

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times Magazine

Talk December 7, 2014

# 'I FELT THE NECESSITY OF RELIGION'

Takashi Murakami on making art after the tsunami.

Interview by JAY CASPIAN KANG

Murakami is currently developing an original animated series for Japanese TV.

**Your new show in New York, "In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow," is a departure from the more pop-culture-inspired work that defined a lot of your career. Why is that?** As a young artist in New York, I thought about postwar Japan — the consumer culture, and the loose, deboned feeling prevalent in the character and animation culture. Mixing all those up in order to portray Japanese culture and society was my work. This time I wanted to examine where religion and art arise when people are faced with natural disaster.

**I noticed a lot of religious imagery in the show. Were you raised in a religious household?** When I was little, my parents belonged to a cult, a big Buddhist sect called Soka Gakkai. I didn't have any particular sentiment for or against religion, but I did feel bad about my parents' poverty and how it made them depend on that cult. I thought that poverty and religion sat right next to each other and I opposed the sort of cult that preyed on poverty and poor people.

**What changed?** After the tsunami in 2011, I saw orphaned children being interviewed on television. Aid workers would tell them, "Your parents went to the other side, but they are always here watching out for you, looking down at you." You know they are trying to comfort the kids, but if you think about it, it's a lie — the parents aren't looking down at them at all. Yet that type of story is also a necessity for these children. I felt these sorts of exchanges might say something about the start of religion, the beginning of faith. I felt the necessity of religion.

**In the past, you have talked about commercial success as your only goal. So it was the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that changed your perspective?** It definitely shifted, on a fundamental level, my position as an artist. I'm still not sure if that's a good thing. Maybe I could have made much more powerful artwork if I had just kept doing the same thing. But the change has already happened.

**What do you think of the comparisons between you and artists like Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst?** World War II was always my



theme — I was always thinking about how the culture reinvented itself after the war. But it was difficult for me, being from the country that lost the war, to tell a story or assert my opinion in the same arena as Koons and Hirst. They are from countries that won the war.

**Do those artists still matter to you in the same way?** Of course I envy them, they are at the center of the art world, still. But I feel like I've taken a step back from that. I stopped worrying about competition in contemporary art. It feels a little bit more pure. That's where I am, one step back.

**Earlier in your career you talked about the need to reject Western influence in your work. Why do you collaborate with Western brands like Louis Vuitton, or musicians like Kanye West?** The offers to collaborate have always come from the other side. In the past, I wondered why they want to collaborate with me, but now I understand. What the West is looking for in Japan is something more than the very artificial, Hollywood, over-the-top Japan. I offer the middle ground, something that is just the right temperature for Western audiences.

**How did you end up working with Kanye?** Kanye's record label contacted me and said that he really liked a sculpture of mine — a woman with huge breasts. They asked if he could come to see it. It just so happened that the sculpture had just returned to the studio for repair. I said sure. Kanye came to the studio and stared at the sculpture, completely without words, just silently looking at it. I think he was moved by it, because he took hundreds of pictures with his digital camera.

**Your Louis Vuitton handbags are very popular among counterfeiters. What do you think about the illegal appropriation of your work?** The absolute highlight of my career is this one cover of Artforum. It's a photograph of an African man at the Venice Biennale sewing a fake Louis Vuitton bag with my monogram on it. That photograph captured everything: the fake and the real, Japanese culture, consumer society, capitalism, copy and original — everything in one image. ♦