

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Goodbye to Cute, Hello to Devilish

BY KELLY CROW

ON MARCH 11, 2011, Japanese artist Takashi Murakami and his staff crouched in a swaying Tokyo skyscraper as a 9.0-magnitude earthquake and tsunami roiled the island, killing nearly 16,000 people. Afterward, he darted through chaotic crowds to his nearby studio—feeling, the artist said in a recent interview, “like I was in a Godzilla movie.”

Mr. Murakami’s studio wasn’t damaged, but he said the tragedy drove him to do some serious soul-searching. The event also influenced the works in his new show, “In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow,” which opens Monday at Gagosian Gallery in New York.

Since the late 1990s, Mr. Murakami has steadily built an international reputation for painting smiling, anime-like characters in a glossy style he calls “superflat.” Some of his rainbow-hue designs have decorated luxury handbags as well as the walls of the Brooklyn Museum. At auction, his cheeky sculptures of mythic figures have resold for as much as \$15.1 million apiece.

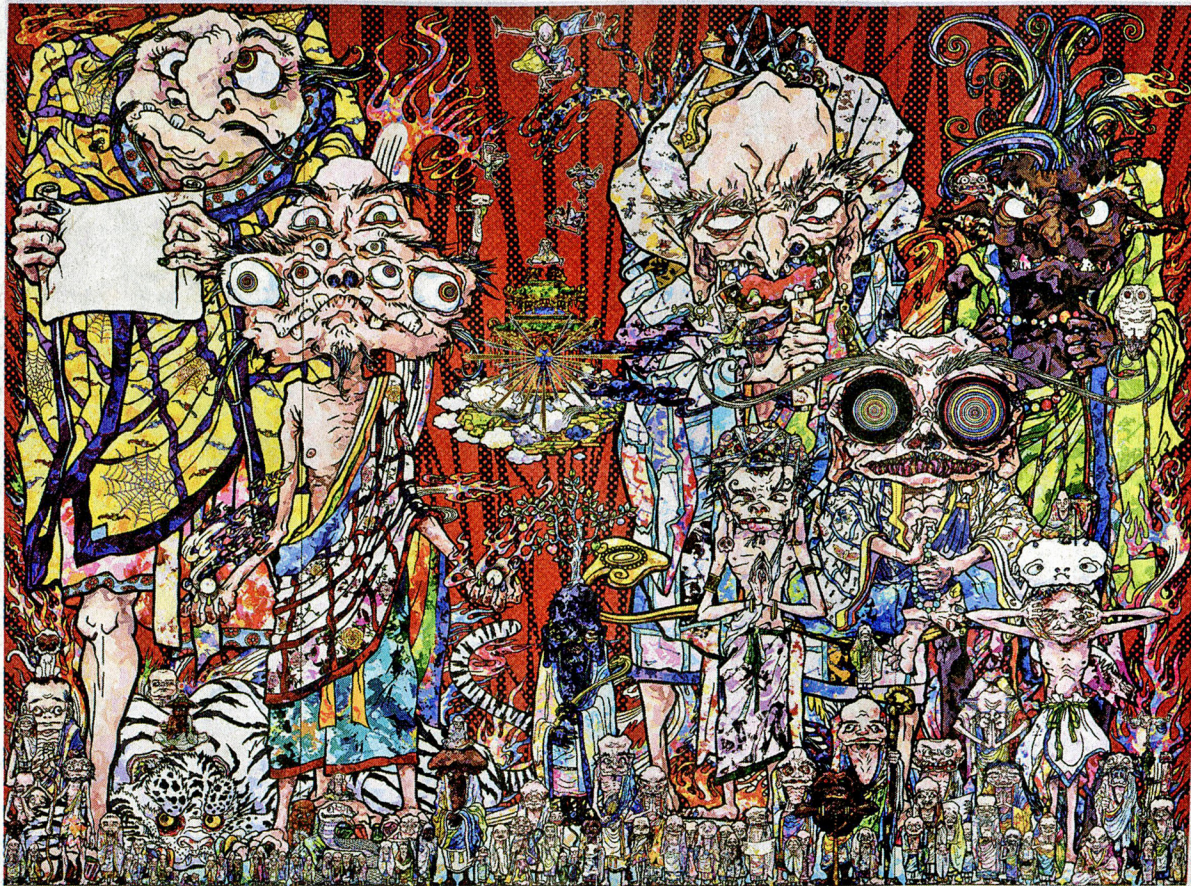
But his latest works herald a darker, angrier mood. Two paintings depict lions—an ancient symbol of authority—lounging on bridges made from piles of skulls. Nearby, a pair of 14-foot-tall demons stands like menacing sentinels, clubs in their claws. The surface of these red and blue monsters appears grimy, a departure from Mr. Murakami’s signature shine.

The centerpiece of the show is a huge temple-like wooden structure, with flaking red pillars and cracking black roof tiles. The work is titled “Bakuramon,” after an imaginary Chinese animal that eats dreams. But the artist said he modeled the structure after renderings of the Rashomon Gate, an eighth-century city gate and pavilion in Kyoto, Japan, that eventually fell into disrepair and was torn down.

In the 1950 movie, “Rashomon,” Akira Kurosawa famously re-created the gate for a film of clashing, self-serving narratives often viewed as a symbol of Japan’s moral decay. At the gallery, Mr. Murakami decided to build a similar gate for slightly different reasons. He said the earthquake sparked a sudden, religious fervor in Japan that unnerved him.

At the same time, he said he found himself empathizing with survivors who sought answers to heartbreaking questions. “When people are confronted by the power of nature, they need a narrative to give them hope,” Mr. Murakami said. “They need to know why they survived.”

For him, Japan’s spiritual revival also conjured complex emotions about his own childhood faith, specifically a branch of Buddhism called Nichiren Shōshū. From the age of 10, Mr. Murakami said he regularly attended trance-inducing meditation sessions alongside



DRIVEN BY TRAGEDY 'Isle of the Dead' by Takashi Murakami will be at New York's Gagosian Gallery starting Monday. At right, the artist during the show's installation in New York earlier this fall.

his parents. His father, a taxi driver, and his mother began practicing after they moved to Toyko from the town of Kokura, nearly 600 miles away. Adherents “became our family,” he said.

A decade later, he said he grew disillusioned and stopped practicing—but the earthquake got him thinking anew about the role that religion, and art, can play in difficult times. He began reading Buddhist texts and poring through ancient Chinese fables to find new characters to paint: Mystics, healers, dragon masters and kings, all a far cry from his typically buxom, manga-like heroines. Many of these new characters show up in a 75-foot-long painting that unfurls like a wall-

size scroll behind Mr. Murakami’s gate installation.

In terms of scale, that’s nothing compared with the 300-foot-long painting he unveiled in a 2012 exhibit at the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. That work showed people suffering after the earthquake.

Mr. Murakami said that from now on, he’s going to pay greater attention to telling sagas through his art: “I used to think about the art market, the industry, about blending high art with low art,” he said. “No longer. Now, story is essential.”

► See more photos and a video from the new show at WSJ.com/Art.

