



CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## 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.

Brian Donnelly, a.k.a. KAWS, at the Drawing Center in SoHo, which is showing "The Way I See It: Selections from the KAWS Collection," which features artworks from his own collection. Lila Barth for The New York Times

**By Travis Diehl**

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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.

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.

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.

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.)

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.