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Takashi Murakami Makes Monster Movie to Teach Children a Lesson

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2012 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Children are the focus of the film 'Jellyfish Eyes'.

Takashi Murakami is one of Japan's most prolific and well-known contemporary artists. Based in Tokyo, the 51-year-old blurs the boundaries of traditional Japanese art and pop culture, deploying the bright, colorful aesthetic of anime and manga in his paintings, sculptures and collaborations with luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton.

Earlier this year, Mr. Murakami released a feature film, "Jellyfish Eyes" ("Mememe no Kurage"), the first of a trilogy of sci-fi computer-generated monster movies. It tells the story of a little boy named Masashi who moves to a small town with his mother after his father dies in the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster.

The town is located in an ordinary-looking Japanese suburb, but Masashi discovers that every child who lives there, including himself and his friend Saki, is paired up with a "FRIEND" – a remote-controlled monster that some kids use for evil purposes like bullying others. The monsters turn out to be part of an experiment by a group of people seeking to dominate the world by harnessing negative energy from children. While the humans are played by actors, the monsters are rendered with computer graphics.

The artist recently spoke to the Journal at the Kaohsiung Film Festival in southern Taiwan about his crossover to the big screen, why contemporary art is like bodybuilding, and the importance of teaching children to cope with failure. Edited excerpts follow.

What drove you to make a monster movie?

My life is heavily influenced by two television shows – “Ultraman” [1966-1967] and “Ultra Seven” [1967-68] – because of the artists behind them, especially the Ultraman series artistic designer Toru Narita. As a child growing up in the post-World War II period, Mr. Narita injured his hand and was exempt from serving in the military. He was torn between his physical disability and his desire to serve his country. On a superficial level, the shows are about big fighting monsters, but if you look closely, you can sense the powerful energy from him. Through these monster shows, the audience can learn about the problems in the society. This is what I wanted to do.

Why are children the focus of the film?

I want to highlight Japan’s complicated social issues in a way that children can appreciate so perhaps when they become adults, they will be better equipped to deal or even improve these issues. Children are very smart, therefore it is imperative for them to know the world we live in is full of traps, dangers and unpleasantness. I am not a pessimist, I am a realist.

The message I want to convey to children is you are not the chosen ones, you are not always blessed and the world is dark and dreary. By telling children the harsh truth, some of them will use that energy and create something awesome when they grow up.

The movie also features four young adults as antagonists.

They appear to be the villains in this movie, but in the next two installments [in the trilogy], you will see these four aren’t as black as white as they seem.

What do they represent?

They symbolize the gray area of life, the overlapping space between right and wrong, and the conflict between light and shadow that we all experience internally. These four never set out to destroy the earth. They are simply pursuing what they believe to be the truth. But just like life, sometimes when you are so determined and concentrated to get to the bottom of one thing, in the end you forget what you were looking for and what had caused you sacrifice everything to pursue this.

It’s similar to the “father of atomic bomb,” J. Robert Oppenheimer. During the height of his research, he probably never imagined the combination of his theories and real-life application would result in something so destructive. He never had the intention to create something so lethal, yet he was already so into the research that he couldn’t stop.

What are your views on Japan’s young people nowadays?

My observation of my 30-year-old-ish employees worries me. They go about their lives without ever questioning anything, just believing whatever the media or their teachers tell them. They are detached from the society and the only person they care about is themselves. This self-centered attitude is prevalent in Japan because our education system teaches them that as long as they focus on their own success, their dreams will come true. This mentality is a fairy tale that means people will fall into pieces when they experience failure.

Religion plays a big role in “Jellyfish Eyes,” but the believers are portrayed as having blind faith. How do you feel about organized religion?

In the movie, the congregation represents a new religious movement that emerges after the March 2011 earthquake and the nuclear disaster. These believers walk around chanting, “We don’t want nuclear energy! Back to nature!” but the reality is, while their religion may provide them a comforting illusion of salvation, it doesn’t offer any solution to the problem. It is a very self-serving, self-deceiving way of life. When children see their parents joining churches like this, they don’t always agree with them. I am not criticizing the power of religion, but there are people who join the movement without ever giving it any real introspection of how they can better serve the society.

What’s your take on Asia’s contemporary art scene?

There are two types of art—the pure kind by natural-born artists, and art by people who have gone through rigorous training. For example, in bodybuilding, some people are born with amazing physiques, yet others have to work really hard, even down to every muscle and sinew, to win a bodybuilding contest.

For most people, they might not appreciate all the intense training that the contestant goes through, but the judges know. Instead of looking only at the bigger picture, a serious bodybuilder divides his body into parts and work on each section until perfection.

In the art world, American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat would be considered pure art while I belong to the latter category. In Asia, the appreciation of art is sometimes very shallow and superficial, but my works require a deep examination. Some critics say that my pieces are overrated and overpriced. I have been called a fraud. But the fact is, every single detail of my artworks is the result of vigorous training with absolute discipline.