

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Takashi Murakami on 'Jellyfish Eyes,' his new monster movie

By Jori Finkel



Performers dressed as the animated characters Luxor, left, and Kurage-Bo greet visitors to the premiere of Takashi Murakami's "Jellyfish Eyes" at LACMA. (Jori Finkel / Los Angeles Times)

In L.A. for his upcoming show at Blum & Poe, the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami started his week with an appearance at LACMA for the "international premiere" of his new movie, "Jellyfish Eyes."

No word yet on distribution plans, but do not expect his usual short-format animated dream-sequence.

Running 100 minutes, this movie mixes live action with computer animation to tell the story of a Japanese boy, Masashi, who finds a lovable Friend (as the species is known) with extraterrestrial powers at a time when he needs it the most, in the wake of his father's death. Looming large are images of earthquakes and tsunamis, and the threat of nuclear disaster as in Fukushima in 2011.

After the screening, part of LACMA's Film Independent series, program organizer Elvis Mitchell did a brief Q&A with the artist-director, his translator on hand. A fair amount was lost in translation. But

Murakami did communicate very clearly his desire to make a monster movie -- originally one in which the Friend Kurage-Bo or Jellyfish-Boy was "a strange guy ... dirty -- and almost naked in my original design."

"Movies are a kind of collaboration, and many people were against this idea," Murakami explained. So Kurage-Bo turned out to have a bright-white blob-body, wide green eyes and a shock of pink hair - - adorable in the venerable Japanese tradition of *kawaii* or super-cuteness. And the biggest monster, not the main character, became the more naturalistic, grungy character.

Toward the end of the talk, Murakami mentioned the Power Rangers and movies by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg as influences, singling out "E.T." and "The Goonies." Like some of these films, the movie explores the dynamics among a group of kids, as Kurage-Bo is not the only Friend in town: every student has a "device" (which looks like a souped-up iPhone) that gives them access to their own Friend.

Unfortunately they use the Friends to bully and fight each other (generic spoiler ahead) until they figure out a way to work together. This makes for little moral subtlety but great visual complexity.

And with so many characters, the merchandising possibilities are endless.

According to gallerist Tim Blum, Murakami's show at Blum & Poe is not connected to the movie visually, but it is "spiritually," as the 2011 earthquake and related events in Japan also informed the direction of the show.

"He's introducing many new things in the show. It's all new work, but also the way they're made is new. The content is new," said Blum.

The first gallery will feature supersized (two measure 35-feet long) paintings packed with images of incredibly old monks. Deeper in the show expect some self-portraits of Murakami, paintings as well as one sculpture. The show opens Saturday to the public.