

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Takashi Murakami's Art From Disaster

He is best-known for his cheery anime-like characters, but the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami's dark new show was inspired by an earthquake and tsunami.

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Stefanie Keenan/Getty

There is a distinct style Japanese artist Takashi Murakami is known for: his bubbly anime-like characters. They've decorated his artworks almost his entire career. Their bright eyes and wide, happy smiles have spread a feeling of happiness and hope across the art world and beyond.

But they just took a turn toward the dark side.

In his most recent exhibition, *In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow*, for New York's Gagosian Gallery, they are a reminder of a tragic past: the great Tohoku earthquake of 2011 and subsequent tsunami that devastated entire coastal towns. Their bright eyes have dulled with a sense of confusion, piles of skulls occasionally lay at their feet, and the bodies of human figures have shriveled and decayed.

The 52-year-old Murakami, who was born and raised in Tokyo, has been painting his happy, anime-like characters since the late 1990s, when he received a fellowship from PS1's studio program in New York.

It was there Murakami was exposed to Western contemporary artists and began combining east and west, high and low—a theme that has stuck with him throughout most of his career.

He used these markers as a platform to introduce new type of art market to post-war Japan. Now, his works sell at upwards of \$15.1 million at auction.

His commercial collaborations have also propelled him to international success beyond the art market—most notably his designs for Louis Vuitton. In 2002 he re-envisioned the luxury brand’s iconic “LV” logo and has since worked with Kanye West, Pharrell Williams, and many others. He is currently working with Vans for an upcoming collaboration.

At the time of the Tohoku earthquake, Murakami was back working in his studio outside of Tokyo, working on his own personal projects. “There was a great shake many times,” he told the *Daily Beast* through his translator. He and his staff were working on pieces for an upcoming exhibition at Gagosian London, holding them tight against the wall so they wouldn’t tumble to the floor.

His more recent works at Gagosian’s 24th Street outpost are just as grand as his previous ones. The massive canvases that adorn the walls are often filled with bright colors and his signature “superflat” style, an art movement he coined that involve various flattened characters, and a nod at consumer culture—a mix of high and low.

Similarly, the shiny, metallic sculptures, such as *The Birth Cry of a Universe*, tower over visitors and fill corners with their reflective material. Their jagged edges and razor sharp teeth make you stand a little further back than normal.

One of the most striking pieces is a wooden, temple-like structure erected in the center of the gallery space. *Bakuramon*, as it is titled, is modeled after Rashomon Gate in Kyoto, Japan, that was erected in the eighth-century but eventually fell into disrepair and was demolished.

The earthquake sparked a surge in religious belief in Japan. The survivors needed hope for a brighter future, and Murakami sought to supply a salvaging narrative through his art.

“After the natural disaster I very realistically felt the reason why people create communities,” such as religions, he said. “It’s against the power of nature—natural disasters, climate disaster, or illness—so these things that you can’t logically defeat ... then you have to work on comforting.”

In 2011, it wasn’t the earthquake that worried him. “The biggest impact for me was the nuclear power plant meltdown,” he said of the earthquake’s ramifications. “My head was completely panicking.”

Murakami had spent many years active in an “anti-nuclear power plant activity movement” around the time of the Chernobyl meltdown in Ukraine in 1986. He was very familiar with the reality of what could happen: Tokyo could be covered with a really high dosage of radiation.

“I wanted to run away right then,” he said, “but I had about 60 staff members in the studio to take care of first.” Over the next week, he made sure everyone was safe until the final worker had departed. Then he headed to his family in Western Japan.

Soon after, Murakami began putting all of his creative energy into this theme of natural disasters, not only for educated adults, but also for the blossoming minds of today's youth. His first feature film, *Jellyfish Eyes*, debuted last year and was set in a town near a threatening nuclear power plant.

“With the movie, I really wanted the story to be a chance for children to realize what might be going on in society—the lies and the things to question,” he said. “But in the Gagorian show, I wanted the expert to stop and think. I wanted them to experience my motivation.”