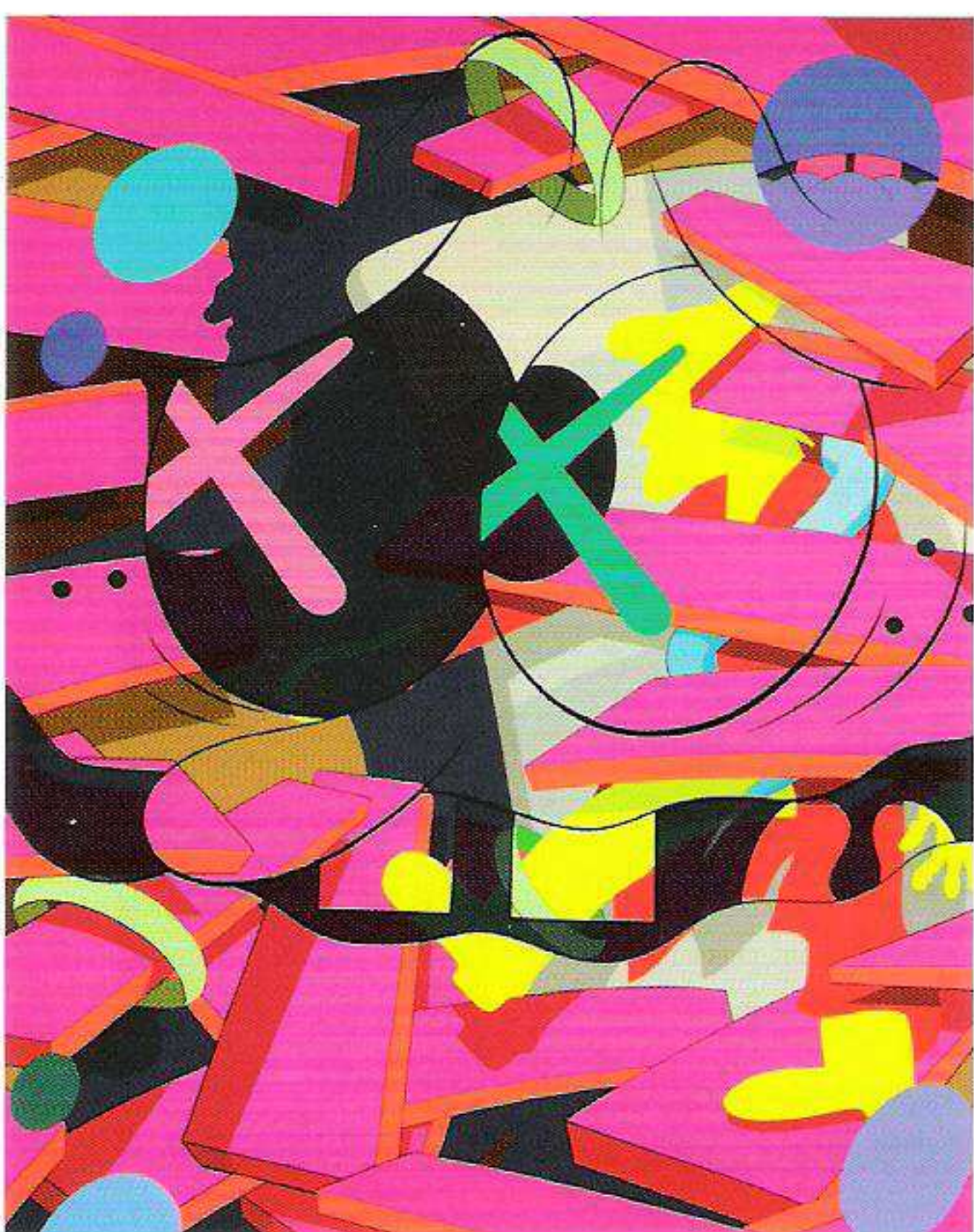




Gone and Beyond



CHUM (Black)



Down Time

## KAWS: DOWN TIME at the High Museum of Art Atlanta

by Joe Pagetta

**I**f there's a word that best describes the work of KAWS (Brian Donnelly), it would be **collaboration**. Even from his early days as a graffiti artist in Jersey City, New Jersey, it never seemed as if his work on trains and billboards, and later bus and subway station advertising, was nihilistic or boastful. Rather, he appeared to be suggesting a collaboration with designers and architects. They just didn't know it yet. It was a strategy—and some would say with graffiti, a risk—that paid off. Even recent work appropriating the characters from *The Simpsons*, *The Smurfs*, or *SpongeBob Square Pants*, in which they become *The Kimpsons*, *Kurfs*, and *KAWSBOB*, appear honest and reverential. As he told fellow artist Gary Panter in a 2009 interview, reprinted in *KAWS: 1993–2010* (Rizzoli), "I think that anyone I make reference to can see that there's a care put into what I do. I'm not trying to fool anybody. I'm not trying to make a fake copy."

KAWS has since gone on to collaborate with Lucasfilm, Nike, commercial photographers, numerous designers and musical artists—among them Pharrell and Kanye West—has had several museum and gallery exhibitions, and opened his own store in Japan, OriginalFake, in which he offers limited-edition toys and clothing.

An exhibit at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, *DOWN TIME*, presents new paintings that incorporate his cartoon imagery, sculptures of his most notable characters, and a retrospective of some of his toys and commercial photography collaborations.

In the Silfly Plaza outside the museum sits the large sculpture *Companion (Passing Through)*, presenting KAWS's Companion character, a Mickey Mouse-like creature, in repose, referencing Rodin's *The Thinker*. It's a solemn piece to confront in its scale, especially at night, and seems to comment on the transient nature of pop culture itself, which is striking when considering that KAWS's main intent may be to have his work remain with us. In another essay in *KAWS: 1993–2010* (Rizzoli) by Monica Ramirez-





**Companion (Passing Through)**

Montagut, she writes that as “the popularity of his [bus station] posters grew—so much that they were taken down and put on sale almost immediately after the artist had put them back in place, KAWS decided to move on to his next venture.”

Four major pieces take over the Wieland Pavilion on the Skyway, including the fiberglass sculpture *CHUM (Black)*, a human-sized version of the limited-edition toy the artist has previously issued in a variety of colors. Clearly a reference to the Michelin Man, with a Mickey Mouse head similar to his *Companion*, *CHUM* stands defiantly and triumphantly in the gallery, blurring the lines between loveable commercial mascot and artful ruse. It’s no wonder that museum-goers tend to strike a similar pose and have their picture taken with the piece. *CHUM* feels like a friend.

The three other pieces in the Pavilion, *Down Time*, *Glass Smile*, and *Gone and Beyond*, showcase KAWS’s work in the more traditional medium of acrylic on canvas and highlight his masterful—and playful—take on abstraction, even referencing his own work, as he does by placing a barely discernible *KAWSBOB* at the center of *Down Time*, formed or deformed by a barrage of colorful rectangular forms spilling about the canvas. The centerpiece of the gallery is clearly *Gone and Beyond*, a single work comprising twenty-seven circular canvases, each forty inches in diameter and depicting action or emotion in extreme closeup, as if “framed by a keyhole or the portal of an ocean liner,” as the piece’s description tells us. It’s an impressive piece to take in up close but almost visually disorienting to appreciate from afar, as your eye searches for a place, or a portal, to focus.

Not to be missed, also in the Weiland Pavilion, is a retrospective of sorts that includes drawings, limited-edition toys, and altered photographs, the latter a collaboration in 2001 with photographer David Sims in which KAWS uses acrylic paint on the photographer’s portraits of notable cultural icons. In the case of several of supermodel Kate Moss, a sperm-like figure adds a cartoon eroticism to an already erotic image, hinting at the absurdity of it all. ~

**KAWS: DOWN TIME** is on view at the High Museum of Art Atlanta until May 20, 2012. [www.high.org](http://www.high.org) [www.kawsone.com/blog](http://www.kawsone.com/blog)


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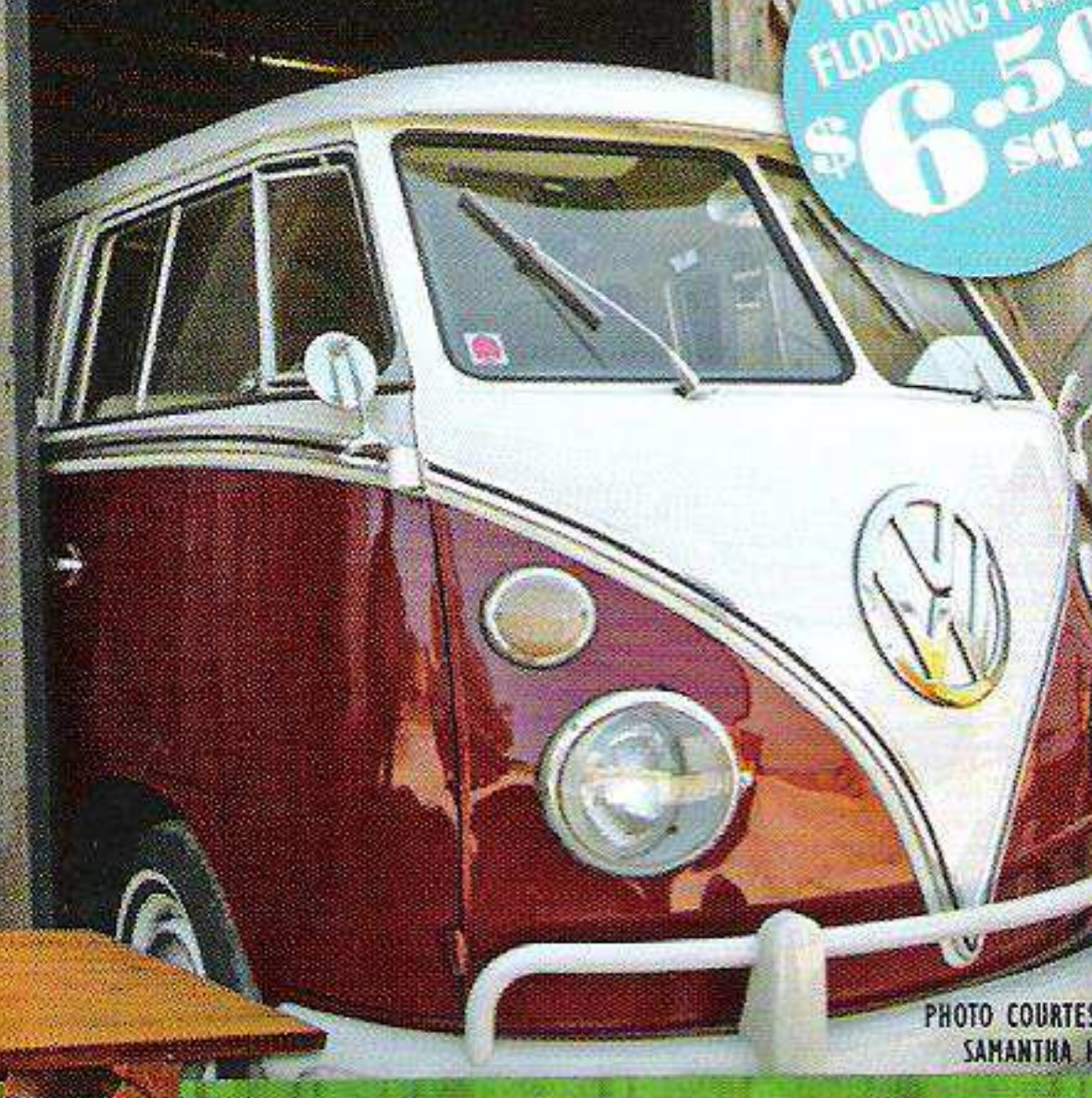
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