

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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## Is Takashi Murakami's work art or porn?



**Stefanie Marsh**

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Are the Japanese artist's new works porn for billionaires, or a profound take on a nation's sexual identity?

In Japan, where he's from, there are still many people who don't consider Takashi Murakami to be a real artist at all. If ten years ago, he says, most Japanese people hated him, now they think he's "just OK", which is fantastic progress as far as he's concerned. Ten years ago people, particularly of his own generation, he smiles, "really hated me. They thought I'm a thief and that I take other people's ideas and sell them to the Western world." He laughs joyfully. Three years ago, *Time* magazine listed him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world, the only visual artist included. And still nobody in Japan understood what Murakami was doing. Most still don't.

We're in the Gagosian Gallery, just south of King's Cross. Outside, it is sweltering. Inside, minions tend humourlessly to the last details of Murakami's show, which is full of deliberately unarousing pornographically themed objects: a giant golden smiling penis, a vagina painted in a kitschy, pop take on the traditional Japanese *shunga* style, a big-eyed cartoonish giant sculpture of a big-breasted nurse. "This is dangerous," Murakami says comically, alluding to the syringe in her hand. He poses beside the penis for a picture. Later he tells me that there are many very beautiful images in Japanese pornography that he's decided to use for this show.

Then there are other objects, not obviously sexual at all. "It looks like a toy," he says, referring to a large yellow sculpture of something Lego-like. "But a few people will look at it and think 'This is hot! This is sexy!'" He tells me that some men apparently find computer-generated lines a turn-on. "I couldn't understand why. I was so shocked. 'Whaaat?'" he almost screams, "This is sexual?" He is parodying himself. "Yeees," comes his rejoinder to himself, "This line is," he beams, "superniiiiice." Somehow, the show works beautifully.

Tonight's private viewing is a pivotal one. Already *The New York Times* art diarist is cooing all over the star of the show, demanding to know where he bought the beautiful shirt he is wearing. But there won't be any television cameras in the Gagosian because Murakami's collectors will all be here and his collectors, being terribly wealthy, don't always like to be identified. In 2008, *My Lonesome Cowboy*, a sculpture of an ejaculating boy, sold for \$15.2 million at Sotheby's. As far as his collectors (none of them are Japanese) are concerned, Murakami is the Andy Warhol of Japan. Art critics, meanwhile, have spent a huge amount of time talking about how Murakami has managed to explain Japan to a Western audience: how he is on the very farthest edge of the Post-Modern vanguard and at least ten years ahead of even New York, where, at 26, Murakami first glimpsed an Anselm Kiefer show at MoMA, which changed everything (The way Murakami actually puts it is: "My brain was an explosion!" His English, it turns out, is rudimentary; my Japanese, nonexistent.) Before the Kiefer show he had been studying Japanese fine art, working various jobs on the side to support himself (his father was a cab driver, and not ever being poor again has always been one of Murakami's "life goals"), but felt disillusioned with the way that contemporary Japanese art was going. He had always been much more drawn to Japan's artistic underground: the *otaku* (or "geek", for want of a better word) culture that generates manga, anime, and idols. Murakami felt that he lacked the talent to be a significant manga artist but always formed part of the *otaku*. From there he developed "Superflat", the art philosophy that was to make him famous and eventually rich, appropriating pop cultural themes into his work as a way to reflect what he thinks of as the "shallow emptiness of consumer culture".

Murakami is an artist but he is also an entrepreneur. He employs hundreds of artists in a factory on the outskirts of Tokyo, and a smaller operation in New York, to make work that he oversees. To qualify for a place in the factory, known as Kaikai Kiki, potential new staff must complete a month of training and pass a test in which they must produce a small painting of a mushroom to be critiqued by Murakami. When he is preparing for a show, Murakami and several staff will often spend several nights in the gallery, sleeping in sleeping bags. "Myself included, all Kaikai Kiki staff are specially trained so that they can fall asleep anywhere and at any time."

If you can read Japanese, you can bankrupt yourself buying Murakami key rings, cuddly toys, T-shirts, pillows and assorted nicely crafted tat on his website; objects younger Japanese people seem to adore. Art is the supreme of luxury entertainment, Murakami says, but why shouldn't ordinary people be able to buy art too? At the other end of the scale, he agreed to collaborate with Marc Jacobs on a \$5,000 limited-edition Louis Vuitton handbag. He also made a five-minute animated cartoon for Louis Vuitton, which many art-literate Westerners felt blurred the commercial too cynically with the artistic. Has he become too commercial? "Yes. Yes!" he almost screams, delightedly. (When the subject of money comes up, Murakami lights up.) He likes to go to auctions (anything but his own work) because he is fascinated by the process. In Japan, he says it's quite normal for shopping centres to hold art shows. What does he do with his money? "I've been lucky enough to become a collector myself. I collect everything from art to pottery, cactuses and even Japanese killifish." So, what would he say is now his life's ambition: "To insert Japanese art deep into the heart of Western art history." And with that, an anxious assistant interrupts and ends our encounter, which has been charming, and leads him off to pose for a picture next to *3-Meter Girl* and her gargantuan breasts.

**Takashi Murakami at Gagosian Gallery, 6-24 Britannia Street, London WC1, to August 5 (020-7841 9960)**