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A Furniture Collaboration That's Irresistible

Brazilian design duo the Campana Brothers' iconic stuffed-animal seating gets the imprint of Brooklyn artist KAWS

By Sarah Medford
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MATCH PLAY Designer Humberto Campana (left) and artist Brian Donnelly, also known as KAWS, in Donnelly's studio. Photo: Ryan Lowry for WSJ. Magazine

AT THE BROOKLYN studio of artist Brian Donnelly, who goes by the handle of KAWS, assistants are jockeying stepladders to and fro among 10 enormous canvases. It's late on an autumn afternoon, and in just over three weeks, the paintings are due at Skarstedt Gallery's Manhattan space for Donnelly's first show with the dealer. The artist, 44, stops working to welcome Humberto Campana, one half of the Brazilian design duo the Campana Brothers, who has arrived straight off a plane from São Paulo. The pair and Donnelly have a looming deadline of their own: In about two months, a collection of limited-edition chairs and sofas—part of their KAWSxCampana collaboration—is set to make its debut at Design Miami, the sister fair of Art Basel Miami Beach.

The carnival vibe of South Beach in December seems fitting for furniture that, at first glance, looks destined for adult playgrounds around the world. Near the back of KAWS's studio, Campana lifts a plastic cover to reveal a sofa upholstered in a heap of cartoonish pink plush toys. "The eyes look like eggs," he says, pulling on one of the figure's googly eyeballs.

The sofa is an offshoot of the Campana Brothers' Stuffed Toys seating, a series they began in 2002. Instead of using latex foam, that most banal of furniture ingredients, they upholster chairs, benches, sofas and stools with a menagerie of soft creatures sewn together. Here, the froth of arms, legs and tubby torsos belongs to a doll-size version of BFF, one of KAWS's cartoonlike characters; other pieces in the collection feature his take on Snoopy.

Such riffs on pop-culture creations are a key part of Donnelly's visual language. And by shifting scale and context, he multiplies his characters' messages and his intended audience. BFF, for instance, first appeared in 2016 as an 18-foot-tall sculpture installed outside a Bangkok mall and exhibition space; it also turned up in Apple's recent "Behind the Mac" ad campaign and as an enormous floral sculpture on the runway for Dior Homme's spring/summer 2019 collection. Designer Kim Jones was so smitten that he gave out BFF toys in Baby Dior suits—and re-created the rose-covered figure for his latest ads.

The furniture project came about through Marc Benda, of the Manhattan-based Friedman Benda gallery, which represents Fernando and Humberto Campana, 57 and 65. Benda has been friendly with Donnelly and his wife, artist Julia Chang, for almost a decade, helping them build a formidable collection of designs by Ron Arad, Faye Toogood, Joris Laarman and Ettore Sottsass, among others. Two fuzzy Campana Brothers seats have turned out to be the biggest hits with the couple's young daughters. "When I first saw the Campana pieces, they were just fun," says Donnelly, a former graffiti artist and Disney animator. "You look at so many things day to day, and then something just jumps out at you."

Humberto Campana encountered Donnelly's work as part of a public sculpture exhibition in Amsterdam in 2015. When Benda fielded a request from Donnelly to collaborate, the brothers didn't hesitate. Since the early '80s, they have pushed the

boundaries of design by reimagining common, sometimes castoff materials, questioning received ideas of value, authorship and beauty itself. Donnelly's work pokes into some of the same corners. And though furniture design was new to him, he's often dabbled in product design, from a line of skateboards for Supreme to clothing for Uniqlo. This spring, Dior will begin selling bags and accessories tagged with a pudgy, X-eyed bee -- KAWS's interpretation of the company's popular insect emblem. "These figures -- they've kind of taken on a life of their own," Donnelly says of this growing universe.