

# THE GRIND

**PG.11** HOLIDAY  
GIFT GUIDE

IT'S OK\* **PG.20**  
STUDIOS

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023

VOL 2 ISSUE 1

**FREE**



**CEASEFIRE NOW!**

## ABOUT

*The Grind* was launched in fall 2022 by a group of passionate local journalists, as a new politics and culture mag for Toronto. It is a non-profit publication not owned by a media empire. We scrape by financially with no full-time staff and a lot of volunteer labour, though we prioritize paying our contributors. Around half of our revenues are from ads and the other half is from donations. We don't publish advertorials (paid advertisements that look like articles). *The Grind* comes out once every two months.

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FATIN ISHRAQ CHOWDHURY



"At the end of the massive November 4 rally calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, thousands of people staged a sit-in in the financial district downtown, demanding Mayor Olivia Chow join the calls for a ceasefire. On Nov. 10, Chow called for a ceasefire."

# INSIDE

**W**hen we began brainstorming for this issue of *The Grind*, we had the idea of publishing a gift guide. Excited by the concept, we began soliciting contributors, creating lists, and so on. We hoped to honour the practice of gift giving while also challenging the unfettered consumption of the holiday season.

It was a difficult balance to strike back in September, and it is even more difficult now given the immense horror of our current moment.

Simply put, there is no graceful way for us to marry the work that we did then with the moment we're in now. It just doesn't work.

So, rather than trying to come up with a tidy narrative, we thought we'd be forthright about the fact that this issue is a bit of an awkward one.

In the same issue where we are offering book and drink recommendations, we are also grieving the loss of life and calling for a ceasefire. It's

an uncomfortable pairing but one that we have tried to navigate with care and consideration.

That means that from pages 11 to 18, you'll find a pull-out gift guide, a labour of love designed to help you prepare for time with loved ones.

In the pages surrounding the gift guide, you will also find the analysis, voice, and perspective of *The Grind* that you have come to know — that, too, a labour of love.

The next two pages are dedicated to what is happening in Gaza.

## COVER PHOTO

Anna Lippman, a Toronto member of Independent Jewish voices and other groups, at the massive Nov. 4 rally downtown calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Read Anna's op-ed on page 4.

## READER LETTERS

I was passing through a coffee shop, mourning as I usually do the lack of an arts/music/movies/events printed listing in this city with so much going on, which I can never find out about, and saw: *The Grind*. I picked it up expecting the usual conspiracy theory crap and instead found an organized list of events worthy of the late lamented *NOW*. This is amazing. I even enjoy seeing the PC political commentary again; it's as good as the old days. I wish you the best for your community reach-out, hang in there dudes through thick and thin and rock on. A desolate city is counting on you.

PAUL REICHERT, BY EMAIL

Women's national soccer team appearing again in local alt paper *The Grind*. Helped promote recent home game where attendance record was smashed. Love it, thx!

ANNE BURBIDGE, @ABURBIDGE ON TWITTER

*The Grind* just out here reviving my hope for this city since the sale of *NOW* Magazine.

JOSIE RAMOAN, @JOSIERAMOAN ON TWITTER

**CORRECTIONS** In our summer issue, we published "Blackout Horoscopes" of the April/May issue horoscopes, but we did not list the artists who made the blackout version, Vlada Bilyak. Our apologies!

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Gift giving made easy.

# BEAUTY AND THE HYPEBEAST

## No Hurrahs for KAWS at AGO

BY CHARLENE K. LAU

It's impossible to talk about the artist known as KAWS (born Brian Donnelly) without speaking of the time we're in. It's 2023 and hypebeast culture and streetwear are fully mainstream, Toronto now has a temple to sneakerdom in the form of a KITH retail store, and the pockets of this lifestyle community are as deep as they've ever been.

While natty threads and sneaker culture were born out of 1970s hip-hop culture and graffiti (or "street art") in New York, hypebeasts — a derogatory term for the sneaker-obsessed shared by a Hong Kong-based publication of the same name — represent a distant cousin. Hypebeasts are seemingly apolitical and largely focused on hyperconsumption through the collecting and wearing of streetwear brands.

KAWS's relationship to this community is developed, firstly, through his own background as a graffiti artist, and later through commercial partnerships including General Mills, Supreme, Uniqlo, and Nike, and famous collectors of this work like Drake, Pharrell Williams, and BTS. With these connections, he pledges an unstoppable allegiance to popular culture and to celebrity over creativity.

In my day job, I'm a curator of public art, a semi-peripheral part of the artworld that sometimes sits outside of art with a capital A. But by night, I'm an art critic, which awkwardly situates me in between extreme positions of accessibility and gatekeeping. It's with this great difficulty that I look at the art of KAWS, a white man born in New Jersey who now lives in Brooklyn.

Note that by this description alone, he might be like many artists before him. Note also that it has been a very long time since I have volunteered to write about a white male artist. And so, on a sunny October afternoon, I walked down Dundas Street, following a modest trail of hypebeast bros also on their way to see the exhibition *KAWS: Family* at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO). I felt a mix of trepidation and excitement, buoyed by the thought of meeting a fellow writer friend — a publisher of an art magazine — who was going to help me dissect this experience.

Once inside the gallery, my friend and I step back to take in the view. We've never seen so many young people in the AGO. The gallery is bubbling with activity. A white security guard shushes a group of racialized youths, and many of the visitors are happily taking selfies and enjoying the artworks on display, something I rarely see happen in these vaunted spaces.

Ah yes, but what about the art?

KAWS is known for one thing: a figure called "Companion" that shapeshifts and borrows from Mickey Mouse, Michelin Man, or Grover. In its various forms, it is in greys or in colour, and sometimes furry. His trademark is marking eyes as Xs, an irreverent take on being dead (though, apparently, he sees Companion as being very alive). His form is found everywhere from



TOP:  
KAWS Time Off, 2023  
BOTTOM:  
KAWS, Space, 2021

**"Are we celebrating his inclusion in the hallowed halls of art history, or his mainstream cool factor and market success?"**

inflatables to collectible figurines, clothing to cereal boxes.

In the exhibition, we see some of these things, including drawings of figures, huge, bright prints, painted bronze sculptures, a loveseat covered in Sesame Street stuffies.

We follow a path from the exhibition through the Henry Moore sculpture court to an oddly annexed section unceremoniously shoved into a corner by an emergency exit. The area is anchored by a jumbo, silver "Space" Companion resembling the old MTV Moonman statue. It features some paintings, a diamond encrusted necklace

commissioned by rapper Kid Cudi, and, you guessed it, more Companions. The painting *News* (2017) appears here, consisting of nine round canvases that abstract and mash up various parts of Companion, whose circular shapes the interpretive panel connects to the Renaissance. It's feeble to make this superficial comparison, as if to champion KAWS's involvement in the "rebirth" of the — or any — cultural moment.

Are we celebrating his inclusion in the hallowed halls of art history, or his mainstream cool factor and market success?

If the latter, the exhibition spaces feel like showrooms, luxury boutiques where the viewer can window shop, consumable shrines to pop artists who came before him. But this is not even close to Andy Warhol, the Godfather of pop art and whose acerbic take on pop culture offered viewers an all-consuming world, a snake eating its own tail. Or Jeff Koons, whom the contemporary art world loves to hate with his *Celebration* series of utterly and (unfortunately) delightful, giant sculptures of balloon animals and wrapped gifts. Or the king of all luxury fashion collaborations, Takashi Murakami, who cheekily put a Louis Vuitton boutique inside his 2007 retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Is KAWS similar at least? Naw. These other artists' works are critical, self-conscious and knowing winks at the establishment. None of that is to be found here in their aspiring heir.

"We're trying to find and sculpt a program that is experimental in some ways," AGO

deputy director and chief curator, Julian Cox, stated about the exhibition in a *Globe and Mail* article. In a strange reversal, pop becomes experimental in the art museum. What does this mean? Perhaps Cox's quote "I think museums more and more have to operate that way" is the most telling, identifying a link to capitalism as the only way in which artistic institutions can survive.

I return to the rampant consumerism of hypebeast culture. I love sneakers as much as the next person, likely more. I love streetwear. I have an outsized appreciation for car culture. But I also love a well-made artwork that says something important about our worlds, our cultures, the times in which we live. KAWS's work is empty of meaning, only comparable to Warhol, Koons and Murakami at a quick glance, but without the substance. Somehow, he has made a career off copying and pasting Companion into various scenarios and adding X'd out eyes for everything else. This exhibition is no different.

While unoriginal, it can't be denied this is a crowd-pleasing show that has expanded the audience for the AGO's programming. Art galleries and museums are intimidating places to be, and these institutions need to do more to reach new audiences. But accessibility doesn't have to come at a price of showing interesting work. After seeing this work, I'm left feeling empty and a bit dead inside, and, like Companion, with my eyes X'd out.



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