

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Manga, hip hop and high fashion: The world of Takashi Murakami

By Laura Allsop for CNN

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- Takashi Murakami is Japan's best known and most successful artist
- He uses Manga and anime in his work; marries pop culture and fine art
- Currently exhibiting at France's Palace of Versailles; has redesigned Louis Vuitton logo
- Champions emerging Japanese art and each year stages art fair, Geisai

(CNN) -- The Asian art scene is increasingly a force to be reckoned with, but one man can claim to have put Japanese contemporary art on the map.

Tokyo-born Takashi Murakami is the man credited with marrying Japanese subculture with contemporary fine art and turning it into a global brand worth millions of dollars.

You will probably recognize his color-saturated, Manga-inspired canvases; his colorful take on the Louis Vuitton monogram for a range of accessories; or perhaps caught his short film directed by McG and starring actress Kirsten Dunst.

New Yorkers will have seen his cartoon characters, Kaikai and Kiki, glide over the city as part of Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

Frequently compared to art stars Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, and friends with U.S. hip hop stars Pharrell Williams and Kanye West, Murakami is increasingly a household name, both for his art and for the controversy it sometimes causes.

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--Takashi Murakami

Like the furor over Murakami's kitsch sculptures being on show at the Palace of Versailles in France. Thousands have signed a petition against the exhibition, led by a French aristocrat descended from Louis XIV.

Prince Sixte-Henri de Bourbon-Parme is also seeking a court order to ban the exhibition.

"The media likes to make a big deal out of the controversy, but I think most people have been enjoying it," Murakami told CNN via email.

Although he exhibits frequently in Europe and the U.S., Murakami is working hard to promote to Japanese art scene.

Each year he stages Geisai -- an art fair which allows artists and galleries to exhibit their work in a fun-filled environment, in Japan. A branch of the fair opened Sunday in Taiwan.

Unlike the more traditional fairs such as Art Basel in Switzerland and the Armory in New York, Geisai is a riotous event celebrating all things cute and crazy.

"When I started (and perhaps even now), the contemporary art scene in Japan was near non-existent," he said.

"Art here has always been viewed more as a subculture than as something of high status," he continued. "Since we started Geisai and Kaikai Kiki, things have developed a little more, but I'd still say that the task of building a functioning art market in Japan with the proper players -- artists, institutions, galleries, critics and an audience -- is the biggest challenge I face."

Born out of a previous attempt to run an "artist's factory," Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. is a studio and art production company that now manages and promotes the work of Japanese artists at home and overseas.

According to independent lecturer and writer on Japanese contemporary culture, Kiyoko Mitsuyama-Wdowiak, Murakami's role with younger artists in Japan is very much that of a mentor.

"I think that he shows them how to be an artist, what kind of artist you can be," she told CNN.

Dr. Sarah Teasley, a tutor at London's Royal College of Art specializing in contemporary Japanese design and culture, agreed: "There are other major figures within the Japanese art world.

"I think where he's made the difference is in popularizing the contemporary art, in giving a sense of accessibility or excitement to young people, such as with Geisai," she told CNN.

Yet the artist has encountered criticism for the commercial aspects of his work -- his 2007-9 touring retrospective was entitled © MURAKAMI, even featuring an in-situ Louis Vuitton shop for its stint in Los Angeles and New York -- and for employing a studio of artists and technicians to help make it.

"I think Murakami is bigger than the artworld is constituted in Japan, he's a transnational brand," Angus Lockyer, Chair of the Japan Research Centre at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London (SOAS), told CNN.

"In other words, he's become a commodity more than anything else," he continued. But the artist is used to taking criticism in his stride, and as far as he is concerned, there's nothing wrong with a bit of bling.

From 2008-9, he collaborated with hip-hop mogul Pharrell Williams to make a sculpture featuring a Manga-style monster whose mouth is filled with a can of Pepsi and a cup cake, among other items, encrusted with diamonds.

"It might sound strange, but I think we share a common set of roots," Murakami said of his popularity among hip-hop stars. "In the old Japanese class system, artists were considered the lowest of the low, even lower than peasants."

"Hip hop started out as an object of criticism and is now finally being granted the respect it deserves," he continued.

"We are both fighting the same battles against preconception and redrawing the same lines."