

## GAGOSIAN

F L A U N T

### TAKASHI MURAKAMI & VIRGIL ABLOH ON THE SURPRISES OF COLLABORATION

Matthew Bedard



TAKASHI MURAKAMI & VIRGIL ABLOH. "ARTISAN" (2018). VIRGIL ABLOH AND TAKASHI MURAKAMI.

Following two shared showings, future history at Gagosian London and “TECHNICOLOR 2” at Gagosian Paris, artists Takashi Murakami and Virgil Abloh recently installed works in the ever-earnest, ever down-to-earth and self-actualized Beverly Hills. And the room delights in itself, delights in delight for delight’s sake. It’s delightful! An art/media melding of layered paintings, large sculptures, and a confluence of their respective brand identities, “AMERICA TOO” does not lean on the homophone because it’s tall, dark, and handsome, but rather because inclusion is intrinsic—perhaps. Fun, too, can have a seat at the table. The scene, then, is punky, as to be expected, but also immersive. Art-historical imagery underlies much of the output, as expressed in new paintings. Big arrows borrowed from Mr. Abloh’s street-couture label, Off-White, meet with Murakami’s omnipotent rainbow flower. There’s sneaky “Mr. DOB,” that quirky character of Murakami’s inspired by anime and manga, running around, popping up in Bernini’s “Self-Portrait as a Young Man” (1623), which swirls into a kaleidoscopic free-for-all that seems hell-bent on joy.

So, who are said collaborators, for those of us spared of social media, and the otherwise curious? Mr. Murakami, perhaps the most famous living Japanese artist, invokes Japanese art history,

Hollywood cinema, fashion, hip-hop, psychedelia, and newness (in whatever form that might be expressed) in his extensive body of work, which, among other things, playfully contorts ideas of the expensive or fine. He's wacky, he's gregarious, he's super cool. Murakami makes a bouncy castle of the art world, with bear hugs and piñatas and nacho cheese for all. His conspirator, Mr. Abloh, formally trained as an architect and civil engineer, works across fashion, architecture, music (the guy's DJ calendar sweats, literally), and consumer products. Currently, he heads the aforementioned label, Off-White, which he founded in 2012, while also acting as artistic director of menswear at Louis Vuitton, a role he assumed this spring, at a house with which Murakami has collaborated for the better part of 13 years. Mr. Abloh could be likened to one of those sticky hands you buy in a vending machine. Like most of us, he gathers fur with age, but his paw prints are seen on everything these days. Sorry mom!

The pair is actually challenging to write about (you're surprised at that?) because they're so absolutely modern— adjectives, observations, sentiments begin to swallow themselves, gasp for air, because they feel forced. And maybe that's the idea? Murakami and Abloh are sprinkling us with satire, but they're also pruning back the apparatus otherwise thought imperative for an art experience: references, deeds done, and nomenclature. Instead, they'll bend their brands into artworks, while the artworks bend into their brands. They'll turn the volume up at closing time; they'll not stop when they're told. As such, it's with pleasure that they've created the art cover for this, The Transience Issue, and thematically keeping, here are the extremely busy guys fielding a few questions relating to "AMERICA TOO", and, well, however else you choose to describe being sincere.



*TAKASHI MURAKAMI & VIRGIL ABLOH. "TIMES: FLAMES" (2018). ACRYLIC ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON BOARD. 70 7/8 X 70 7/8 IN. © VIRGIL ABLOH AND © TAKASHI MURAKAMI. PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE – JWPICTURES.COM. COURTESY GAGOSIAN.*

## **TAKASHI MURAKAMI**

**Describe the surprises you've met in collaborating with Virgil Abloh.**

The sheer speed with which Virgil makes his decisions. Virgil's charisma draws out his collaborator's maximum ability and potential.

**How do you remain excited about artistic production? Or is excitement not a key ingredient?**

Fear is the key ingredient. Once I die, and I am no longer able to provide any excuses for myself, the only thing that I will have to show is my completed artwork. So I'm constantly in fear of the gaze of my future critics, collectors, curators, and audience, and I am relentlessly doing my best now in order to respond to the expectations of the audience who may see my work in museums in the future.

**The works are traditionally presented in a classic gallery cube, but were you to envision a more alternative presentation, where might that be? Who's there?**

I have a café in Tokyo and I do occasionally present my new work there. It's a woody space with a '50s Northern European feel, not a white cube.

**Do you feel the concept of fame is evolving in the current cultural climate, or is the idea somewhat fixed?**

Since Instagram, I think the fame index is determined by the number of followers you have. I have been straining to increase my followers, but it's nothing compared to pop stars and supermodels. It's quite depressing to feel your social standing quantified in that way.

**We might suggest that works in the show present a kaleidoscopic view of art history, met with pop, met with cultural commodification—does one ingredient dominate another, or do you feel this is immeasurable?**

The ingredient that is the most unique to this collaboration is the wave of the era that Virgil is riding now. The audience looking at our collaborative works in a museum 100 years from now will nostalgically look back to this time; I think these works will allow them to think about the shifts and transitions through the history of art.

**What do you think of when encountering the word “transience”?**

I think about the difference, in the poetic sense, of artists from hundreds of years ago, when life expectancy was short, and that of the people now who can concretely imagine eternal life. We now get to have long lives and even possibly maintain them indefinitely, so, in a sense, it's becoming difficult to find punctuations in life. Paradoxically, we burst with poetry when thinking about taking our own lives. Perhaps this environment of paradox has something to do with the sense of transience.

**VIRGIL ABLOH**

**Describe the surprises you've met in collaborating with Takashi Murakami.**

The only surprise is that we are strikingly the same person.

**Do you feel the culture space is overcrowded with collaborations and cross-pollinations, or is this a permanent direction for art and pop?**

I personally think that it is impossible to be overcrowded. I don't know what it means. Art should be based on a segment of real life and I think it's dangerous if humans don't cross-pollinate.

**What sort of musicality or musical identity would you ascribe to the works on show at Gagosian? How come?**

Hip-hop is a contemporary art based on sampling and new ideas. I would say that this project came in the same era where hip-hop is the most relevant form of music.

**“AMERICA TOO” might suggest that America is longing for inclusion, or is an add-on of some kind, yet its global identity often contradicts that idea. Can you describe the ethos behind the show title? Satirical? Ironic? Something else?**

The show title is up to one's own interpretation. I find it most interesting what you have projected on those two words being adjacent to each other.

**What do you think about traditional print magazines as they relate to youth culture? Is there a disconnect, or do you think the language is fluent?**

Print, in my mind, is ultra-important in this world of disappearing digital content.

**What do you think of when encountering the word “transience”?**

Enjoy or move on.