

KAWS: THE MESSAGE

Florence, Courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi
29 October 2025 – 25 January 2026

Celebrated artist KAWS creates a new large-scale installation for Palazzo Strozzi, in dialogue with its Renaissance architecture and the exhibition *Fra Angelico*.

From 29 October 2025 to 25 January 2026, Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati present *THE MESSAGE*, a **new site-specific installation for the Renaissance courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi** by KAWS, the world-renowned contemporary artist whose unmistakable works aim to challenge the categories and hierarchies that exist within fine art.

KAWS (USA, 1974) has achieved global recognition with works that straddle the worlds of art, popular culture, and commerce, often drawing inspiration from animation and contemporary visual communication. From his beginnings as a graffiti writer to the creation of his iconic characters with X-ed out eyes, KAWS has developed a highly distinctive style and a playful yet subversive approach that questions the boundaries between “high” and “low”. The artist employs shared symbols and a cast of hybrid characters to address human themes, whose broad appeal to viewers inside and outside the art world establishes KAWS as a uniquely prominent artist and influence in today’s culture.

Curated by Arturo Galansino, Director General of Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, *THE MESSAGE* establishes a striking visual and symbolic dialogue with the Renaissance architecture of the palace and the concurrent exhibition dedicated to Fra Angelico (on view until 25 January 2026). Reworking the theme of the Annunciation—one of the friar painter’s most celebrated subjects—through a monumental installation, KAWS offers an unprecedented encounter between eras, forms, and visions, evoking both traditional iconography and the immediacy of contemporary life.

The work consists of two wooden sculptures over six metres tall depicting two of KAWS’s most iconic characters, *COMPANION* and *BFF*, shown interacting with mobile phones. Their pose overtly recalls the iconographic tradition of the Annunciation, with Mary and the Archangel Gabriel facing each other in a dialogue suspended between the human and the divine.

KAWS’s characters embody universal human emotions such as melancholy, vulnerability, and solidarity. On this occasion, the artist revisits a canonical scene of Western visual culture through a direct reference to the hyper-connection that defines our everyday lives. In *THE MESSAGE* the mobile phone becomes the key element of the scene: an object of daily use that in today’s world has assumed an almost sacred quality. Whereas in Renaissance iconography the angel conveyed the divine word, today communication takes place through the smartphone, an emblem of instantaneous and universal connection. By placing the device at the centre of the encounter between *COMPANION* and *BFF*, KAWS combines a familiar gesture with a moment of collective reflection, underscoring how technology has become the privileged vehicle of the messages that shape our relationships and our perception of reality.

The public and accessible dimension of the work, a hallmark of KAWS’s practice, is integral to the project: its free access in the courtyard amplifies the encounter with visitors and aligns with the mission of the *Palazzo Strozzi Future Art* programme, which promotes projects by contemporary artists capable of creating new perspectives between past and future.

"We are proud to present the work of KAWS, one of the most famous and recognisable contemporary American artists on the international scene," says Arturo Galansino, Director General of the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi. "Following on from our series of projects by leading figures in contemporary art, KAWS has created a brand new site-specific project for Palazzo Strozzi. *THE MESSAGE* offers an unexpected comparison between eras, forms and visions, drawing on traditional iconography and the everyday reality of our present day."

"A few years ago, Arturo Galansino invited me to create a work for the Courtyard of Palazzo Strozzi and told me about the *Fra Angelico* exhibition," says KAWS. "*THE MESSAGE* is a work that I imagined in dialogue with one of fathers of the Renaissance, it's about communicating, it's about people, what's said and what's lost. I feel it's a contemporary interpretation of a very old idea."

"For the Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati, supporting a project like this means broadening our vision: believing in art as a place of encounter and participation," says Andy Bianchedi, President of the Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati. "We are proud to continue the *Palazzo Strozzi Future Art* programme, promoting artists who courageously forge new ties between eras and visions. At a time when we are increasingly immersed in digital communication, *KAWS: THE MESSAGE* invites us to pause and observe such an everyday yet symbolic gesture, becoming an invitation to reflect on our present."

The project *KAWS: THE MESSAGE* is promoted and organised by Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and Fondazione Hillary Merkus Recordati.

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KAWS (b. 1974, Jersey City, NJ, USA; lives and works in Brooklyn, New York) has exhibited extensively in major cultural institutions worldwide, including exhibitions at SFMoMA, San Francisco (2025); Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville (2025); The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh (2024); Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (2023); Serpentine Gallery, London (2022); Mori Arts Center Gallery, Tokyo (2021); The Brooklyn Museum, New York (2021); and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne (2019).

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PHOTO SHEET

KAWS <i>THE MESSAGE</i> 2025 Installation view <i>BFF</i> Wood 5501 x 2513 x 2763 cm <i>COMPANION</i> Wood cm 3872 x 2514 x 2450 Photo Ela Bialkowska OKNO studio © KAWS	 A photograph showing the installation of two large wooden sculptures by KAWS in the courtyard of the Palazzo Strozzi. One sculpture, 'BFF', is a standing figure with a large head and a small body, holding a small object. The other, 'COMPANION', is a seated figure with a large head and a small body, also holding a small object. They are positioned on a raised platform in the center of the courtyard, surrounded by classical arches and columns.
KAWS <i>UNTITLED (THE MESSAGE)</i> 2025 Ink on paper 30.48 x 22.86 cm © KAWS	 A black and white ink drawing of a standing KAWS figure. The figure has a large, rounded head with a small tuft of hair, a small body, and large, rounded feet. It is holding a small object in its right hand.
KAWS <i>UNTITLED (THE MESSAGE)</i> 2025 Ink on paper 30.48 x 22.86 cm © KAWS	 A black and white ink drawing of a seated KAWS figure. The figure has a large, rounded head with a small tuft of hair, a small body, and large, rounded feet. It is holding a small object in its right hand.
KAWS <i>PORTRAIT</i> Photo credit: Shaniqwa Jarvis	 A photograph of KAWS standing in his workshop. He is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and glasses. Behind him are shelves filled with various bottles of paint and other materials. In front of him is a large white box or container.