

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Wallpaper*

A mournful Takashi Murakami shows his spiritual side at Gagosian Gallery,
New York

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Takashi Murakami's latest show follows a newfound spiritual direction for the artist, exploring the trauma of Japan's 2011 tsunami and earthquake. © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co Ltd. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery. Photography: Robert McKeever

Since the 1990s when he created his cartoon avatar Mr Dob, there has been a sector of the art market immune to the charms of Takashi Murakami. His 'superflat' style, considered by many to be the ultimate leveller between high and low art, translated to others as simply 'flat'.

The time to reconsider that appraisal is now. In a new show launched at New York's Gagosian gallery this week, Murakami tosses his divisive brand of 'art merchandise' to the wind and breathes a more spiritual air.

Entitled 'In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow', the show was triggered by the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami of 2011, which flattened northeast Japan and swept the country into a collective grief. The artist, who has always blended historical motifs and classical techniques in his pop art, mined religious iconography and folk tales with mournful resolve in a journey toward enlightenment.

He devoted time to meditation, to understanding the religions he once dismissed and explored the human tendency to seek religion in the wake of catclysm. Along the way he revisited and internalised Buddhist and Shinto emblems and the 19th-century scrolls of Kano Kazunobu, who painted *arhats*, or spiritual beings, after the Great Ansei Earthquake of 1855.

Mr Dob makes an appearance in one painting, emoting in a way that's hard to articulate. Ditto the bulbously familiar character Mr Pointy - certainly not the smiley, happy Murakami of yesterday. There is little else to suggest this work comes from the poster boy of art-meets-commerce. The artist's central piece is a 56-tonne *sanmon*, a replica of a thousand-year-old sacred gate, framing views toward a skull-cluttered canvas. In another room looms a demonic totem, familiar for its Murakami-esque gold plate but not for its mushroom-cloud silhouette, an allusion to that other Japanese disaster in recent memory.

The artist appears to have reconstructed his belief system in the healing years post-tsunami, to embrace all manner of Eastern religions, and tailored their imagery to his mischievous manga sensibility. It's cathartic to watch. Far more edifying than retail therapy.