AS HE PREPARES TO STORM THE ONCE-VAUNTED SEAT OF WESTERN CULTURE WITH A CAREER-SPANNING RETROSPECTIVE AT THE FRENCH PALACE OF VERSAILLES, JAPAN’S KING OF POP FINDS HIMSELF ON THE BRINK OF A NEW CHAPTER IN HIS OWN THREE-DECADE ART EPIC—AND CONTEMPLATING WHAT HE WILL DO FOR A GRAND FINALE

By ALISON GINGERAS Portraits GRANT DELIN

TAKASHI MURAKAMI, AN AÑNA WHEN TELLING ONE... FOR EVEN, WHAT I WAS YESTERDAY IS NOT A PERSON, LIKE AN ISHOT SPRINGING ITS SKIN 1944, COURTESY: ALAN COHEN BLOGGERS, PARIS © 2007 TAKASHI KUROKAWA KOREA CO., LTD.
"I pick up many ideas from different Japanese things. The way I formed my studio and how I organize things actually came out of the model of the Japanese animation studio and the manga industry."
I'M VERY SAD TO BE COMPARED WITH WARHOL AND THE FACTORY. BECAUSE I HAVE NO DRUGS. YOU KNOW. WE HAVE NO DRUG CULTURE IN JAPAN. MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD LABOR IS TOTALLY DIFFERENT.
REALLY LOVE AMERICAN CULTURE... THAT'S WHY I COME HERE—I'M ALWAYS LOOKING FOR WAYS TO CONNECT MYSELF WITH AMERICAN PEOPLE AND THAT AMERICAN FEELING.

"You and me," they objected because I'm always traveling outside of Japan. [laughs]

GINGERAS: I guess they were thinking they have too much work already with you.

MURAKAMI: Yes, they are already overwhelmed with fixing paintings and other things. "Oh, my god! It was a mistake in my judgment. So after we talked about it I decided to take one dog and made plans to go to the hotel to pick it up. When I brought her back, I went to the veterinary to get her checked out. The doctor said that she looked like a Japanese dog.

GINGERAS: She’s a Japanese breed?

MURAKAMI: A mix.

GINGERAS: What is the breed, exactly?

MURAKAMI: No name.

GINGERAS: No breed? She’s just an indigenous Japanese dog?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. It was fascinating. The vet told me that almost 90 percent of dogs in Japan come from the West. So she is like an original. The vet was excited and was asking about where she came from. He wanted to meet the breeder. [laughs] It’s the first time for me to be taking care of a pet. It’s not like taking care of the cacti that have.

GINGERAS: You breed cacti plants; right?

MURAKAMI: Yeah, and also very small guppies. I also keep something else—these small insects.

GINGERAS: Yes, I heard that you’re breeding beetles. Is there a dedicated animal manager at your studio?

MURAKAMI: [laughs] Yeah, I have two guys who do that.

GINGERAS: Two guys? And that’s all they do, right?

MURAKAMI: Yeah, yeah. All day, all the time.

GINGERAS: Is there just one person in charge of Poni?

MURAKAMI: No. Two guys. They take turns. There are shifts.

GINGERAS: I saw this chart on the wall when I went to the Kaikai Kiki studio in Long Island City while we were working on the Tate Modern show last year [Pop Life: Art in a Material World]. Shin [Shinichirō Kitahara, director of exhibition production at Kaikai Kiki] showed me the chart that tracks how Poni is trained and cared for, which I thought was amazing because it’s like the same way you make paintings. It detailed this almost step-by-step process. I thought that somebody who didn’t know you might think it’s too clinical a way of treating a dog. But I thought it was interesting because it showed that you were treating this process of training and caring for the dog with the same level of respect that you do the process of making paintings—which is with an enormous amount of respect.

MURAKAMI: [laughs] Well, it’s very serious.

GINGERAS: Did you make that recent self-portrait sculpture with the dog [Poni & Me, 2009] before you got Poni?

MURAKAMI: That piece was planned more than three years ago. I don’t know why I depicted myself with a dog. I saw a show at T.G.C. [in Long Island City] with a very funny video where a dog is baring himself for, like, 20 minutes. So I was thinking, "Who’s training for that? What is that? This is not art? What is that? This is dog?" It made a big impression on my brain. I was like, "What is a pet? What is a dog?"

GINGERAS: What were you thinking about the representation of dogs in more traditional terms? I don’t recall having noticed so many dogs when I’ve visited Tokyo. Is there a genre or iconography of dogs in Japanese visual culture in the way that there is in, say, European art?

MURAKAMI: I think so, because there are many statues in Japan that feature dogs. You know that film Hachi with Richard Gere?

GINGERAS: About the owner who disappears while the loyal dog stays and waits for eternity for his return?

MURAKAMI: Yes.

GINGERAS: I think almost every culture has that story. Do you think Poni is going to appear in your work?

MURAKAMI: Oh, I don’t know. But for now I’m focused on breeding her. It’s like making a Jack Russell Terrier, because her breed seems similar to one of theirs. I want the mix to be exact. GINGERAS: So we can add dog breeder to the list of all the various things that you do. You’re a painter, sculptor, animator, gallery owner, an entrepreneur...
MURAKAMI: Being a breeder is so very hard! [laughs] You're working with dogs.

GINGERAS: Well, you're work so much about hybrids, isn't it? MURAKAMI: I don't think I've realized that until now. I'm always very interested in breeding. Raising cats is breeding. My lots plane collection is breeding. The insects are breeding.

GINGERAS: But isn't that part of what you do visually? Especially in your most recent work—not for example, the epic 16-panel painting you made for Palazzo Grassi, 777.77 The Emergence of God at the Return of Faith... in a way, you're cross-breeding Western, postwar art language and the Japanese super-flat aesthetic.

MURAKAMI: This specific work is like a typo style.

GINGERAS: It's style?

MURAKAMI: You know, bringing records and mixing.

GINGERAS: But you don't think that what you're doing is more analogous to bringing together a Western Jack Russell dog with an innate breed of Japanese dogs? I don't think it's like when you're deepening, because with that kind of mixing you know what you're going to get. But when you make a painting, you don't always know what's going to happen.

MURAKAMI: Oh... That's the can's take?

GINGERAS: Yes. [laughs] I was thinking about the work you made for the Pop Life show at the Tate Modern, where you took a Western Pop reference—The Vipers' track "Turning Japanese"—and reframed it in a Japanese otaku sensibility (otaku refers to people who have an obsessive interest in things like manga, anime, and video games) in a video starring Kirsten Dunst as a mermaid (magical princess). I thought it was such a perversent and safely complex way of making your work accessible to a public that might not know who you are—which was the case in London. Yet you weren't dumming it down.

MURAKAMI: When I approached the film director, McG, for this project, I proposed for him to use the Akibahara neighborhood—Tokyo's "electric town" as a backdrop. The film was supposed to star the Japanese otaku cult girl band AKIBA, but at the very last minute, they dropped out. After they dropped out, we had just three days. So I was ready to give up.

GINGERAS: Really?

MURAKAMI: We had the money and planning in place and I thought it would all fall through, but McG didn't let that happen. He said, "Okay, Takashi, I have a question. Do you want to make a film or not?" So in just one day he got Kirsten Dunst to come to Tokyo, he brought in this music, and he asked me if it all fit with my ideas. It was perfect because my goal was just to introduce people to what is Akihabara and try to explain its significance to Londoners and to serious art people. I was trying to capture what was happening in Japanese nerd culture. I didn't at first understand this process of shooting a video. The whole planning happened over the phone. Three days later, McG arrived in Tokyo and started shooting. It was all done after an 18-hour shoot.

GINGERAS: Had Kirsten Dunst ever experienced this aspect of Japanese culture? Had she ever been to Akihabara? Did she know about cosplay (costume play) and all that?

MURAKAMI: No, no. She has had some information, but she had no experience with it. I think she really enjoyed it. That McG is really talented with people. He was great at making the actress feel good and motivated. You know, McG twisted my idea so it could fit with Western expectations...

GINGERAS: It's funny, because I had the impression at first that McG twisted your idea by adding this pop song to your piece. But what made it even more perverse is how you then assimilated the hybrid of the Hollywood star and Akibahara landscape in the way you made this monumental wallpaper backdrop for the video for the Tate presentation.

MURAKAMI: I had to do that. I had to make up my identity, right? [laughs]

GINGERAS: Yes and no. Your contribution to that show speaks to how, despite your being one of the most famous and popular artists working today, most people still don't grasp the complexity of your work. It still seems that most people understand that your work is the Japanese version of Western pop art. But I'm actually captivated by the indigenous Japanese side of your work. It seems that you try to translate or make accessible this deep Japanese-ness to non-Japanese audiences. Just the other day I was talking to this art historian who was saying, "Takashi Murakami is like a Renaissance artist. He has all these different assistants and young artists working with him under the Murakami school." And while that's true, as you've said yourself, your whole model of working comes out of the Edo period [the pre- and early-modern period running from 1603–1868] and the archetypal of the Temple School. I was also thinking about how Gensai [a Tokyo art fair curated by Murakami to support emerging artists] is founded on an indigenous Japanese idea—that of the arts festival. It's not the application of a Western idea of an art fair onto your contemporary reality. Does that make sense?

MURAKAMI: It's true that I pick up many ideas from different Japanese things. The way I formed my studio and how I organize things actually came out of the model of the Japanese animation studio and the manga industry. The manga industry is gigantic in Japan. There are so many layers to the business, like making all video, making a spin-off game, card... GINGERAS: And figures and printed matter...

MURAKAMI: Yes, everything. It's kind of like creating something like the Star Wars franchise. A single big hit for a manga studio means tons of money. One can gross more than a movie. The Japanese invented this industry. I've been immersed in manga since I was a kid. I grew up with this culture. So I started to think about how to compare manga to contemporary art. The contemporary art industry did not exist in Japan when I was starting out. Contemporary art and manga—what is the same about them? Nothing, right? The manga industry has a lot of talented people, but contemporary art works more of a solitary model. No one embarks on collaboration in contemporary art in order to make money. But in the manga world, everyone is invested in collaboration. The most important point is that the manga industry constantly encourages new creators and creators.

GINGERAS: Like passing the creative baton?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. Manga culture grows and educates these artists. So learned from that experience. Manga uses Japanese traditional structures in how to teach the student and to transmit a very direct message. You learn from the teacher by watching from behind his back. The whole teacher—master thing is part of Asian culture, I think. So I guess I agree with you in that respect.

GINGERAS: That's why I think that your inclusion in the Pop Life show almost mirrors yours. In a way, it positions you as part of a legacy that comes out of Andy Warhol. Of course, your work—and the way you work—has a relationship to Warhol and his notion of business art. But I think it also has this whole other side that has no roots in Warhol?

MURAKAMI: I'm very sad to be compared with Warhol and The Factory, because I have no drugs, you know. [laughs] We have no drug culture in Japan! Maybe it's because our attitude toward labor is totally different.

GINGERAS: Well, this whole comparison between your studio, Kiki Kiki, and The Factory is a good myth that I'd like to blow out of the water. I'm really glad you brought up the subject of drug culture and the subculture that isn't part of your studio. Yet, as a frequent visitor to your studio, it seems to me like you have a different kind of subcultural situation there. There is a frisson of something underneath what's happening there—it's not all just business. It's not just pure capitalist productivity. Of course, you run your studio very well, but there's this other thing happening that's interesting to me.

MURAKAMI: I don't know... Maybe it's interesting from the outside, but on the inside...

GINGERAS: It's not?

MURAKAMI: Maybe it was the name at Warhol's Factory.

GINGERAS: Well, maybe when he had Andy Warhol Enterprises in the '70s and '80s, when he was producing Interview and Andy Warhol's TV and the commissioned portraits, there wasn't an open drug culture... I suppose there was always one around Studio 54.

MURAKAMI: Well, Warhol's studio... Continued on page 31.
transformation was very dramatic. But our studio has no drama. It's very quiet. [laughs]

GINGERAS: But aren't a lot of the people who work with you part of the whole otaku subcultural scene?

MURAKAMI: [laughs] This is an overimagination, I think. There are only a few of this type of otaku people in my studio.

GINGERAS: I have these fantasies about these quiet, hardworking girls in the studio who then transform into gothic-lolita French maids—the whole cosplay thing.

MURAKAMI: Yeah, exactly. This morning I was talking with my assistant who came with me to New York from Japan. He was pointing out this guy, SHISHO [Murakami's painting studio director], who came from Japan at the time to work at the New York studio, he is always working very hard. But he's a total otaku. He's what we call geek people. These otakus are so intense. They can be focused for a very long time—like, eight hours! I told the studio director in New York, “We need more geek people in the studio just like SHISHO!” [laughs]

GINGERAS: Well, the whole thing about otaku is their obsessiveness, right?

MURAKAMI: Yes. I asked SHISHO to recruit more of them—especially for the Japan studio.

GINGERAS: Your founding in 2008 of the School Festival Executive Committee—this community of obsessed and freaky young kids in the otaku world—actually did seem like the 21st-century version of Warhol to me.

MURAKAMI: Yeah, they were a bunch of otakus—totally geek people.

GINGERAS: When I experienced that School Festival at GEISAI a couple of years ago, I was thinking that this community is as crazy as the whole Velvet Underground scene must have been in the '60s. I thought, This is the most far-out, crazy, alternative culture I've ever experienced firsthand.

MURAKAMI: Yes, yes. But that version of GEISAI in 2008 has become like a memorial date. You remember? The next day... Crash! [laughs]

GINGERAS: That's right. It was right before the whole economic crash.

MURAKAMI: I spent $8 million to organize that year's GEISAI and School Festival Executive Committee. It was a bubble—and the bubble burst the following day.

GINGERAS: Well, you had a premonition to throw the biggest party, anticipating the bubble burst.

MURAKAMI: I so enjoyed it.

GINGERAS: You have no regrets?

MURAKAMI: Well, I could share it with so many people like you. It was and still is a very happy moment. I don't regret it. It was a really nice experience for me. But now I'm still doing GEISAI but with a much smaller budget.
GINGERAS: What's going on with your Los Angeles studio? I heard that you have a space there? I'm very curious.


GINGERAS: So it's just empty? Marika's [Shishido, Murakami's media relations coordinator] just there doing e-mail?

MURAKAMI: Just pay rent. [laughs]

GINGERAS: But do you plan to establish your animation studio there?

MURAKAMI: It's very possible—it's an idea, yes. But now I'm making a bat [Elfin's note: The planned location of the bat is Los Angeles, ten planes are on schedule and still in very preliminary stages of preparation].

GINGERAS: A bat?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. It's something... I don't know. It's supposed to be like a Japanese-style snow thing—like sake and shochu [an alcoholic drink distilled from barley, sweet potatoes, or rice].

GINGERAS: I was first introduced to shochu thanks to you. Now I love it. But you don't like to drink, so why are you going to open a bar?

MURAKAMI: Basically it's that I'm a forager, but I really love American culture. That's why I come here—I'm always looking for ways to connect myself with American people and that American feeling. I'm trying to pick up on the feeling of places, like the Los Angeles feeling or the New York feeling... Los Angeles is much better for me that way.

GINGERAS: Why is that?

MURAKAMI: The weather is warm.

GINGERAS: [laughs] That's it?

MURAKAMI: Also, the people are fun. They laugh a lot.

GINGERAS: Better quality of life out there?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. But New York City is still the art capital—every time I'm in New York, I'm thinking about competition.

GINGERAS: So you are going to keep the Kaitoki Kid painting and sculpture studio in New York?

MURAKAMI: Yeah, because New York is the place you make meetings. But in Los Angeles, it's about relaxing—not going to lunches and dinners. Everywhere the food tastes very good.

GINGERAS: Tell me more about the bar then.

MURAKAMI: I don't know. It's just my dream. Another of my dreams is to have a water business.

GINGERAS: Like Murakami bottled water?

MURAKAMI: Exactly. It's a natural concept because I realized the U.S. is really big, so maybe I'll be able to find a good spring. [laughs] It will be my original type of Evan or something like that. So this is my dream. It's like having a garden for the booming plants. I am super-focused on the future all the time.

GINGERAS: So it relates back to your breeding.

MURAKAMI: Yes. I'm thinking about water and then maybe some shochu stuff.

GINGERAS: Would you make your own shochu?

MURAKAMI: I'm already experimenting on making the shochu in my studio—and also preparing the schedule by which we will make it. [laughs]

GINGERAS: There's a chart for the shochu?

MURAKAMI: Yeah.

GINGERAS: What are you making it with? Barley? Potatoes? Because there are different types...?

MURAKAMI: Potatoes. GINERAS: So you'll have to plant some potato fields in L.A.?

MURAKAMI: I don't know that yet, but it could be possible... Maybe.

GINGERAS: You can lose me! I would love to be your director of shochu.

MURAKAMI: But that's why I want to start the bar. It's an echo of my dream. Every time I start a new business, I'm looking for the niche market. The sake market is already fixed, but nobody knows shochu in America... Almost nobody.

GINGERAS: Are you going to continue making your Kaitoki Kid animation films? Doesn't it have three chapters so far?

MURAKAMI: Yes, but now it's going to be feature-length, so I'll throw out the first three parts. I'm reminding it—now it looks like Star Wars [1977]. You know, it's a saga, like a space battle.

GINGERAS: Do you have a projected release date?

MURAKAMI: Not yet.

GINGERAS: When I saw the first chapter of the Kaitoki Kid and Kiki animation film—you gave me the DVD when we arrived in Tokyo—I marveled at how incredibly culturally specific the animation is in terms of its Japanese-ness. It just has such a seductive appeal. It's so accessible.

MURAKAMI: But my dream is to be in the water business! [laughs]

GINGERAS: Okay, so the water business is number one. What's the hierarchy of your dreams then? One is the water business.

MURAKAMI: Yes.

GINGERAS: Number two?

MURAKAMI: Number two is animation.

GINGERAS: Number three?

MURAKAMI: Number three is the breeding.

GINGERAS: Dogs, llamas, and cacti. Okay, and number four?

MURAKAMI: Number four is worrying about how I will make my death. I'll like to make a scenario about how and when I will die. Suicide or... I don't know... cancer. [laughs]

GINGERAS: You want to plan your own death?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. I want to make it a surprise—like a crime or something like that. You know, I'm an artist—I'm joking. [laughs] But this joke is very...

GINGERAS: But so many artists are obsessed with death.

MURAKAMI: It's kind of a running joke. At the opening party for the show at Gagosian, Jeff [Poe, art dealer, co-owner of Blum & Poel] was saying, "What, Takashi? Don't tell me about death! Don't tell me suicide. Fuck you, Takashi." [laughs] He was so serious.

The next morning I went to meet with my assistant, Merika, and Jeff was super seriously talking with her. He was saying, "Merika, why is Takashi talking to me about suicide? Has he been down? Maybe he's tired." But this death thing is maybe an artist thing. It's something most artists think about. Inventing a death scenario... I still don't know yet.

GINGERAS: Do you feel your dark side?

MURAKAMI: I don't think so. I think we are thinking about making heroes, history related to birth and death. That is history.

GINGERAS: Art is kind of about beating your own death, right?

MURAKAMI: I would be very sad if I got Alzheimer's... I wouldn't be able to make good things anymore. Marcel Duchamp was playing chess when he died, which is okay, you know... But it is very sad to make a bad painting or something. I don't want to do that.

GINGERAS: That's your worst nightmare?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. That's why I'm thinking about suicide or something. Inventing a scenario... Which brings us to number five. Number five is taking care of our company, Kaitoki Kid, and making paintings.

GINGERAS: And included in number five would also include taking care of the artists that are in your circle—the ones you've managed and helped foster? MURAKAMI: Yes.

GINGERAS: Are you still very involved in helping the careers of all these artists?

MURAKAMI: Yes. Now I am focusing on their education, because the art world is in a little bit of a twisted state. So we have to change and figure out what is the future way, because the art world also has changed.

GINGERAS: Is that why you're doing GENSAI University?

MURAKAMI: Oh, yeah. Well, it comes from many ideas. GINGERAS: Can you explain maybe just a little bit about GENSAI University?

MURAKAMI: It's just a lecture series. It's a lot like in New York City where you have readings in bookstores. It's like when a philosopher comes and talks for 90 minutes and then there's a question-and-answer period. Something like that. It's very funny.

GINGERAS: Anytime I've worked with you on a show—most recently both in London and Venice—we've done this Shinto ceremony and offering to bless your installation when we finished. Maybe it's surprising to hear about this respect for ritual and tradition for people who don't know you. But behind the scenes, there's also this kind of spirituality that's part of your work.

MURAKAMI: Yeah, but, you know, Asian people just do that. [laughs] Like even Jackie Chan makes some ceremony before he starts to shoot a movie.

GINGERAS: Beyond the ceremonies, would you say that you give importance to these Shinto and Buddhist calendars? Don't difference between religious or spiritual thought become more important for you at some point?

MURAKAMI: I don't know. I met this master recently from Taiwan. He is taking care of me constantly, but I totally didn't believe in supernatural powers before I met him. Now I believe a little bit... or not... I don't know. Because I have a pain here... [getters in leg].

GINGERAS: In your knee?

MURAKAMI: Yes. And this guy just goes [nurse bow] that and, oops, there's no more pain. I asked him how. He said, "I take care of it. The god came from nowhere. It's in my hand." [laughs] Okay. I said, "Your hand? Really?" He said, "Yes. Something like that. So funny. But he will not accept any money from me."

GINGERAS: How did you meet this guy?

MURAKAMI: Through a Taiwanese friend. She is now the producer in Taiwan of GENSAI. She introduced me. He is a very famous guy.

GINGERAS: Is he be like monk? What does he do?

MURAKAMI: No. I don't know. Maybe he's a psychic.

GINGERAS: Like a psychic?

MURAKAMI: Yeah, but everything is free. It's really strange and very scary. For example, he took care of me a lot and, finally, I gave him a red envelope. Inside there's like $1,000 for him and I thanked him very much. He says, "Oh, thank you," and then he took out these dollars and gave them back to me. I asked, "What is this ceremony I don't understand?" Next time I gave him $900 and the same thing happened—he gave it back. I really did not understand. When I went to his house in Taiwan, I saw that he is not at all rich—in fact he's really poor. When I asked him about this whole situation, he said, "Because this is what god said." GINGERAS: God said he should be poor?

MURAKAMI: I don't know. It's a really strange family.

GINGERAS: Have you spent a lot of time in Taiwan recently?

MURAKAMI: Yes, because we're making a gallery there.

GINGERAS: A gallery to host exhibitions?

MURAKAMI: Yes.
could collect all the paintings and sculptures we show there. So we just thought it was a good idea. I'm not sure what's going on with the market. But the Asian market is really active.

GINGERAS: Well, there is a lot of commentary now about how there are serious art collectors who are coming from places in Asia and the Middle East that were not really part of the traditional demographic.

MURAKAMI: This is why Taipei and my activities in Taiwan are not a joke. It seems like a real art market will take hold there and that is why my friend wants to open a gallery. I still don't know yet what is the reality of the Chinese market. But it's not just about China—there's also Singapore and Malaysia.

GINGERAS: Is it political for you to have a gallery in Taipei—to choose Taipei over a Chinese city?

MURAKAMI: Well, I could've opened a gallery in Hong Kong. It's much better to link with the mainland Chinese market. Taiwan is complicated for mainlanders, but so far, there is no real reaction to this choice.

GINGERAS: Are you interested more generally in politics?

MURAKAMI: I don't think so.

GINGERAS: No?

MURAKAMI: Maybe a little bit because I'm getting old. You know, I can read the newspaper now—that's why.