

## **KAWS -From Media Inspired Cartoons to "Sacrosanct" friends at the AGO – Irene Faiz**

Mid October, 2023: The KAWS exhibit had opened just a couple of weeks earlier at the Art Gallery of Ontario. I thought I was at the Eaton's Centre. Crowds of Gen Zs were at the AGO! What brought them here? Their vehicle of communication: Social Media. Social Media had spread the news! "Come to the AGO and pose with your favourite post-pandemic KAWS character!"

KAWS, born in 1974, Jersey City, United States. He began his art making before he even knew it was called art, at the age of eleven. Making graffiti art at a young age, KAWS developed designs that would become his signature; skulls and cross bones and "X"s for eyes.

In the 1990s he worked as an animator for television and film.

KAWS' art is on exhibit in three sections of the Art Gallery of Ontario till August 5th. Ranging from sculpture, drawing, street art, installation and product design, his art is positioned between the AGO's Henry Moores and August Rodins.

When asked in an interview with Dan Nadel, "Does it bother you that the art gets associated with cartoons and not in a category with, say, Moore and Rodin? Where would you have it? KAWS responds by saying, "No, it doesn't bother me, but I think people want to pretend that's the only place it lives. In my mind it should be broad. The history of things made. I think I am putting effort into making the best existing form that I can make within my abilities."

KAWS characters are emoting post pandemic expressions. With titles such as: Better Days Ahead, Alone Again, Lost Time, Safe Inside, Gone, we are reminded of the crisis that we all lived through starting in March 2020.

KAWS's characters are featured in a range of sizes: from small scale that can be held in your hands to mammoths. However, what is common amongst them all is that they are expressing their post pandemic state of mind. *Time Off* lays a very relatable pose as if he is lounging on a couch on a Friday night.

The range of mediums is impressive as well: Fibre glass, wood, bronze and aluminum. And another memorable version could exist only through the app on your own cell phone. You can view two of these versions in the beautiful high ceiling spaces of Gallery Atelier overlooking Dundas St.

The viewer becomes the vehicle by which these characters come to life. They come to life when we pose with them and take selfies. They come to life when we use our technology and they appear only through the screens on our cell phones and portable computers.

Dan Nadel asks KAWS about how he "reshapes" the world of vinyl figures and makes them his own? "I love the way that you can claim things and reshape them and become them. It's

fascinating. Like say, (Andy) Warhol with soup cans, (Yayoi) Kusama with dots or (Damien) Hirst with butterflies or his spots. Things that always existed become yours.”

All artists “reshape” their experiences to articulate their thoughts. Consciously or unconsciously. We all recreate our worlds to help ourselves cope.

In the following curriculum unit a grade 11 visual art class in Toronto was led to reflect on the toys and cartoon characters that they identified with to create their own “sacrosanct” friend. Life has been challenging for our 16 year olds over the past four years. Finally we are back at school following daily routines that we have longed for.

They named their characters: Power, Isolation and Loneliness and Good vs. Evil. Or, Cute, Brave and Funny. Bold, Rash and Independent. Flexible, Fluffy and Compact.

They translated their drawings of their creations into a series of four-colour reduction prints and credited these “sacrosanct” friends to “help them with; the overwhelming amounts of artwork” they had to do. They wrote about how these friends were reliable, kind and funny. Faithful. Someone to talk to while being able to joke around. A protector. A friend who cares for me, understands me and likes things that I like.

What did this class learn about the creative process? “I learned that making art is not easy and not everything will look the way you want it. But, that’s just like life. You make mistakes and you learn from them.” Another student articulated, “I learned that art doesn’t have to be perfect and that mistakes can make your art more unique and beautiful.” Yet another student wrote, “I learned that using your favourite memories from the past can be a way to express yourself.” They also commented on the techniques they used, “I really learned to appreciate the steps and effort it takes to draw and print out these characters. Alongside the creativity it took to give these drawings life, their personality is really coming through with the different colour combinations I can use in printmaking.”