

COLUMNS

KAWS: Bridging the gap between luxury and China's aspiring youth

March 13, 2017



Last summer, KAWS worked with luxury leather handbag brand Nancy Gonzalez, in one example of how the artist has merged his iconic imagery with a high-end product. (Courtesy Photo)

By [Jessica Rapp](#)

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Art and luxury have intersected time and time again in China as brands work to find new ways to engage aspiring collectors and art enthusiasts, especially those within the country's budding market of Gen Y consumers.

Agencies and brands are increasingly using influential artists and their work to make inroads to connect directly to this audience through branding and commercial products.

Coming to Shanghai's Yuz Museum late this month is an artist who is adept at connecting these markets thanks to his growing following of youth in the United States: Brian Donnelly, widely known as KAWS.

The renowned graffiti and pop artist is showcasing his work for his first survey exhibition in Asia, and if it is anything like his current show at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX, it will be bringing in a wave of curious Chinese millennials.





The KAWA: Untitled (Kimpsons), 2004 acrylic on canvas piece is among the works that will be featured at the Yuz Museum. (Courtesy of Yuz Museum, private collection)

KAWS is showing signs of how his popularity in the West (the artist known for his toys and streetwear collaborations has more than 600,000 followers on Instagram) could translate to China. His influence is already blossoming in both the mainland and in Hong Kong.

As recent as January, Sotheby's "Boundless: Contemporary Art" auction in Hong Kong saw the sales of several of his pieces, which spanned from paintings to sculptures, beat estimates.

It was in 2015 that KAWS first officially hit the mainland, taking a Hong Kong installation called "CLEAN SLATE" to debut in Shanghai's Huangpu District through a partnership with Lane Crawford.

At the Yuz Museum exhibit, KAWS: "WHERE THE END STARTS," which takes place from March 28 to Aug. 13, KAWS is displaying a vast range of his key works spanning the last two decades, including paintings, sculptures, drawings, toys and "advertisement interventions" that feature his iconic style that plays off of cartoon-like imagery recognizable in Western consumer culture.



The KAWS "ALONG THE WAY" (2013) wooden sculpture from the collection of the artist will be on display at the Yuz exhibition. (Courtesy of Yuz Museum, collection of the artist)

But aside from artwork and exhibitions, KAWS has been making a name for himself through brand collaborations that are buoyed by the growing interest among Chinese youth with streetwear culture and its imagery. His Uniqlo collaboration last year, which came out thanks to his longtime friend and co-collaborator, Uniqlo creative director and streetwear icon NIGO, sold out instantly online and in stores in the United States and China and eventually had to be re-released.



KAWS poster

The artist has also worked with Nike, and soon plans to launch special edition Air Jordan's with glow-in-the-dark soles, which will retail on the high-end side, at around \$350.

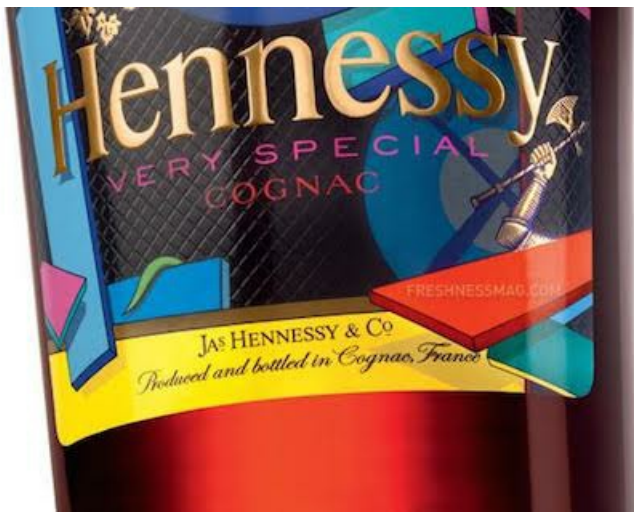
While there is not yet news on Chinese consumers' reception to the upcoming release, it would not be the first time for a sneaker collaboration to captivate China's affluent sneakerheads.



KAWS collaboration with Nike for the Air Jordan sneaker

But while these brands target the fashion-savvy aspiring middle class shoppers, KAWS has also been establishing a firm footing in the luxury industry with a series of partnerships. He worked with Hennessy in 2011, and around the same time as the Uniqlo collaboration last year, the artist did a capsule collection of leather handbags in partnership with New York x Columbia brand Nancy Gonzalez, which started at around \$3,000 and immediately sold out.





KAWS did an illustration for Hennessy Cognac labels in 2011. (Courtesy Photo)

While this type of high-end creative concert did not take place on the mainland, there is no doubt potential brewing, as art museums in China have already been making efforts to connect the dots between luxury and art to attract a new wave of millennial consumers.

A more recent example of this type of partnership took place late last year at K11 Art Mall in Shanghai, which hosted an art exhibition featuring Vivienne Westwood's collections and contributions to environmental causes.

The show also saw the luxury fashion designer creating limited-edition handbags for the department store's trendy Chinese-designer boutique exclusively for the event.



KAWS "FIVE SUSPECTS," 2016 acrylic on canvas will be displayed at the Yuz exhibition later this March. (Courtesy of Yuz Museum, Private Collection)

CROSS-POLLINATION BETWEEN the art and luxury industries is moving to redefine a luxury corridor to grow audiences and reach aspiring Chinese consumers who want to find a way to opt into the contemporary artist culture through buying into its product-based and commercial sphere.

KAWS is already providing an avenue in which to do this his Fort Worth exhibition closed with a blockbuster attendance of 400,000 visitors, drawing "a healthy crowd of millennials."

As luxury continues to change, consumers will likely see more of this type of collaboration, even with larger luxury companies Louis Vuitton and Supreme, anyone? moving in this direction.

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