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How Takashi Murakami Got His Start as an Artist

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“At the studio I rented for \$80 a month on Lorimer Street in Brooklyn, uncertain whether I would have anything to eat the next day.” © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagosian.

In the second installment of a new series, we continue to shine a light on the tumultuous early days of artists who have since become household names.

Takashi Murakami, 57, may now be an international art star and a cultural icon, but he was once a disgruntled student, bored with his conservative schooling and dreaming of better things. Indeed, when he was just starting out, Murakami claimed no special status as an artist. “I was never particularly talented at drawing or painting,” he said; hard work, practice, and determination would sharpen those skills.

He had his first solo show in 1989, at Tokyo’s Ginza Surugadai Gallery, and began traveling from his native Japan to New York City around that time. Murakami always thought of New York as one of the art world’s vital centers, and he was willing to struggle in order to absorb what it had to offer. He recalled once renting a studio on Lorimer Street in Brooklyn for a mere \$80 a month (“uncertain whether I would have anything to eat the next day,” he added). In 1994, he landed a residency in the prestigious PS1 International Studio Program.

These early experiences helped shape Murakami’s unique artistic vision. The hyperconfident artist would eventually become a global brand, his manga-inspired creations taking over the world—one wild sculpture and painting at a time.

Murakami may be beloved for his bright flower-headed figures and frenetic wild-eyed figures, but some of his most pivotal works have a deeply subversive edge. *Hiropon* (1997), for instance, is a sculpture of a blue-haired woman whose comically oversized breasts unleash a torrent of milk. “I thought that the bizarreness of sexuality manifested in the Japanese otaku culture was unprecedented elsewhere, creating brand-new rules for designing human forms,” Murakami explained. “My intention was to merge that form with the rules of contemporary art.” This unexpected blending of influences and inspirations would continue to be a hallmark of Murakami’s practice, leading to a broader movement that he dubbed “Superflat.”



Takashi Murakami, Hiropon, 1997. © 1997 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagosian.
Takashi Murakami, Field of Flowers, 2019. © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagosian.

One of the artist’s canniest moves has been to remain both popular and critically acclaimed. Murakami has shown his work everywhere from the Palace of Versailles to blue-chip galleries, while also undertaking collaborations with brands like Louis Vuitton and red-hot fashion designers like Virgil Abloh. He has directed a feature film (2013’s *Jellyfish Eyes*), expanded his motifs into a line of collectible merch, created a sculpture with pop star Pharrell, and dabbled as a music-video director. Murakami’s fine art is represented by powerhouse galleries Perrotin and Gagosian, and the latter is currently showing his new works at its Beverly Hills location through April 13th. Much like Damien Hirst, Murakami has also taken business into his own hands, founding the Tokyo-based art production company and gallery Kaikai Kiki to promote both his work and that of his peers and acolytes.

Yet before feverish fans queued around the block to see Murakami and his otherworldly creations, he was much like any other smart young artist laboring in obscurity: driven, curious, and always willing to take risks.

How did you become interested in art?



© Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagolian.

During my art university years, I think I was running around trying things out in order to understand who I was. First, I wanted to be an animator. I made a few short animation films of my hand-drawn illustrations on 8mm film, hoping to become a filmmaker. I had such enthusiasm that I even invited Hayao Miyazaki, the genius of animation, to give a talk at the university's festival. I also watched George Lucas's behind-the-scenes video on *The Empire Strikes Back* and fantasized about his special-effects studio, ILM. When Michael Jackson's music-video masterpiece for *Thriller*, by John Landis, was released, I bought the imported video for Y15,000 (about \$162 in today's currency), and watched it over and over at my friend's house, and giddily made an imitation film on 8mm.

When graduation neared, however, I started to doubt I would be able to support myself in this way. Since I trained to paint, I thought I'd give painting another try, and started on my graduation project in earnest. I belonged to the drab *Nihonga* (Japanese painting) course in the painting department and spent my days in frustration, laying crushed mineral pigments on Japanese *washi* paper.

Nihonga was not a genre where potential talent could blossom. Content-wise, the paintings were inferior imitations of Impressionist works. It was all politics, with a few artists, cherry-picked by galleries and award organizations, constantly vying for power; getting tangled in such politics, young artists had no room to exercise their talents. It was an environment far removed from art, but during the height of Japan's bubble economy, its market moved similar kinds of money as the contemporary art world today.



Takashi Murakami, 727, 1996. © 1996 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagolian.

Then, one day, I saw a major solo exhibition by Shinro Ohtake, a contemporary artist greatly influenced by Neo-Expressionism, in downtown Tokyo. I was blown away. I quit Nihonga and became committed to contemporary art. At the time, there wasn't a market for contemporary art in Japan, and if you were to choose it as your path, you had to be prepared to accept poverty. Yet it attracted me because its landscape looked liberating—free of politics, factions, and frictions.

The behind-the-scenes video for *Star Wars*; a book explaining Hayao Miyazaki's animation production; Katsuhiro Otomo's manga *Domu: A Child's Dream* (1980–81); Shinro Ohtake's 1987 solo show at Sagacho Exhibit Space; German artist Horst Janssen's prints and drawings; and all the works I saw at SoHo galleries when I first visited New York, as well as the 1988 Anselm Kiefer show at MoMA.

Tell me about an early successful attempt at artmaking.



Mammoth sculpture by Murakami and classmates pictured during a parade in the early 1980s. © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagolian.

As a university freshman, I made a huge model mammoth, about 5 meters tall, for a festival parade float. All 25 students in the Nihonga course were supposed to make it together, but only 6

of us actually participated. In the end, it was just me and a reticent, geeky guy pulling an all-nighter to get it done. But we made it in time for the parade, and it won the competition.

The question was what a Japanese artist must do to survive in New York, and since no handbook was available on the topic, I arrived at my own answer through observations: I thought perhaps by plugging my personal, mundane experiences into the rules of art in New York, I might arrive at artistic expressions with some originality.



“At PPOW Gallery, assisting the artist group TODT.” © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagosian.

As for business savvy, I was determined to support myself with art when I took the entrance examination for university. It wasn't that I held a vision for success; I was just determined to acquire the skills needed to support myself, one way or another.

I was never particularly talented at drawing or painting. I can say this because there's always a kid in class who's really good at drawing or painting, and their works would draw classmates' admiration, but I haven't had such an experience. That is, at no point was I made to feel I had artistic talent. I concluded that while I loved to draw, I wasn't talented, so I needed to first train myself to draw realistic pictures.

What sort of other jobs in Japan did you have while you were making a name for yourself?

I worked for nine years as an instructor at a prep school for the art university entrance exam, and four years as an arts-and-crafts instructor in kindergarten. [I was also] an illustrator, a concept designer for a restaurant, and an event coordinator.

Were there people early on who didn't understand your work, or who actually disliked it?

When I submitted a large painting with a manga-like motif for a gallery exhibition [at SCAI The Bathhouse in 1994], a friend of mine who had walked me through the basics of contemporary art told me he was finished with me, saying: “Murakami! You asked me to teach you about contemporary art, so I took pains to carefully guide you through. Yet what is that cartoonish painting? You make a mockery of the history of painting!” But I didn't understand why he was so upset.



Takashi Murakami, ZuZaZaZaZaZa, 1994. © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagosian.

There had been no precedent of art that focused so blatantly on post-war Japanese culture, so while I didn't think it was radical, I thought perhaps it had originality.

You started coming to New York in the late 1980s and '90s. Were you pleased by what you found? What did you learn?

I believed that at the time, contemporary art was being produced in London, Los Angeles, and especially New York, the center within the center, so the shows happening at that time were really current. When I lived in Japan—when there was no internet—the information about “now” was imported a couple of months after the fact.



“At the opening of my solo show at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in SoHo.” © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagosian.

I was extremely inspired by Bob Flanagan & Sheree Rose's 1994 show at the New Museum, then located in SoHo. Receiving a daily injection since before he could walk or talk, Flanagan had developed a needle fetish; his installations showcased the resulting perverse S&M sexuality as art. Seeing this, I learned, "Ah! Anything goes! It's not the superficial beauty that's important, but things like individual history and private shame!"

Who have been some of your mentors?

The people I hold as masters in my mind are the animator Yoshinori Kanada; the animation director Hayao Miyazaki; the manga author Katsuhiko Otomo; and the director George Lucas. My real-life mentor is the professor Nobuo Tsuji, the Japanese art historian. From him, I have been learning, among other things, about artists' *raison d'être* throughout history.

At what point was "Mr. DOB"—the character who is often seen as an alter ego for yourself—born?



"A photo from an open studio at the Clocktower Studio in Tribeca during the PSI International Studio Program." © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagolian. Takashi Murakami, Mr. DOB, 2019. © 2019 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagolian.

Mr. DOB was born when my old friend, a 19-year-old aspiring designer at the time, bought his Apple computer. I had never studied design, but I really wanted to realize a mechanical line that couldn't be reproduced by hand. When I was despairing, my friend told me that such lines could be achieved through Bézier curves in a software called Illustrator. So I camped out at my friend's place for a week and sat behind him at the computer, telling him what to do like a backseat driver until we created Mr. DOB.

Back then, each action took time to compute, so while we awaited computations, we would discuss our future dreams. My young friend spoke of freely creating images and movies with his Mac and becoming an unburdened creator of expressions. I was dreaming of moving to New York. Both of us have realized the dreams we talked about back then.

You've since built an entire company, a brand, for your work. What gave you the confidence and the healthy ego required to make such an ambitious decision?



Takashi Murakami, In 2019, a Sentimental Memory of POM and Me, 2019. © 2019 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagolian. Takashi Murakami, Kaikai Kiki News, 2002. © 2002 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagolian.

The self I discovered during my high-school years was someone who was extremely weak academically, not interested in studying, someone who did not want to be a “salaryman,” and who loved anime and manga. Frankly, I built my company because I couldn’t find any other way to function. The path I chose has been a lot of work, but this was the only way for me to survive.

Fast-forwarding to today: You have a major exhibition at Gagolian in Los Angeles. It includes a massive, fish-themed painting, *Qinghua* (2019), which took you over a decade to realize. Can you tell me a little about it?

If I may say so myself, this piece is exquisitely done. How can I put it—it’s been my goal as an artist to make my mind completely blank and paint as though in a daze, wandering randomly around the canvas, and this is a piece that I managed to complete in such a way. I feel very proud of this work.



Takashi Murakami, Qinghua (detail), 2019. © 2019 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Photo by Josh White. Courtesy of Gagolian.

When I had first met Larry Gagolian at his uptown space in New York to discuss being represented by the gallery, I tried to promote myself by showing him an idea for this painting and telling him that I intended to make a large painting with this as the subject. Larry really liked the idea. I did come to be represented by Gagolian, but I wasn’t able to realize the fish painting for a long time.



Takashi Murakami, Picture of a Title "I Spin," 1986. © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Gagolian.

Before I became a contemporary artist, I used to almost exclusively paint fish—especially freshwater fish. I recall often going to a river with my father to fish and seeing what looked like professional fishermen catching grass carp and fish named *Hypophthalmichthys molitrix* (silver carp) or *Hypophthalmichthys nobilis* (bighead carp), brought in from China, that were more than a meter long. I was astonished. Neither my father nor I ever managed to catch big fish, and we brought small fish or shrimp home to release in our backyard pond. Rather than staying a faint memory, it seems that my awe of huge fish remained vividly in my mind.



Takashi Murakami with characters from his film Jellyfish Eyes at the IFC Center, New York, 2015. Courtesy of Janus Films and Gagolian.

If you could go back in time and offer some advice to your younger self, what would it be?

Perhaps to have more fun.