

GAGOSIAN GALLERY





AS HE PREPARES TO STORM THE ONCE-VAUNTED SEAT OF WESTERN CULTURE WITH A CAREER-SPANNING RETROSPECTIVE AT THE FRENCH PALACE OF VERSAILLES, JAPAN'S KING OF POP FINDS HIMSELF ON THE BRINK OF A NEW CHAPTER IN HIS OWN THREE-DECADE ART EPIC—AND CONTEMPLATING WHAT HE WILL DO FOR A GRAND FINALE

By ALISON GINGERAS *Portraits* GRANT DELIN

TAKASHI MURAKAMI'S *JAD THORN*, *WHY NOT LET'S ROSE...*, *CHANGE*, *WHAT I WAS YESTERDAY IS GAST ASIDE*, *LIFE AN INSECT*, *SHEDDING ITS SKIN*, 2009. COURTESY GALLERIE EMANUEL PERROTIN, PARIS © 2009 TAKASHI MURAKAMI/KAIKAI KIKI CO., LTD.



"I PICK UP MANY IDEAS FROM DIFFERENT JAPANESE THINGS. THE WAY I FORMED MY STUDIO AND HOW I ORGANIZE THINGS ACTUALLY CAME OUT OF THE MODEL OF THE JAPANESE ANIMATION STUDIO AND THE MANGA INDUSTRY."



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”

THIS PAGE: TAKASHI MURAKAMI'S
FLOWER MATANGO (I), 2001-2006,
COURTESY GALERIE EMMANUEL
PERROTIN, PARIS; ©2001-2006
TAKASHI MURAKAMI/KAIKAI
KIKI CO., LTD. OPPOSITE TOP:
TAKASHI MURAKAMI AT BLUM &
POE IN LOS ANGELES, JUNE 2010.
BOTTOM: TAKASHI MURAKAMI'S
KAIKAI & KIKI, 2000-2005, COURTESY
GALERIE EMMANUEL PERROTIN,
PARIS; ©2000-2005 TAKASHI
MURAKAMI/KAIKAI KIKI CO., LTD.

"The Japanese Andy Warhol" is the shortcut many critics use to describe the complex and wide-ranging work of artist Takashi Murakami. And while it is probably one of the most hackneyed, if not reductive, monikers in the book, the Warholian model does provide a useful point of departure for understanding Murakami's oeuvre.

Blurring the traditional lines between art, commerce, pop, and subcultural concerns, the range of Murakami's creative pursuits are seemingly boundless. In addition to producing some of the most iconic paintings and sculptures of the past two decades, his "business-art" activities span from designing a full gamut of consumer merchandise (either for his own Kaikai Kiki label or for fashion houses such as Louis Vuitton and Comme des Garçons) to running a gallery that promotes young Japanese artists to hosting a weekly radio talk show in Tokyo—to name just a few of the many preoccupations that keep him working on a legendarily nonstop clock.

Yet as this conversation reveals, Murakami cannot be reduced to being a mere disciple of the American Pop master. Indigenous Japanese culture—whether in its reverent, sacred forms, or in more spectacular pop guises—is at the heart of every aspect of Murakami's work. But while his nationalism might not always be immediately legible to Western audiences, his multitentacled enterprise can be understood as a campaign to reverse the tide of Japan's postwar cultural inferiority complex and overturn American Pop hegemony by capturing both the Western market share and the popular imagination with more purely Japanese forms and content.

Understood in these terms, the 48-year-old Murakami will stake a major victory by colonizing one of Europe's most revered palaces next month with the opening of a retrospective of his work at the Château de Versailles in France, which will feature a panoramic selection of paintings and sculptures installed throughout the Hall of Mirrors, the apartments of the king and queen, as well as in the Château's legendary gardens. I spoke to him recently in New York.

ALISON GINGERAS: How's your dog? His name is...

TAKASHI MURAKAMI: Her name is Pom.

GINGERAS: Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about how Pom came into your life?

MURAKAMI: [laughs] Well, this last year was very busy, so I thought I had to take a rest—a holiday. I was looking for a good place to go where nothing was happening, and I saw a photo in a magazine of a small, dirty hotel, and, in the photo of the hotel, there was this very dirty dog. The hotel was in the very southern part of Japan, a place called Yoronjima... It's just a small coral island—there is nothing there. It was a popular vacation place in Japan in the 1970s, but now it's very, very quiet, almost like a ghost town. But the hotel there is still alive. The owner is, like, a crazy local guy. Everything there looks really unnatural. This hotel has two dogs. One dog was the one I saw in the picture—it's a very small dog. But the second one was grown and was pregnant! So I asked the owner when this pregnant dog would give birth, and he kept saying, "Tomorrow, tomorrow..." I was waiting for the puppies, so I wound up staying at this hotel for four days. It was a sad situation—there was no sun and no puppies.

GINGERAS: Not a great vacation then.

MURAKAMI: No. But I am not fun. [both laugh] I always have stress. It's not funny. So I was just there, watching this dog and waiting for the puppies.

GINGERAS: You didn't go to this island with the idea of acquiring a puppy?

MURAKAMI: No. It was a boring time where I could just watch life go by... I could see that having an animal is nice. When I went back to Tokyo, the hotel manager e-mailed me: "The dog had babies. What do you think? Can you pick one up from here?" I immediately replied, "Yes, okay." So I got these four puppies.

GINGERAS: Four?

MURAKAMI: Yes. I told my studio staff and I anticipated everybody would say, "Yes! Thank you, Takashi!" But everybody went quiet. Silence. No reaction. I asked, "Why? Dogs are cute and funny." Then one of my assistants said, "But, Takashi, who will take care of them?" And when I answered,

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"You and me," they objected because I'm always traveling outside of Japan. [both laugh]

GINGERAS: I guess they were thinking they have too much work already with you!

MURAKAMI: Yes, they are already overwhelmed with fixing paintings and other things. They were saying, "Oh, my god!" It was a mistake in my judgment. So after we talked about it I decided just to take one dog and made plans to go to the hotel to pick it up. When I brought her back, I went to the veterinarian to get her checked out. The doctor said that she looked like a Japanese dog.

GINGERAS: She's a Japanese breed?

MURAKAMI: A mix.

GINGERAS: What is the breed, exactly?

MURAKAMI: No name.

GINGERAS: No breed? She's just an indigenous Japanese dog?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. It was fascinating. The vet told me that almost 90 percent of dogs in Japan come from the West. So she is like an original. The vet was excited and was asking about where she came from. He wanted to meet the breeder. [both laugh] It's the first time for me to be taking care of a pet. It's not like taking care of the cactuses that I have.

GINGERAS: You breed lotus plants, right?

MURAKAMI: Yeah, and also very small guppies. I also keep something else—these small insects.

GINGERAS: Yes, I heard that you're breeding beetles. Is there a dedicated animal manager at your studio?

MURAKAMI: [laughs] Yeah, I have two guys who do that.

GINGERAS: Two guys? And that's all they do, right?

MURAKAMI: Yeah, yeah. All day, all the time.

GINGERAS: Is there just one person in charge of Pom?

MURAKAMI: No. Two guys. They take turns. There are shifts.

GINGERAS: I saw this chart on the wall when I went to the Kaikai Kiki studio in Long Island City while we were working on the Tate Modern show last year [Pop Life: Art in a Material World]. Shin [Shinichi Kitahara, director of exhibition production at Kaikai Kiki] showed me the chart that tracks how Pom is trained and cared for, which I thought was amazing because it's like the same way you make paintings. It detailed this almost step-by-step process. I thought that somebody who didn't know you might think it's too clinical a way of treating a dog. But I thought it was interesting because it showed that you were treating this process of training and caring for the dog with the same level of respect that you do the process of making paintings—which is with an enormous amount of respect.

MURAKAMI: [laughs] Well, it's very serious.

GINGERAS: Did you make that recent self-portrait sculpture with the dog [Pom & Me, 2009] before you got Pom?

MURAKAMI: That piece was planned more than three years ago. I don't know why I depicted myself with a dog. I saw a show at P.S.1 [in Long Island City] with a very funny video where a dog is biting himself for, like, 20 minutes. So I was thinking, "Who's training for that? What is that? This is art? This is not art! What is that? What is this dog?" It made a big impression on my brain. I was like, "What is a pet? What is a dog?"

GINGERAS: What were you thinking about the representation of dogs in more traditional terms? I don't recall having noticed so many dogs when I've visited Tokyo. Is there a genre or iconography of dogs in Japanese visual culture in the way that there is in, say, European art?

MURAKAMI: I think so, because there are many statues in Japan that feature dogs. You know that film *Hachi* with Richard Gere?

GINGERAS: About the owner who disappears while the loyal dog stays and waits for eternity for his return?

MURAKAMI: Yes.

GINGERAS: I think almost every culture has that story. Do you think Pom is going to appear in your work?

MURAKAMI: Oh, I don't know. But for now I'm focused on breeding her. It's like making a Jack Russell Terrier, because her breed seems similar to one of those. I want the mix to be exact.

GINGERAS: So we can add dog breeder to the list of all of the various things that you do. You're a painter, sculptor, animator, gallerist, an entrepreneur...

MURAKAMI: Being a breeder is so very hard! [laughs] You're working with DNA.

GINGERAS: Well, your work is so much about hybrids, isn't it?

MURAKAMI: I don't think I've realized that until now. I'm always very interested in breeding. Raising cacti is breeding. My lotus plant collection is breeding. The insects are breeding.

GINGERAS: But isn't that part of what you do visually? Especially in your most recent work—for example, the epic 16-panel painting you made for Palazzo Grassi, [1727–272: *The Emergence of God at the Reversal of Fate*]... In a way, you're cross-breeding Western, postwar art language and the Japanese superflat aesthetic.

MURAKAMI: This specific work is like a DJ style.

GINGERAS: DJ style?

MURAKAMI: You know, bringing records and mixing.

GINGERAS: But you don't think that what you're doing is more analogous to bringing together a Western Jack Russell dog with an innate breed of Japanese dog? I don't think it's like when you're deejaying, because with that kind of mixing you know what you're going to get. But when you make a painting, you don't always know what's going to happen.

MURAKAMI: Oh... That's the critics' take?

GINGERAS: Yes. [both laugh] I was thinking about the work you made for the Pop Life show at the Tate Modern, where you took a Western Pop reference—The Vapors' track "Turning Japanese"—and retranslated it into a Japanese otaku sensibility [otaku refers to people who have an obsessive interest in things like manga, anime, and video games] in a video starring Kirsten Dunst as a majikko [magical] princess. I thought it was such a perverse and subtly complex way of making your work accessible to a public that might not know who you are—which was the case in London. Yet you weren't dumbing it down.

MURAKAMI: When I approached the film director, McG, for this project, I proposed for him to use the Akihabara neighborhood—Tokyo's "electric town"—as a backdrop. The film was supposed to star the Japanese otaku cult girl band AKB48, but at the very last minute, they dropped out. After they dropped out, we had just three days. So I was ready to give up.

GINGERAS: Really?

MURAKAMI: We had the money and planning in place and I thought it would all fall through, but McG didn't let that happen. He said, "Okay, Takashi, I have a question: Do you want to make a film or not?" So in just one day he got Kirsten Dunst to come to Tokyo, he brought in this music, and he asked me if it all fit with my ideas. It was perfect because my goal was just to introduce people to what is Akihabara and try to explain its significance to Londoners and to serious art people. I was trying to capture what was happening in Japanese kid culture. I didn't at first understand this process of shooting a video. The whole planning happened over the phone. Three days later, McG arrived in Tokyo and started shooting. It was all done after an 18-hour shoot.

GINGERAS: Had Kirsten Dunst ever experienced this aspect of Japanese culture? Had she ever been to Akihabara? Did she know about cosplay [costume play] and all that?

MURAKAMI: No, no. She may have had some information, but she had no experience with it. I think she really enjoyed it. That McG is really talented with people. He was great at making the actress feel good and motivated. You know, McG twisted my idea so it could fit with Western expectations...

GINGERAS: It's funny, because I had the impression at first that McG twisted your idea by adding this pop song to your piece. But what made it even more perverse is how you then assimilated the hybrid of the Hollywood star and Akihabara landscape in the way you made this monumental wallpaper backdrop for the video for the Tate presentation.

MURAKAMI: I had to do that. I had to make up my identity, right? [laughs]

GINGERAS: Yes and no. Your contribution to that show speaks to how, despite your being one of the most famous and popular artists working today, most people still don't grasp the complexity of your work. It still seems that most people understand that your work is the Japanese version of Western pop art. But I'm actually captivated by the indigenous Japanese side of your work. It seems that you try to translate or make accessible this deep Japanese-ness to non-Japanese audiences. Just the other

day I was talking to this art historian who was saying, "Takashi Murakami is like a Renaissance artist. He has all these different assistants and young artists working with him under the Murakami school." And while that's true, as you've said yourself, your whole model of working comes out of the Edo period [the pre- and early-modern period running from 1603–1868] and the archetype of the Temple School. I was also thinking about how GEISAI [a Tokyo art fair created by Murakami to support emerging artists] is founded on an indigenous Japanese idea—that of the arts festival. It's not the application of a Western idea of an art fair onto your contemporary reality. Does that make sense?

MURAKAMI: It's true that I pick up many ideas from different Japanese things. The way I formed my studio and how I organize things actually came out of the model of the Japanese animation studio and the manga industry. The manga industry is gigantic in Japan. There are so many layers to the business, like making a video, making a spin-off game, cards...

GINGERAS: And figurines and printed matter...

MURAKAMI: Yes, everything. It's kind of like creating something like the *Star Wars* franchise. A single big hit for a manga studio means tons of money. One can gross more than a movie. The Japanese invented this industry. I've been immersed in manga since I was a kid. I grew up with this culture. So I started to think about how to compare manga to contemporary art. The contemporary art industry did not yet exist in Japan when I was starting out. Contemporary art and manga—what is the same about them? Nothing, right? The manga industry has a lot of talented people, but contemporary art works on more of a solitary model. No one embarks on collaboration in contemporary art in order to make money. But in the manga world, everyone is invested in collaboration. The most important point is that the manga industry constantly encourages new creations and creators.

GINGERAS: Like passing the creative baton?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. Manga culture grows and educates these artists. So I learned from that experience. Manga uses Japanese traditional structures in how to teach the student and to transmit a very direct message. You learn from the teacher by watching from behind his back. The whole teacher-master thing is part of Asian culture, I think. So I guess I agree with you in that respect.

GINGERAS: That's why I think that your inclusion in the Pop Life show almost misrepresents you. In a way, it positions you as part of a legacy that comes out of Andy Warhol. Of course, your work—and the way you work—has a relationship to Warhol and his notion of business art. But I think it also has this whole other side that has no roots in Warhol.

MURAKAMI: I'm very sad to be compared with Warhol and The Factory, because I have no drugs, you know. [Gingeras laughs] We have no drug culture in Japan! Maybe it's because our attitude toward labor is totally different.

GINGERAS: Well, this whole comparison between your studio, Kaikai Kiki, and The Factory is a good myth that I'd like to blow out of the water. I'm really glad you brought up the whole subject of drug culture and the subculture that isn't part of your studio. Yet, as a frequent visitor to your studio, it seems to me like you have a different kind of subcultural situation there. There is a frisson of something underneath what's happening there—it's not all just business. It's not just pure capitalist productivity. Of course, you run your studio very well, but there's this other thing happening that's interesting to me.

MURAKAMI: I don't know... Maybe it's interesting from the outside, but on the inside...

GINGERAS: It's not?

MURAKAMI: Maybe it was the same at Warhol's Factory.

GINGERAS: Well, maybe when he had Andy Warhol Enterprises in the '70s and '80s, when he was producing *Interview* and *Andy Warhol's TV* and the commissioned portraits, there wasn't an open drug culture... I suppose there was always one around Studio 54.

MURAKAMI: Well, Warhol's studio ~ Continued on page 117

“I
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ALISON GINGERAS IS CHIEF CURATOR OF THE FRANÇOIS PINAULT COLLECTION AT THE PALAZZO GRASSI AND PUNTA DELLA DOGANA IN VENICE, ITALY.
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more MURAKAMI

Continued from page 103 transformation was very dramatic. But our studio has no drama. It's very quiet. *[laughs]*

GINGERAS: But aren't a lot of the people who work with you part of the whole otaku subcultural scene?

MURAKAMI: *[laughs]* This is an overimagination, I think. There are only a few of this type of otaku people in my studio.

GINGERAS: I have these fantasies about these quiet, hardworking girls in the studio who then transform into gothic-lolita French maids—the whole cosplay thing.

MURAKAMI: Yeah, exactly. This morning I was talking with my assistant who came with me to New York from Japan. He was pointing out this guy, SHISHO [Murakami's painting studio director], who came from Japan at the time to work at the New York studio, he is always working very hard. But he's a total otaku. He's what we call geek people. These otakus are so intense. They can be focused for a very long time—like, eight hours! I told the studio director in New York, "We need more geek people in the studio just like SHISHO!" *[laughs]*

GINGERAS: Well, the whole thing about otaku is their obsessiveness, right?

MURAKAMI: Yes. I asked SHISHO to recruit more of them—especially for the Japan studio.

GINGERAS: Your founding in 2008 of the School Festival Executive Committee—this community of obsessed and freaky young kids in the otaku world—actually did seem like the 21st-century version of Warhol to me.

MURAKAMI: Yeah, they were a bunch of otakus—totally geek people.

GINGERAS: When I experienced that School Festival at GEISAI a couple of years ago, I was thinking that this community is as crazy as the whole Velvet Underground scene must have been in the '60s. I thought, This is the most far-out, crazy, alternative culture I've ever experienced firsthand.

MURAKAMI: Yes, yes. But that version of GEISAI in 2008 has become like a memorial date. You remember? The next day . . . Crash! *[laughs]*

GINGERAS: That's right. It was right before the whole economic crash.

MURAKAMI: I spent \$8 million to organize that year's GEISAI and School Festival Executive Committee. It was a bubble—and the bubble burst the following day.

GINGERAS: Well, you had a premonition to throw the biggest party, anticipating the bubble burst.

MURAKAMI: I so enjoyed it.

GINGERAS: You have no regrets?

MURAKAMI: Well, I could share it with so many people like you. It was and still is a very happy moment. I don't regret it. It was a really nice experience for me. But now I'm still doing GEISAI but with a much smaller budget.

GINGERAS: What's going on with your Los Angeles studio? I heard that you have a space there? I'm very curious.

MURAKAMI: Shut up! *[both laugh]* Nothing is happening! I'm just renting a huge studio office in Hollywood.

GINGERAS: So it's just empty? Marika's [Shishido, Murakami's media relations coordinator] just there doing e-mail?

MURAKAMI: I just pay rent. *[laughs]*

GINGERAS: But do you plan to establish your animation studio there?

MURAKAMI: It's very possible—it's an idea, yes. But now I'm making a bar *[Editor's note: The planned location of the bar is Los Angeles, but plans are tentative and still in very preliminary stages of preparation].*

GINGERAS: A bar?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. It's something . . . I don't know. It's supposed to be like a Japanese-style social thing—like sake and shōchū [an alcoholic drink distilled from barley, sweet potatoes, or rice].

GINGERAS: I was first introduced to shōchū thanks to you. Now I love it. But you don't like to drink, so why are you going to open a bar?

MURAKAMI: Basically it's that I'm a foreigner, but I really love American culture. That's why I come here—I'm always looking for ways to connect myself with American people and that American feeling. I'm trying to pick up on the feeling of places, like the Los Angeles feeling or the New York feeling . . . Los Angeles is much better for me that way.

GINGERAS: Why is that?

MURAKAMI: The weather is warm.

GINGERAS: *[laughs]* That's it?

MURAKAMI: Also, the people are fun. They laugh a lot.

GINGERAS: Better quality of life out there?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. But New York City is still the art capital—every time I'm in New York, I'm thinking about competition.

GINGERAS: So you are going to keep the Kaikai Kiki painting and sculpture studio in New York?

MURAKAMI: Yeah, because New York is the place you make meetings. But in Los Angeles, it's about relaxing—just going to lunches and dinners. Everywhere the food tastes very good.

GINGERAS: Tell me more about the bar then.

MURAKAMI: I don't know. It's just my dream. Another of my dreams is to have a water business.

GINGERAS: Like Murakami bottled water?

MURAKAMI: Exactly. It's a natural concept because I realized the U.S. is really big, so maybe I'll be able to find a good spring. *[laughs]* It will be my original type of Evian or something like that. So this is my dream. It's like having a garden for the lotus plants. I am super-focused on the lotuses all the time.

GINGERAS: So it relates back to your breeding.

MURAKAMI: Yes. I'm thinking about water and then maybe some shōchū stuff.

GINGERAS: Would you make your own shōchū?

MURAKAMI: I'm already experimenting on making the shōchū in my studio—and also preparing the schedule by which we will make it. *[laughs]*

GINGERAS: There's a chart for the shōchū?

MURAKAMI: Yeah.

GINGERAS: What are you making it with? Barley? Potato? Because there are different types . . .

MURAKAMI: Potato.

GINGERAS: So you'll have to plant some potato fields in L.A.?

MURAKAMI: I don't know that yet, but it could be possible . . . Maybe.

GINGERAS: You can hire me! I would love to be your director of shōchū.

MURAKAMI: But that's why I want to start the bar. It's all linked with my dream. Every time I start a new business, I'm looking for the niche market. The sake

market is already fixed, but nobody knows shōchū in America . . . Almost nobody.

GINGERAS: Are you going to continue making your Kaikai Kiki animation film? Doesn't it have three chapters so far?

MURAKAMI: Yes, but now it's going to be feature-length, so I'll throw out the first three parts. I'm remaking it—now it looks like *Star Wars* [1977]. You know, it's a saga, like a space battle.

GINGERAS: Do you have a projected release date?

MURAKAMI: Not yet.

GINGERAS: When I saw the first chapter of the Kaikai and Kiki animated film—you gave me the DVD when we arrived in Tokyo—I marveled at how incredibly culturally specific the animation is in terms of its Japanese-ness. It just has such a seductive appeal. It's so accessible.

MURAKAMI: But my dream is to be in the water business! *[laughs]*

GINGERAS: Okay, so the water business is number one. What's the hierarchy of your dreams then? One is the water business.

MURAKAMI: Yes.

GINGERAS: Number two?

MURAKAMI: Number two is animation.

GINGERAS: Number three?

MURAKAMI: Number three is the breeding.

GINGERAS: Dogs, lotuses, and cactuses. Okay, and number four?

MURAKAMI: Number four is worrying about how I will make my death. I'd like to make a scenario about how and when I will die. Suicide or . . . I don't know . . . cancer. *[laughs]*

GINGERAS: You want to plan your own death?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. I want to make it a surprise—like a crime or something like that. You know, I'm an artist—I'm joking. *[laughs]* But this joke is very . . .

GINGERAS: But so many artists are obsessed with death.

MURAKAMI: It's kind of a running joke. At the opening party for my show at Gagosian, Jeff [Poe, art dealer, co-owner of Blum & Poe] was saying, "What, Takashi? Don't tell me about death! Don't tell me suicide. Fuck you, Takashi." *[laughs]* He was so serious.

The next morning I went to meet with my assistant, Marika, and Jeff was super seriously talking with her. He was saying, "Marika, why is Takashi talking to me about suicide? Has he been down? Maybe he's tired." But this death thing is maybe an artist thing. It's something most artists think about. Inventing a death scenario . . . I still don't know yet.

GINGERAS: Do you feel your dark side?

MURAKAMI: I don't think so. I think we are thinking about making history—history related to birth and death. That is history.

GINGERAS: Art is kind of about beating your own death, right?

MURAKAMI: I would be very sad if I got Alzheimer's . . . I would not be able to make good things anymore. Marcel Duchamp was playing chess when he died, which is okay, you know . . . But it is very sad to make a very bad painting or something. I don't want to do that.

GINGERAS: That's your worst nightmare?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. That's why I'm thinking about suicide or something. Inventing a scenario . . . Which brings us to number five. Number five is taking care of our company, Kaikai Kiki, and making paintings.

GINGERAS: And included in number five, would that also include taking care of the artists that are in your circle—the ones you've managed and helped foster?

MURAKAMI: Yes.

GINGERAS: Are you still very involved in helping the careers of all these artists?

MURAKAMI: Yes. Now I am focusing on their education, because the art market is in a little bit of a twisted state. So we have to change and figure out what is the

future way, because the art world also has changed.

GINGERAS: Is that why you're doing GEISAI University?

MURAKAMI: Oh, yeah. Well, it came from many ideas.

GINGERAS: Can you explain maybe just a little bit about GEISAI University?

MURAKAMI: It's just a lecture series. It's a lot like in New York City where you have readings in bookstores. It's like when a philosopher comes and talks for 90 minutes and then there's a question-and-answer period. Something like that. It's very funny.

GINGERAS: Anytime I've worked with you on a show—most recently both in London and Venice—we've done this Shinto ceremony and offering to bless your installation when we finished. Maybe it's surprising to hear about this respect for ritual and tradition for people who don't know you. But behind the scenes, there's also this kind of spirituality that's part of your work.

MURAKAMI: Yeah, but, you know, Asian people just do that. *[laughs]* Like even Jackie Chan makes some ceremony before he starts to shoot a movie.

GINGERAS: Beyond the ceremonies, would you say that you give import to these Shinto and Buddhist calendars? Do different aspects of religious or spiritual thought become more important for you as time goes on?

MURAKAMI: I don't know. I met this master recently from Taiwan. He is taking care of me constantly, but I totally didn't believe in supernatural powers before I met him. Now I believe a little bit . . . Or not . . . I don't know. Because I have a pain here . . . *[gestures to leg]*

GINGERAS: In your knee?

MURAKAMI: Yes. And this guy just goes *[waves hand]* like that and, oops, there's no more pain. I asked him how. He said, "I take care of it. The god came from nowhere. It's in my hand!" *[laughs]* Okay! I said, "Your hand? Really?" He said, "Yes." Something like that. So funny. But he will not accept any money from me.

GINGERAS: How did you meet this guy?

MURAKAMI: Through a Taiwanese friend. She is now the producer in Taiwan of GEISAI. She introduced me. He is a very famous guy.

GINGERAS: Is he like a monk? What does he do?

MURAKAMI: No. I don't know. Maybe he's a psychic.

GINGERAS: Like a psychic?

MURAKAMI: Yeah, but everything is free. It's really strange and very scary. For example, he took care of me a lot and, finally, I gave him a red envelope.

Inside there's like \$3,000 for him and I thanked him very much. He says, "Oh, thank you," and then he took out these dollars and gave them back to me. I asked: "What is this ceremony? I don't understand." Next time I gave him \$9,000 and the same thing happened—he gave it back. I totally did not understand. When I went to his house in Taiwan, I saw that he is not at all rich—in fact he's really poor. When I asked him about this whole situation, he said, "Because this is what god said."

GINGERAS: God said he should be poor?

MURAKAMI: I don't know. It's a really strange family.

GINGERAS: Have you spent a lot of time in Taipei recently?

MURAKAMI: Yes, because we're making a gallery there.

GINGERAS: A gallery to host exhibitions?

MURAKAMI: Yes.

GINGERAS: Why Taipei?

MURAKAMI: Because of this friend who is a producer. We developed a really strong friendship.

GINGERAS: But is there an interesting art scene there?

MURAKAMI: I don't know. He just asked me to make an advertising campaign and I said I wasn't interested, but I told him that if he had a gallery, he

could collect all the paintings and sculptures we show there. So we just thought it was a good idea. I'm not sure what's going on with the market. But the Asian market is really active.

GINGERAS: Well, there is a lot of commentary now about how there are serious art collectors who are coming from places in Asia and the Middle East that were not really part of the traditional demographic.

MURAKAMI: This is why Taipei and my activities in Taiwan are not a joke. It seems like a real art market will take hold there and that is why my friend wants to open a gallery. I still don't know yet what is the reality of the Chinese market. But it's not just about China—there's also Singapore and Malaysia.

GINGERAS: Is it political for you to have a gallery in Taipei—to choose Taipei over a Chinese city?

MURAKAMI: Well, I could've opened a gallery in Hong Kong. It's much better to link with the mainland Chinese market. Taiwan is complicated for mainlanders. But so far, there is no real reaction to this choice.

GINGERAS: Are you interested more generally in politics?

MURAKAMI: I don't think so.

GINGERAS: No?

MURAKAMI: Maybe a little bit because I'm getting old. You know, I can read the newspaper now—that's why.