

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



In a New Show, Takashi Murakami Visits the Dark Side

Ann Binlot



New works by Takashi Murakami go on view today at Gagosian's Chelsea location. Takashi Murakami, "Tan Tan Bo - In Communication," 2014. Acrylic, gold leaf and platinum leaf on canvas mounted on wood panel, 141 3/4 x 141 3/4 inches, 360 x 360 cm. Right: Takashi Murakami, "The Birth Cry of a Universe," 2014. Mixed media, 90 9/16 x 165 3/8 x 115 3/8 inches, 230 x 420 x 293 cm. ©2014 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York. Photograph by Robert McKeever

On March 11, 2011, the day the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami devastated Japan, Takashi Murakami was in his studio near Tokyo. Though his family, who live in the south, were unharmed, the artist's studio assistant lost his grandmother and grandfather. The magnitude of the tragedy got Murakami thinking. "I used to think of religion as something kind of false and hypocritical, but after the earthquake disaster, I realized in a time like that, religion and fairy tales and things like that are actually a necessity," he said through a translator.

That thought became the starting point for the works in his new show, "In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow," which opens tonight at Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea. As the tragedy unfolded, the artist began exploring art history through the lens of natural disasters, beginning with the Great Ansei Earthquake of 1855. Its aftermath saw the rise of artists like Kano Kazunobu, whose haunting scrolls portrayed Buddha's 500 *arhats* — people who have attained enlightenment.

The exhibition represents a dark departure from the smiling cartoon flowers of Murakami's best-known work. One 82-foot-long canvas emulates the style of Kazunobu's paintings, depicting grotesque figures and young children in peril. In another case, Murakami layered *arhats*, which are often portrayed in Japanese art in the wake of a natural disaster, on top of an abstract painting he had been working on at the time of the catastrophe.

The idea for the show's centerpiece — a nearly life-size, multi-ton replica of a *sanmon*, or sacred gate, from the Heian period, guarded by two large, horrific demon sculptures — took root in 2000 when Murakami visited the then newly remodeled Gagosian space to view the Damien Hirst exhibition "Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings." One larger-than-life sculpture depicting an anatomical model, "Hymn," caught the artist's eye. "I was blown away," Murakami said. "I was so shocked, I wanted to create a shocking show myself."

"In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow" is on view at Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, through Jan. 17, 2015, gagosian.com.