

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Takashi Murakami's reluctant homecoming

Andrew Lee



Imperfect circles: Artist Takashi Murakami stands between two works, 'Atlantis' and 'Shangri-La,' which are part of his 'Enso' series. | MARTIN HOLTkamp

Ebisu Yokocho has never looked so fabulous. It's the night before Halloween and costumed women with talon-like nails and feathered eyelashes snake their way through a boisterous crowd crammed into this narrow alley of food stalls and bars. The smell of booze and grilled meat mingles with the scent of perfume, stage makeup and sweat. A wandering guitarist's sing-a-long is interrupted by pro-wrestlers who come crashing to the ground in front of him, and everyone cheers. A buxom burlesque dancer gyrates to the Beatles' "Twist and Shout." Behind her, a sushi chef slices up a whole tuna into hundreds of bite-size servings, while nearby a girl in a pink wig hugs a man wearing a fish on his head. And somewhere among all the fun Takashi Murakami, dressed as a giant cartoon flower, is taking selfies with anyone who asks.

Say what you will about Japan's most controversial artist, he sure knows how to throw an after-party.

It's a much more serious mood earlier in the day when I speak with Murakami at the opening of "Takashi Murakami: The 500 Arhats" at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo's ritzy Roppongi Hills complex — but he is no less flamboyant. Dressed in a shiny silver suit more befitting of a rock star than an artist, he explains to The Japan Times just how little he cares about what his Japanese audience thinks of him, and why he has finally decided to hold a solo exhibition of his work here after 14 years.

“Actually, I didn’t want to do this show,” he admits, “but I had a relationship with the late Minoru Mori, the founder of the Mori Art Museum, his family and the current president, Shingo Tsuji. So when they said they really wanted me to do the show, I decided to do it.”

Murakami gestures at his flashy suit to make his next point.

“Japanese people would hate this outfit, but I really don’t have any desire to be understood by the Japanese audience or to even show them my work,” he says. “For the past 20 years there has been this tendency for the Japanese to be very jealous of people who are successful — especially those who succeed overseas in the West — and they bash them online. The Japanese media also only ask really silly questions that don’t get to the core of what I am trying to do. In fact, I rejected all Japanese media requests for this event.” Luckily the artist is more tolerant of the English-language press.

This isn’t my first time speaking with Murakami. The last time was in 2005 when his star was still rising and he was the darling of the international art scene. At that time, he was preaching an idea that Japanese art was “superflat,” with no divisions between pop culture (such as anime and manga) and high-art. His exhibition “Little Boy: The Arts of Japan’s Exploding Subculture” was showing at the Japan Society in New York and he was at the center of what was then being called the third wave of Japonisme: A Japanese cultural renaissance of sorts that introduced the world to obsessive *otaku* (geek) culture and the now-decidedly-uncool term “Cool Japan.” It’s not a stretch to say that, as far as how the country was seen from the outside, it was a good time for culture.

Since then, however, the world was hammered by the 2007-08 global financial crisis (referred to as the “Lehman Shock” here), Japan suffered the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, which resulted in the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant disaster, and the political right wing has made many in the country nervous.

I ask Murakami if he feels he has changed since the last time we spoke.

“Until the financial crisis I thought the most important thing for me was the relationship between capitalism and art, and that’s what I was working on,” he explains. “After being faced with the earthquake and tsunami in 2011, though, I realized that what people really need are stories that differ from reality. For example, people might tell a child who lost his parents in the disaster, ‘Oh, your parents have become stars.’ That’s obviously not the truth, but it’s something we have to rely on to keep living.

“At times like that, when we can’t depend on anything else, our hearts need something to hold on to — and that’s the moment when religion starts to arise. That’s the realization I had, I started thinking about why there has historically been a deep relationship between art and religion. So I started to consciously think about creating a narrative that is easy for the audience to understand.”

Walking through the Mori Art Museum, the sheer scale of the 100-meter-long “500 Arhats” is stunning. Depicting 500 of Buddha’s enlightened disciples, the work was inspired by the “Five Hundred Arhats” by Kano Kazunobu (1816-63), which he was painting when a massive earthquake hit Edo (now Tokyo) in 1855. It’s hard not to assume that Murakami’s work,

produced not long after the devastating 2011 quake, also contains a message of enlightenment for the Japanese.

However, Murakami makes it clear that his work was not created as any kind of message for the people of Japan.

“This was a work I created to be shown in Doha,” he says with some emphasis. “Initially, I wondered about introducing people in an Islamic country to Buddhist motifs. Since Qatar was trying to open up its country through art, I thought it’d be good to show Japan’s flexible attitude toward religion in the context of a strict religious country. Japanese culture mixes Shinto and Buddhism and we’re not really bound by religion, but in times of crisis we kind of depend on the idea of religion,” he says. “But my message to the Japanese audience was absolutely zero.”

Showing alongside “The 500 Arhats” are other works by Murakami that have never been exhibited in Japan before. For visitors used to the artist’s previous work, which emphasizes the *kawaii* (cute) side of Japanese pop culture, the most noticeable change now is how much darker his work seems. Where there were once fields of colorful, smiling flowers there are now piles of skulls. In “Enso,” a series that was unveiled earlier this year, perfect circles are spray-painted over embossed patterns of skulls and accompanied by words such as “death” and “hollow.” Additionally, the artist’s famous alter ego, Mr. Dob, has evolved from a happy-go-lucky character into a multieyed nightmare with fangs.

“I live in Japan but my audience is outside Japan,” Murakami says, emphasizing the point again, “so I’ve been looking on the Internet to try to understand the situation overseas. In the past year or so I’ve really focused on the actions of ISIS and the related videos that get posted online.”

Earlier this year, ISIS, or the Islamic State group, kidnapped and beheaded two Japanese nationals, Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto. The group has also claimed responsibility for recent attacks in Beirut and Paris.

“I think people have become really used to that sort of (violent) imagery, it has kind of been imprinted on our minds,” Murakami continues. “So I wonder if our feelings need to be refreshed. Do we want to forget and do something else? Or do people, including myself, need to be reminded of those things? I kind of mull these thoughts over while I am creating, and that’s how these thoughts are being expressed now.”

Murakami’s older work was often seen as having an anti-nuclear message, and he postulated that the Japanese dealt with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by retreating into a state of childish innocence. He’d previously told me that he thought his fellow citizens were like characters in “The Matrix” film series, stuck in protective cocoons scared to break out of the collective illusion that everything is OK. I wondered how he felt about the current state of affairs in Japan, with young people protesting Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s right-wing policies and the Fukushima nuclear meltdowns still looming in the background?

“Basically, I’m not very positive about the current atmosphere (in Japan),” he replies. “If this situation continues on for 50 years perhaps someone might lead a revolution, but this is just the beginning and at this point in time no one like that is emerging.”

“As an artist, all I can do is paint when history-making moments unfold, like Francisco de Goya did during the Spanish Civil War. All I can do is look at the situation, understand it and put it into my work so that hopefully it will remain a permanent part of our history.

“I do think the current state of Japan is very similar to when the Tokugawa shogunate was defeated, leading to the Meiji Restoration (of 1868). Anyone can see that the political situation in Japan now is odd. We are in a dilemma that no one can solve. If this continues there will be a point where some kind of revolution will happen, like the one that ended the Tokugawa shogunate.”

Despite the criticism, Murakami hasn't completely given up on his home country and admits he still wants to connect with his Japanese audience — just not through art. Getting back to his otaku roots, Murakami created a film studio several years ago to begin making movies, realizing a long-standing desire to create anime. In the wake of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, he directed his first feature film, “Jellyfish Eyes.” The story is about a boy whose father died in the tsunami and who teams up with other children and their “Pokemon”-like friends to defeat a greater evil.

“The Japanese have really cultivated eyes for the medium of film,” Murakami says. “So while I have given up holding exhibitions to make them understand my paintings or sculptures, via film I'm able to do so. I plan to communicate with the Japanese audience in that way.”

Back at the after-party in Ebisu, it's clear that, despite any disdain he has for local art fans, Murakami knows how to show supporters his appreciation. The food and drink flow until 5 a.m. with things getting progressively debauched as the night goes on. He seems light years away from the serious artist I spoke with earlier in the day, and it is clear he has made a triumphant return to the local scene — whether he wanted to or not.