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Interview: Takashi Murakami on His Superflat Collection

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Takashi Murakami and his Superflat Collection
(Photo: Kentaro Hirao)

Following "The 500 Arhats," his first one-man presentation in Japan in 14 years at the Mori Art Museum, which opened last October, Takashi Murakami unveiled a landmark showing of over 1,000 artworks from his collection at the Yokohama Museum of Art in late January.

The title, however, is slightly misleading. "Although the exhibition is titled 'Takashi Murakami's Superflat Collection,' these works are, strictly speaking, not really 'in' my collection per se," Murakami tells me, during a recent visit to his studio. "For tax reasons, all the artworks in my so-called 'collection' have actually been classed as dead stock or bad inventory belonging to my gallery, Kaikai Kiki — entirely legally, of course," he adds.

"You see, the tax system is Japan is extremely unfavorable towards the collecting of art. Whenever I talk with my tax accountants, they always tell me to sell off my art pieces at a loss — at a price much, much lower than what I paid for them," he says, with a touch of bemusement. "If I got rid of some artworks in this way, then I wouldn't have to pay the tax on them."

Apart from the thorny tax issues, Murakami has had to learn some tough lessons as an artist-turned-art collector, whom some longtime dealers have gleefully swindled. "Buying art," says Murakami, "is essentially a process of communication. Both buyer and seller observe each other's behavior, trying to suss out how much the other person values or craves the object, in relation to the 'real' value of the piece."

"Sometimes it's the dealer who tricks me into paying more than the true value of the artwork. At other times, I might test the waters to see how much a potential buyer craves a work that I have," he muses. "I've been tricked into paying more than the 'real' price many times — in fact, if you

go by the correct price dictated by the market, I would even say that you could buy my entire collection for half the sum I acquired it for," confesses Murakami.

"I think this gap between the 'real' value of something and the price paid for it is particularly huge in the antiques world. And perhaps it was because I'm an artist that these dealers managed to trick me into overpaying. But I've learned to accept this, and treat it as a lesson in how dealers think when they negotiate with their collectors," he concludes.

Away from the loaded negotiations that take place in hushed, brick-and-mortar galleries, however, Murakami has also fully embraced the alternative taste-making networks that proliferate on social media. He has often bought art that he only briefly glimpsed on Instagram, by artists like Joshua Nathanson, a former student of Sterling Ruby, and the Japanese artist Madsaki. "I follow people who have 'liked' my work on Instagram, and I regard many of them as virtual curators. So I'll look at the photos of artworks that they've taken, and if I see something I like, I'll capture those images and pass them to my assistants, who will then go and search for and inquire after the work in question," he reveals.

Although many of the star-quality centerpieces on display at the Yokohama Museum of Art are by renowned, blue-chip artists like Anselm Kiefer, Zhang Huan, Lee Ufan, Maurizio Cattelan, and Thomas Houseago, and Ugo Rondinone, the collection is most distinctive for its expansive reach that transcends historical eras, Western and Eastern cultures, and the border between art and craft — a distinction that is particularly malleable and ambiguous in Japan.

Within the "craft" section of his collection, Murakami professes a particular attachment to the English and American slipware folk pottery dating from the 17th and 18th century, and a series of curious, rag-like cloths that he received as a gift from the legendary antique dealer Kazumi Sakata, who is known for having elevated extremely humble, everyday objects to the level of high art.

"In Japan, Sakata was a revolutionary figure: he created this bizarre zone of connoisseurship by lowering his gaze to the level of the common man, and prizing a certain beauty to be found in poverty and an austere lifestyle," Murakami tells me. "It's similar to the attitude espoused by Yanagi Soetsu, the founder of Japan's Mingei folk art movement, which was based on appreciating the beauty of humble Korean ceramics, for instance, from the viewpoint of Japan's privileged upper class."

"And while I do admire the philosophy and lifestyle of this generally left-leaning coterie of art world figures in postwar Japan, ultimately I belong to the realm of an American-style capitalist art market that's wallowing in money — producing the very sort of art that Japanese people tend to despise," he adds.
The spare, minimal beauty of many of the antiques in Murakami's collection — which spans wooden Buddha statues, gleaming Korean ceramics from the Joseon Dynasty, and Japanese tea bowls — belies a certain schizophrenic relationship of art to money that isn't always apparent to those only enraptured by the charm of an antique patina.

As Murakami points out, the 16th century tea master Sen no Rikyū, who is often credited as the originator of the idea of *wabi-sabi* (an aesthetic of imperfection), was in fact an arms dealer who profited from provincial lords constantly at war. "Today, many tea ceremony connoisseurs often cherish a pure, untainted vision of Sen no Rikyū, when in fact he was thoroughly embroiled in

money, blood, and war. His vision of the austere beauty of *wabi-sabi* emerged out of conflict and chaos," Murakami points out.

"In the same way, I made my own artistic debut in America, a country that is perennially at war, and whose economy depends on this condition. And I am myself making money from this state of war," he says. Just as Rikyū leveraged his political power and influence to spread his aesthetic ideas, Murakami sees himself essentially as "a kind of trader or merchant. Art has always been enmeshed with money, greed, and desire, as Rikyū showed us," he adds.

Some works in the collection tell the story of how a taste for certain artists, while not especially prevalent in their home country, sometimes took unexpected root in Japan. Particularly significant for Murakami at a personal level are a series of screen prints and drawings by the early 20th century German artist Horst Janssen, whose work he saw in Tokyo as a student.

Despite having shown at documenta and winning honors including the Grand Prize for graphic art at the Venice Biennale in 1968, Janssen remains a relatively obscure figure in the West — but commands an outsized reputation in Japan. "Janssen was profoundly influenced in his graphic style by *ukiyo-e* artists like Hokusai and Sharaku," Murakami notes. "So I think that's part of the reason why he was popular in Japan in the late 1970s and 80s, when I was still a high school student. He's one of the reasons that inspired me to be an artist."

How a predilection for certain artists and art forms becomes entrenched in cultures far removed from their point of origin is a question that has long fascinated Murakami. "Take the English slipware ceramics, for instance. Their color and hue complement Japanese culture perfectly, with our soy sauce and miso soup!" he quips, only half jokingly. "These plates take on a beauty of their own when seen and used in Japan. And it's the same thing with my own artworks — the Japanese don't think they look beautiful, calling them loud and garish," he adds. "In a way, I think it's inevitable that this sort of localization will bring about certain differences in taste, and unique ways of marketing these things."

"For me, art has always been a way of finding some stability to deal with what I view as a mental disorder: if I don't make art for even two days, I think I would go mad. And I think it's similar with collecting art — all collectors have some conflict they're wrestling with, and their collections are a way of compensating for that," says Murakami.

The eclectic diversity and unexpected randomness of his collection, then, seem to offer him a kind of contrasting temperament to all his other artistic activities. "In my case, because I try to understand what art is in a logical way, I need some illogical things in my collection as a counterpoint," Murakami reasons. "If I didn't have a certain dose of disorder or confusion in my collection, there would be no sense of balance to what I do."

"Takashi Murakami's Superflat Collection: From Shōhaku and Rosanjin to Anselm Kiefer" runs at the Yokohama Museum of Art through April 3, 2016.