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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Manga Royals and French Bureaucrats Fête Murakami's Controversial Versailles Show



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Artist Takashi Murakami in the gardens of the Château de Versailles

By Nicolai Hartvig, ARTINFO France

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Takashi Murakami with Jean-Jacques Aillagon and curator Laurent Le Bon, in the gardens of the Château de Versailles, with the artist's 'Oval Buddha'

VERSAILLES, France—There was a striking abundance of smiles at the famed **Château de Versailles** for the opening of a show that detractors have denounced as speculative neo-vandalism, pornographic provocation, sexism, and a blight on France's prized heritage.

The sculpted manga-like resin characters smiled. The face-endowed flowers, peering across prints and carpets, smiled. Takashi Murakami, the guest of honor, smiled. As did

Jean Jacques Aillagon, the embattled president of the Château de Versailles, assailed for inviting the provocative likes of Jeff Koons and French artist Xavier Veilhan into rooms formerly reserved for the 'Sun King' **Louis XIV**, the ill-fated Louis XVI, and Marie Antoinette.

"Takashi Murakami's works are joyous and Versailles is a palace destined for happiness, joy, and merriment," proclaimed Aillagon.

The Murakami exhibition officially opens September 14, but tourists already posed for pictures in front of the Japanese contemporary artist's 'Tongari-Kun' in the Salon d'Hercule and milled around the 'Flower Matango' in the Galerie des Glaces. "I think we are not here for Takashi Murakami," urged one tour guide, reminding his group that the centuries-old French castle had other, more storied attractions. There were further hints that dissent over the Murakami show had permeated the gilded walls. 'There are so many other places where they could exhibit this sort of thing,' lamented another guide.

"All of this stems from misunderstanding," Murakami said of the opposition to the show. "Let's take baseball or soccer. When one team scores, there are always people who are unhappy, get angry, and voice this. I respect that, but my task is entirely different. I wouldn't make even the slightest change to my creations. This is not a time for bowing and trying to please everyone. Mine is a work of confrontation between the old and the new."

Aillagon found the parallels, noting that the much-loved Louis XIV can be found in the guise of Hercules, Apollo, or Alexander across the hallways at Versailles and that Pop and contemporary art have similarly seized cultural icons to explore and critique.

"Artworks must not be locked into ghettos, or mutually exclusive categories," he mused.

Murakami revealed that, even in Japan, criticism had come to the point of "unabashed Murakami-bashing," mainly on social networking Web sites. "This is probably the most complicated show I've done, due to the location," the artist said.

Aillagon has mounted a strong defense of his reign at Versailles, dismissing criticism as right-wing and conservative ranting and suggesting that his successor would follow closely in his footsteps. He noted that controversy had also followed Marc Chagall's commission to adorn the ceiling of the Paris Opera and the windows of the Reims Cathedral with his work.

"I find it very pleasant when an exhibition sparks debate, but not when it turns to controversy," Aillagon said. "Debate is grounded in intelligence and reason, controversy is grounded in excessive passion, prejudice, and contempt. I find it sad when you criticize a show before seeing it, even before the first artwork has arrived. It's scandalous when people don't like an artist or a show and therefore want to have it banned. That is unacceptable social censorship."

Murakami said he had made several visits to Versailles as the project advanced. "I discovered the Sun King's emblematic presence everywhere, through the golden coloring. I wanted this to echo into my work, which is why certain pieces are covered in golden leaves, among them the 'Oval Buddha' in the garden." Murakami had wanted to install three outdoor sculptures but settled for one.

Notably (though unsurprisingly) absent from the Versailles show are Murakami's most controversial works, "My Lonesome Cowboy" and "Hiropon," along with their novel depictions of semen and breast milk. The raunchiest piece is the long-legged "Miss Ko2," in the Salon de la guerre.

The artist referred to his two notorious works as "big breasts" and "big penis man." He said, "My main theme is that of the social monster. It so happens that this monster could take on an erotic appearance. But I don't want my authorship of those works to lock me into an 'erotica' category. I'm just a very normal artist," Murakami said.

"Lonesome Cowboy" could have caused some trouble, admitted Aillagon, adding that "it's best not to unnecessarily provoke scandal or give fodder to those who say we deliberately put on shows for shock value."

Rest assured, there is still nudity in the show. "Sculptures such as 'Tongari-Kun' (with the tongue-in-cheek alias, 'Mr Pointy'), 'Oval Buddha,' and 'The Emperor's New Clothes' are all male," said Murakami. "Of course, the 'weenies' are so small that you would think they weren't even there. But I invite you to take a closer look."

"Takashi is a bit of a prude," joked the show's curator, Laurent Le Bon, who is also director of the Centre Pompidou's new venture in Metz. "This exhibition effectively holds the tiniest micro-penis in the world."

The Murakami show can be enjoyed at the Château de Versailles until December 12. It then moves on to Doha, Qatar.