

The New York Times

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KAWS Looks to the Fringes for Inspiration

The wildly popular artist mixes up his collection, shining a light on Outsider art and graffiti.



The artist KAWS (Brian Donnelly) with pieces from his personal art collection in his Williamsburg studio. From left, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's "No. 866, March 23, 1960" (1960) and Ed Ruscha "Bail Jumper" (1990). Cole Wilson for The New York Times

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By Max Lakin

Feb. 20, 2020



As KAWS, Brian Donnelly creates cartoon-colored reworkings of well-known pop culture characters rendered slightly askew through recurring motifs — cauliflower ears and XXs for eyes — that give the effect of a dream half-remembered. His popularity, based on the raft of toys, fashion collaborations and multimillion dollar auction results, hovers somewhere near the mesosphere.

That Mr. Donnelly, who got his start writing graffiti in his native Jersey City, has recently joined the [American Museum of Folk Art's](#) board may sound incongruous for someone routinely designated (and euphemistically maligned) as a street artist. But in fact he collects the work of self-taught and outsider American artists. In an upstairs living space in his Williamsburg, Brooklyn, studio, paintings by Joe Coleman and [Susan Te Kahurangi King](#) share the wall with large-scale canvases by [Peter Saul](#), while [R. Crumb comic panels](#) mix with sketchbooks from graffiti legends like Phase 2 and Dondi White.

By joining the folk art trustees, Mr. Donnelly traces a neat concentricity with a board predecessor and shaper of an art movement, Andy Warhol, who could often be found at the Chelsea Flea Market loading his Dodge convertible with Americana and folk pieces.

“When I think of how I collect, it isn’t that I’m trying to be a part of some group or collect some type of work,” he said in his second-floor aerie, as assistants quietly colored paintings downstairs. “I just like collecting. It’s led me to a place where some of the stuff I collect is self-taught. I can’t compartmentalize it. For me, I just think of people making stuff. I find a lot of the self-taught stuff is a nice rabbit hole to go down.”

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These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

What was your interest in joining the folk art museum?

I think how I came to be in touch with the museum was their shows of Henry Darger and that kind of work. I feel like, if anything, maybe I can cross-pollinate some people who are familiar with my work and introduce them to the great things that are happening at the museum.



More from KAWS's collection. Left, two pieces from H.C. Westermann: top, "The Sea of Cortez: High" (1973) and "Madame B" (1965). Center, Peter Saul's "Subway" (1982), and right, from top, Lee Quiñones's "Heart Break" (1978), and his "Lee Has Quit" (1977); Eric Haze's "H A Z E" (1981); and Quiñones's "Hagar the Horrible" (1978). H.C. Westermann/Dumbarton Arts, LLC/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Peter Saul/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Cole Wilson for The New York Times

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Center from top: Jim Nutt's "Twixt" (1996) and his "Is this the right way?" (1979); Lee Quiñones's "Fabulous Ave" (1977), behind stack; Mr. Nutt's "One's More Ridiculous" (1978); and left, "BFF," a doll by KAWS and Dior (2018), sitting on Misha Kahn's "Miss Fishy" (2016). Cole Wilson for The New York Times

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"Black Book" by REVOLT (c. 1980). Cole Wilson for The New York Times

What sort of outsider art do you gravitate toward?

A lot of stuff is turning over, new stuff is coming to market. There are great [\[Martín\] Ramírez](#) drawings that have come up. I was collecting Imagists, and drawing connections between, say, Ramírez and [Jim Nutt](#). What really got me into it was Susan King's work, and that was only a few years ago. I was collecting Peter Saul and really like his '60s works on paper, and I saw images of King's work, and what she was doing in the '60s was amazing. It felt like it could have the best conversation with all this Saul stuff. These drawings hold their weight with Peter, with the Chicago Imagists.

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Do you feel a kind of stewardship in collecting and preserving work that does not always get institutional representation?

I feel that about every work I collect. It's not to be taken lightly, to be the custodian of a work of art, whether it's a piece made just now by some young kid, or something from the '50s. For me, it's not like there's an end goal, but it informs me as an artist. I get really interested in what shows were these works in, and the trajectory of an artist. Also, just having it around and seeing the marks in person. [Joe Coleman's Darger portrait](#) you could see in a show, but you're spending, what, two minutes with it, max?



From left, Willem de Kooning's "Untitled (Woman)" (c. 1951-53); H.C. Westermann's "Central America" (1973); and Lee Quiñones's "In The 7 Yard Study #1" (1982). The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; H.C. Westermann/Dumbarton Arts, LLC/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Cole Wilson for The New York Times

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On wall, Martin Wong's "Heaven" (1988); on floor, from left, Mr. Wong's "Chinese Altar Screen" (1989); in front of altar screen, KAWS's "GONE" (2019); Joyce Pensato's "Untitled Elmo" (2012-19); KAWS's "KAWS WONDERWALL" (2010) and KAWS and Estudio Campana's "KAWS: Monster" (2019). Cole Wilson for The New York Times

You own a few works by Martin Wong, an artist and inveterate collector in a very specific category.

I definitely appreciate what he did as far as taking a body of graf and putting it together in one place for people to view. [Lee Quiñones](#) was his chef for awhile; to have a place to stay, he cooked for him. There's a lot of overlapping synergies that aren't out front in the textbooks.

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Do you consider graffiti an outsider art?

I always think: Where does graf fall? You can't look at it the way you do artists coming out of art schools. With graffiti, you're making work to reach people, you have this bravado, you want to dominate spaces, but with self-taught, often people are making work to pass their days; sometimes it's only discovered after they've passed. Say Darger for example: Only after death are you finding all that work. People get out of it what they need. I don't think there's been a lot of great literature about graffiti. You need to have enough distance to look back objectively. I think Henry's [Henry Chalfant] [show at the Bronx Museum](#) was a great entry point for people. I mean, I'm far from the person who's going to tell you the definition of outsider art.

Who do you feel is due?

It's endless. Helen Rae — did you see her stuff at the Outsider Art Fair? She does these amazing drawings in colored pencil that when you see them they just destroy so much other stuff and you've got to say: when? I'm always thinking about how artists are making different work in other parts of the world, but it seems like they're feeding off each other, like some of the '60s paintings of [Tadanori Yokoo](#), they're very similar to [Karl Wirsum](#) in the '60s, and there's no way they're overlapping. There's no internet; it's not like Karl was in the art magazines at the time. You just wonder, what is that? R. Crumb is another who's a complete anomaly. Paul Morris repositioned him, but the work was always there. Sometimes it takes somebody to put it into the system. It's interesting seeing what gets taken into the gallery world.

Correction: Feb. 20, 2020

An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of an artist. She is Helen Rae, not Helen Ray.

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