 28 July 2025.