

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Religion unexpectedly enters Murakami's vision

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“Shi no Shima” (Isle of the Dead), one of Takashi Murakami’s works themed on death currently on display at Gagosian Gallery in New York

World-famous contemporary artist Takashi Murakami is pushing boundaries with a series of ambitious new works, thanks to a shift the artist attributes to the Great East Japan Earthquake.

In 2012, the year after the devastating disaster, Murakami showed his epic “Gohyaku Rakan-zu” (The 500 Arhats), a three-meter-high, 100-meter-long painting portraying 500 people who attained enlightenment in Buddhism, at an exhibition in Doha, Qatar’s capital.

His latest exhibition of new paintings and sculptures in New York is widely seen as an attempt to completely change his image in recent years.

Titled “In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow,” the show opened in November at Gagosian Gallery, which is known for its global influence in the art world.

Behind a massive wooden gate are groups of large paintings and sculptures. Photographs taken at the venue exhibit a dark atmosphere rather than a pop feel.

One exhibition review said: “His newest show . . . may not win over all his detractors. But it will go a long way to convincing skeptics that the goofy-seeming Murakami is actually a serious artist — in this case, a deadly serious one.”

Yet Murakami insists he has not changed.

“My goal of artistic exploration remains unchanged, but how I am pursuing that goal has changed,” the artist explained. In a nutshell, his main focus has moved from “art and capitalism” to “art and religion,” he said.

“It was essential to forge ties with the market amid the ongoing art bubble,” he said, recalling his past works collaborating with high-end fashion brands.

The ©MURAKAMI exhibition, which traveled around the United States, including Brooklyn Museum in New York in 2008, was held during such a trend. But the 2011 disaster turned out to be a major turning point.

Murakami said he had been unable to understand religion until then. But he “witnessed the moment when religion emerged.” It was religion as the act of mutual aid in exchange for nothing, in which neighbors help each other during times of disaster and in poverty.

The artist said the experience led him to the belief that “I had no choice other than honestly depicting how despair and hope stand side by side, which has enabled me to stand at a more primitive position rather than [creating] highly developed art.”

In his latest exhibition, Murakami still retains his distinct style in which he builds up a particular context in multiple layers.

Among the works is “Bakuramon,” a gate that Murakami reportedly fabricated with the help of those in the field of film design and carpenters specializing in the construction of temples and shrines in the Tohoku region. While the work was inspired by director Akira Kurosawa’s masterpiece “Rashomon,” he also kept in mind the history of the Rajomon grand gate, which once stood in the ancient capital of Heiankyo (present-day Kyoto). Constructed based on the style used in Chinese gates, the gate later fell into disrepair.

The Bakuramon gate is followed by a series of paintings with titles reflecting the theme of death.

The exhibition also has many works based on ancient Japanese artifacts, with particular attention to the devotion of artists in the past to the act of drawing.

There were certainly people who devoted themselves to painting even during turmoil as seen in a masterpiece by late Edo period artist Kano Kazunobu, “Gohyaku Rakan-zu,” on which Murakami’s work of the same title is based. After the 2011 disaster, artists’ such way of living became to feel real to him.

Another earlier artwork that inspired Murakami is “Gunsen-zu” (Immortals), a major work by 18th-century artist Soga Shohaku. Compared with his other works, the piece is outstanding in its elaborate drawing. “It really expresses his spirit of defiance,” Murakami said.

“I’d like to incorporate the state of mind [all of these artists had when they] produced the works, being compelled by forces beyond their control, and create a moment when the primitive spirit and art are bound together,” he said.

The interview was conducted in a car as the artist traveled from a studio in Saitama Prefecture to central Tokyo.

Spending much energy on film productions, Murakami keeps himself extremely busy.

From this autumn through spring next year, Mori Art Museum in Roppongi, Tokyo, will host Murakami’s solo exhibition titled “The 500 Arhats,” where the gigantic artwork displayed at the Doha show will be shown to the public.

He reportedly decided to hold the exhibition there because he empathized with former Mori Building Co. Chairman Minoru Mori, who died in 2012.

The upcoming show is likely to draw tremendous public attention, as it will be his first solo exhibition in the country in more than a decade.

“Takashi Murakami: In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow,” is held at Gagosian Gallery in New York through Jan. 17. For more information, visit www.gagosian.com.