

GAGOSIAN



Virgil Abloh and Takashi Murakami Chat with AD About Their Gagosian Collaboration

For their show "AMERICA TOO," the multi-hyphenate icons mash up their signature styles and explore the current political climate

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TAKASHI MURAKAMI & VIRGIL ABLOH, *AMERICA TOO*, Installation view, 2018. © Virgil Abloh and © Takashi Murakami Photo: Joshua White – JWPictures.com. Courtesy Gagosian

Throughout recent history, artists and their contemporaries have collaborated to create works that transcend their individual practices. The early 20th century had Man Ray and Duchamp; the '80s had Warhol and Basquiat; 2018 has Virgil Abloh and Takashi Murakami. The pair met a decade ago when Murakami designed an album cover for Kanye West while Abloh served as creative director for the rapper; since then, they've gone on to collaborate on a series of exhibitions for Gagosian that mash up signature icons—instantly recognizable elements from their respective work—to create new pieces. Murakami and Abloh both reject the air of exclusivism that floats around the art world, instead creating work that synthesizes culture and erases the lines between high and low. The two are cult figures in their respective worlds: Murakami has worked as a practicing artist for decades, blending traditional Japanese painting, hip-hop, Western art theory, and anime in his signature hypersaturated works, while Abloh doesn't sit in one genre, moving

freely between fashion, architecture, music, furniture design, and contemporary art. Abloh is also the creator of Off-White, a clothing label that has taken everyday icons of anonymous design (intersection arrows, quotation marks) and turned them into signature characters of Off-White's visual language—much like Murakami has been doing for decades with his cartoonish flowers and characters. It's as if Abloh's and Murakami's oeuvres are different dialects of one language.

The duo's latest show for Gagolian's Beverly Hills gallery, entitled "*AMERICA TOO*," features a mix of large sculptures, paintings, neon works, hanging canvases, and more that both borrow and blend motifs from each artist's individual practices. The two-week exhibition points to the current political climate in America as an indicator of "the now," but resists making a sharp political statement. (Among the pieces featured is an interpretation of the American flag as seen by the two artists, as well as nonpolitical work that serves as the intersection of each artist's practice.) "*AMERICA TOO*" is both a continuation of and a departure from their previous shows—*future history* at Gagolian London and "*TECHNICOLOR 2*" at Gagolian Paris. In celebration of their latest collaboration, Abloh and Murakami spoke with AD about their visual languages, the role of politics in art, and what they've learned from working with one another.



TAKASHI MURAKAMI & VIRGIL ABLOH "*AMERICA TOO*" Installation view, 2018 © Virgil Abloh and © Takashi Murakami
Photo: Joshua White – JWPictures.com Courtesy Gagolian

Architectural Digest: Virgil, as artists, both you and Takashi have created your own trademarks and icons. What was it like to combine your distinct visual languages?

Virgil Abloh: I think that was what was initially intriguing—can the visual languages become one? It's not a given. The symbols that are used in the artworks that we create are the ones that are most understood to stand for us if we don't exist, sort of in the contemporary sense. The show here, "*AMERICA TOO*," is a testament to the different formats in which those two identities can exist together.

AD: Tell me about the inspiration for the collaboration. How did it come about?

VA: I was just intrigued by the fact that it's our first time doing works together in America. And so for me, I was inspired by the relation between "America" and branding—let alone us being in Los Angeles, a sort of beacon to the whole world as far as media. That gave like a subcontext for a lot of the works that we did together.

Takashi Murakami: What triggered the collaboration was our re-encounter when Virgil came to visit my show at the MCA Chicago last year, where he has his own exhibition scheduled next

year. Michael Darling, the curator of both our shows, reintroduced us. We were then in a talk show together at ComplexCon, and I learned more about his creative thinking and background during that talk on stage.

VA: The inspiration was more like a study of our time and our identities. Both of us have a desire to exist and participate in the now, and I think this exhibition is representative of that. These symbols that we both have sort of bestowed with our personality exist in contemporary society on many levels, in different spheres, but us doing this show sort of unites them.



Two works from "AMERICA TOO" that employ characters from each artist's visual language. TAKASHI MURAKAMI & VIRGIL ABLOH "AMERICA TOO" Installation view, 2018 © Virgil Abloh and © Takashi Murakami Photo: Joshua White – JWPictures.com Courtesy Gagolian

AD: What was your artistic process like for this show?

TM: Virgil and I played constant catch with our ideas, and my studio Kaikai Kiki produced the actual works. When I collaborated with LV, Marc [Jacobs] would ask me to create certain patterns and characters, I would present him the drafts, and Marc would review and comment, and we would repeat. But once the patterns were finalized, the rest of the work of producing the products was in his realm and I left the process to him. This time, my job was to firmly land Virgil's ideas in the art world, so I was focused on how to produce what we discussed in a way that would work as an artwork.

With my own work I would freely post it on Instagram, but when it comes to collaboration work I leave it to Virgil because he has the expertise in communication. He's the one who communicates with those outside the art world. So in that sense we had a division of roles. We are both so busy that our ideas always come to us last-minute. This exhibition has been quite a feat to pull off.

AD: Takashi, Virgil's work is minimalist and Bauhaus-inspired, which is a departure from your own practice. What is it like to collaborate with an artist whose visual language is different from yours?

TM: Virgil was following and studying my practices, and it was because he mentioned this to me that I proposed our collaboration. We had also worked together on Kanye's project in the past. So I only found out that we had very different visual languages after I started collaborating with him. On the other hand, Virgil's theme is to continuously bridge over architecture, fashion,

music, and others, and mine is to bridge over anime, subculture, art, Japan, and the West, so in that sense I don't think we are entirely different—in fact, we are quite similar.



A view of two works from the collaboration, including the duo's interpretation of the American flag. TAKASHI MURAKAMI & VIRGIL ABLOH "AMERICA TOO" Installation view, 2018 © Virgil Abloh and © Takashi Murakami Photo: Joshua White – JWPictures.com Courtesy Gagolian

AD: Has either of your work changed as a result of this collaboration? What have you learned?

VA: I learned the rate and possibility of communicating ideas in different spheres. You know, like, we could do these shows by ourselves, we could do the shows at Gagolian, we could do the shows, you know, in different atmospheres. But I think what's compelling is that we're exposing an audience to art that might not otherwise be interested in it, in this sort of capacity.

TM: Virgil is so fast-paced so my production speed is now 1.5 to two times faster than what it used to be. His approval process is very quick as well, so in order to catch up, I did my best to make quick decisions.

AD: The title of the show is "AMERICA TOO." What does that mean to you? What do you hope to contribute to the current national conversation with these works?

TM: Politics and art essentially don't go together. I would like to know if Virgil has a certain hope or idea about it.

VA: Just existing. Takashi and I are not first-rate enough to sort of approach it for face value. I think what's more interesting is that we're more interested in the sort of "contemporary," or at least I am, like the "of now"—there's no box that emotion fits in. But by us creating works, it is America, too.