

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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‘Japan’s Andy Warhol’ has blurred the lines between art and commerce. Over two burgers in Tokyo, he talks about fantasy beating reality and his quest to be understood

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Illustration by James Ferguson

I’m wondering whether Takashi Murakami might make more sense if he didn’t have half a Freshness Burger jammed in his mouth and some kind of green relish leaking down his chin. As it is, I’m struggling to understand him, either with my rusted Japanese or through the English interpretation coming at me rapid-fire in my left ear.

Murakami is talking about the influence that contemporary artists such as Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons — with whom his name is often linked in a sort of big-brand holy trinity — have had on his career. “The theme my generation explored was the relationship between capitalism and art. In that sense I couldn’t use that many narrative motifs,” he is saying, rescuing a stray piece of hamburger bun from his goatee. “So Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and myself, we were trying to

link art, which fundamentally has no value, with capitalism and to show how it can be seen as valuable.” I’m nodding vigorously and smiling. I’m thinking, “What on earth is he on about?” Contemporary artists often spin complicated theories around their creations, as though their art needed intellectual scaffolding for collectors to appreciate and — more importantly — purchase it. Murakami, who is regularly referred to as Japan’s Andy Warhol, is no exception. He coined the term “superflat” to describe his two-dimensional, graphic-design-like work, inspired by the slightly deranged worlds of *manga* (cartoons), *anime* (animation), and the fetishised creations of Japanese *otaku* (geek) subculture. His style — recurring images include Technicolor flowers and toothy monsters — is both a celebration and, plausibly, a parody, of this adolescent-leaning genre.

Whatever the theory, in practice Murakami, 53, has successfully blurred the lines between “low” and “high” art, between commercial and critical success. He has designed everything from Louis Vuitton handbags to the packet of Frisk mints in my pocket, the latter decorated with piles of colourful skulls and sold for £2. In 2008, with the art market at its frothiest, his life-sized fibreglass sculpture “My Lonesome Cowboy” sold at Sotheby’s New York for \$15m. If Murakami’s aim was to discover the relationship between capitalism and art, “My Lonesome Cowboy”, which depicts a yellow-haired adolescent with a swirling lasso formed by a torrent of his own semen, seemed to have nailed it.

We’re having lunch at his cavernous art-factory in a Tokyo suburb, two trains and a taxi ride from the city centre. In these industrial surroundings — the lift door comes down vertically, like in a garage — he and a team of apprentices churn out art works that will be shipped around the world. The current focus of activity is *The 500 Arhats*, his first big solo exhibition in Japan for 14 years. The show, which opens at Tokyo’s Mori Art Museum in October, will feature a painting 3m-high and a seeing-is-believing 100m in length, which depicts 500 enlightened followers of Buddha, or *arhats*. In the warehouse is a 25m section with a procession of cartoon grotesques, dazzling and distorted, rendered in shimmering acrylic on canvas.

According to Murakami, there is a scarcity of restaurants in the area, so we’ll eat on the premises. The “dining room”, reached via clanking metal steps, is flooded with stark fluorescent lighting. There are several large drafting tables, heaped with food and drinks that have been ordered in. Murakami cuts a slightly comic, almost cartoonish, figure with his hair pulled back in a ponytail, an elven beard and his Kim Jong-il-like pot belly. He’s wearing a pink T-shirt, with splatters of paint, and baggy brown trousers held up with braces.

He selects a hamburger from Freshness Burger, a local chain, plus a bag of thick-cut potato wedges, a small green bottle of San Pellegrino and a plastic bottle of pink grapefruit-flavoured Calpis, a yoghurt-like concoction popular in Japan. “This is thick-style,” he chuckles, reading the label out loud. I go for a wooden *bento* box filled with bamboo, boiled shrimp, egg roll, grilled chicken, squidgy *konnyaku* (yam cake) and rice. To drink, I pick cold milk tea, ready mixed in a plastic bottle.

Murakami plops himself at the head of the table and I sit diagonally across from him. We’re both perched on wheeled office chairs. Walking round the studio earlier, he was relaxed and jolly. Now, he grows serious and his answers, delivered with eyes squeezed shut, become lengthier and more mannered.

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Is it right, I start, that the sombre mood of *The 500 Arhats* owes something to his reflections on the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in which nearly 16,000 people died? Yes, he says, the earthquake made him think more about the role of society and religion, leading him to “incorporate narrative aspects into my work”. He turned for inspiration to the works of Kano Kazunobu, who painted 500 disciples of Buddha in another time of great trauma for Japan. That was during the death throes of the Edo period, when feudalism was making way for the rapid modernisation propelled by the 1868 Meiji Restoration.

He dashes off briefly, reappearing with a little tripod on which he mounts an iPhone. Before I know it, he’s filming me interviewing him. Self-consciously, I pick up some pickled vegetables with my chopsticks and start nibbling.

“People in Japan today have a lot of frustration and are looking back to a time, between the Edo and the Meiji periods, when [Kazunobu’s] arhats were being drawn,” he continues. Today, too, “we feel the need to change but, in reality, we are not changing. Japan was defanged in the postwar period, deprived of the ability to take measures on its own,” he says of his belief that Japan is a “client state” of the US, with a stunted political class and civil society. He’s also concerned about mountainous public debt. “For Japan to grow, we first need to cut our debt to zero,” he says hopefully.

I take a bite of *yuba*, a silky tofu-like dish, and a piece of thick *Kombu* seaweed. Both are surprisingly good. Even though this is a cheap *bento*, each item is carefully separated from the others in mini-compartments or paper wrappings to preserve the individual flavours. Murakami’s assistant serves us hot green tea. Now I have two drinks and he has three.

If Japan, as he says, has struggled to change, doesn’t the radicalism of Shinzo Abe, the current prime minister, mark a shift? After all, like him or loathe him, Abe’s government has embarked on a daring — some would say reckless — plan to rid the economy of deflation. Concerned by the rise of China, Abe is also bolstering the armed forces, challenging 70 years of pacifism enshrined in the country’s US-imposed constitution of 1947. If there’s change, Murakami replies, it’s dangerous. “The Abe government is opening the doors to hell,” he says, opening his mouth and inserting a potato wedge. “Japan might go crazy and find itself in a terrible situation like when the Nazis rose to power.”

I press him on this alarming prediction but he doesn’t elaborate much, so I leave politics and return to art. In the early 1970s, when he was eight or nine, his mother began taking him to exhibitions. He remembers Renoir, Van Gogh and especially Goya as influences. Afterwards, his mother would insist he wrote critiques, a task he recalls with some bitterness. “My mum and dad were a little like tiger parents,” he says, switching briefly to English. “I hate that but, at the same time, I am a little bit proud.” After taking a swig of Calpis, he tells me that his father was a taxi driver and that the part of Tokyo where they lived, Sakashita — literally, “Down the Hill” — often flooded during typhoon season. “Our family was poor but my parents gave us money for education.”

At Tokyo University of the Arts he studied *Nihonga*, a traditional Japanese painting technique, but by the late 1980s, Murakami had begun to explore the *otaku* culture inspired by obsessive fandom for video games, *manga*, animation, “cosplay” (costumes) and science fiction. “Twenty years ago, these people were discriminated against,” he says. “*Otaku* culture went uncelebrated

but I steeped myself in this subculture. I felt that I could spark something new by attaching myself to something that was held in low esteem.”

In the mid-1990s Murakami moved to New York and some in Japan accused him of ripping off *otaku* culture for commercial gain. “People say, ‘Oh, Takashi steals from our culture.’ But wait a minute. Our culture means my culture, too, right?” He disappears then reappears, this time with a teriyaki chicken burger.

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Today, *otaku* culture is wildly popular with teenagers around the world, he says with a hint of pride. Is that such a good thing, I ask? Aren’t its images — sometimes cute and infantile, sometimes suffused with graphic sex and violence — a reflection of the stunted Japanese society, stuck in adolescence, that he has often bemoaned? And wouldn’t Japanese men be better off leaving the security of their bedrooms and dealing with real issues, including real women? If nothing else, I suggest, treating women as equal partners, rather than objects of out-of-reach fantasy, might help improve the country’s famously low fertility rate.

Murakami is having none of it. The eyes slam shut again. *Otaku* culture, he replies, has the virtue of being authentically Japanese, not some imitation of revered western culture. And *riajuu* people, he adds, referring to “real” people with fulfilling lives in the real world, are looked down on by *otaku*. “We are becoming sexless because we have evolved,” he says approvingly, when I ask him why Japanese spend so much time perusing images of sex and so little — if surveys are to be believed — actually having it.

“I love the fantasy world,” he continues, adding that since he and his wife live in different cities, they conduct their relationship largely via FaceTime. “Going through the iPhone is much more real because we can record it,” he says. “That makes it much better than real life.” Westerners, he says, are too obsessed with real-world experience. “Western people need drugs to release dopamine,” he says matter-of-factly. “But we just play video games and don’t use drugs. So we’re healthier.” I see, I say, glancing at his empty bag of potato wedges.

Murakami is comfortable indulging *otaku* fantasies, whether for 15-year-old girls or Lycra-suited women. His “Miss ko2” (pronounced “ko ko”), for example, which in 2003 sold for more than \$500,000, is a 6ft tall blonde with large breasts and the skimpiest of maid uniforms. “You might think this is rather strange or weird,” he says, correctly sensing that I find much of *otaku* culture both strange and weird. “But from the perspective of *otaku*, this is mere common sense.” As his assistant serves hot black coffee, I decide to plunge a little deeper into Japan’s nether regions. In 2014, after decades of international pressure, parliament banned the possession of child pornography. The ban, though, didn’t cover cartoons, on the grounds that limits should not be placed on an artist’s imagination. I wonder what Murakami thinks of this.

He replies by bringing up a comic book from a few years ago called “*Okusama wa Shougakusei*”, or “My Wife is an Elementary Schoolgirl”. “Back then, this cartoon became very controversial and the then deputy governor of Tokyo bashed it, saying this kind of thing damaged Japan’s reputation in the west,” he says. Murakami’s response was to recreate the cartoon with the help of Britney Spears, who in 2010 dressed in the same elementary schoolgirl get-up for the cover of POP magazine. “I thought if a well-known celebrity would accept this as art, then people would start to change their mind,” he says. “If I have a certain opinion, I try to incorporate that into my work.”

Not for the first time, I find myself stuck down a conversational rabbit hole, so I switch topics again. This time, I bring up the subject of whether Murakami's work can really be considered his own, given that much of it is produced — admittedly according to his design — by studio assistants. “Perhaps people said such things 20 years ago,” he bristles. “Would people say something like this to Tom Cruise?” he asks, meaning, I take it, that a lead actor's contribution to a film is not diminished because he is part of a wider cast and crew.

“I think of myself as a grand chef at a three-star restaurant,” he says, adjusting the metaphor. “And the young people working in the studio are the apprentices.” Nor does he exploit them, he says, pre-empting my next question. “Some overreact, saying that I'm exploiting their labour . . . and pay them just pennies. But that's not true,” he says. “They also have a dream of becoming a grand chef in future.”

Most Japanese dining tables are elegance itself. Ours, though, is now filled with the detritus of lunch: burger wrappers, paper cups, plastic bottles and my empty *bento* box. I end by asking Murakami about something he had said in a previous interview: that, only 100 years after his death, people would finally understand his art. He doesn't have to wait that long, I joke. Why doesn't he just tell me now?

From his answer, it is clear he feels misunderstood, especially in Japan, where he has not exhibited in many years. “No one asked me,” he says when I ask why not. “I don't like making shows in Japan because Japanese people don't understand my point of view.”

He mentions Kitaoji Rosanjin, a ceramicist, painter, calligrapher and restaurateur who died in 1959. Like Murakami, Rosanjin liked to spin big theories around his work — Murakami calls it “noise”. Like Murakami, not everyone understood what he was on about. “When he was alive, people said, ‘This is imitation, this is fake,’” he says, adding that Rosanjin was only truly appreciated after his death. “Perhaps I'll just stand behind my pieces and be silent,” he says, implying that his theorising is somehow impeding people's comprehension of his work. “Maybe then people will understand me,” he adds wistfully. “It'll be much clearer when I die.”