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Gaudy Mushrooms, Dreamy Blondes Take Over Sun King's Palace

By Jorg von Uthmann - Sep 19, 2010 7:00 PM ET



"Tongari-Kun" by Takashi Murakami. The fiberglass, steel, oil, acrylic and urethane paint is in the Salon d'Hercule of the Chateau de Versailles through Dec. 12. Photographer: Florian Kleinfenn/Kaikai Kiki Co. via Bloomberg



"Oval Buddha Silver" (2008) by Takashi Murakami. The sterling silver work is in the Salon d'Abondance of the Chateau de Versailles. The show runs through Dec. 12. Photographer: Florian Kleinfenn/Kaikai Kiki Co. via Bloomberg

The protests started well before the show opened.

Two groups say they are going to challenge the exhibition of works by Takashi Murakami in the royal apartments of the Chateau de Versailles outside Paris: "Versailles Mon Amour" will picket it; "Non aux Mangas," which has the support of Prince Sixte Henri de Bourbon-Parma, one of the Sun King's descendants, has taken the administrator to court.

Murakami, born in 1962, is a Japanese artist whose works are inspired by comics and animation. For many people, his grinning flowers, big-eyed blondes and brightly colored mushrooms are the epitome of kitsch. Others are willing to part with large sums of money to acquire them. In May 2008, "My Lonesome Cowboy," a Murakami sculpture of a masturbating boy, sold for \$15.2 million at Sotheby's in New York.

It's unlikely that the protests will stop the show: Two years ago, similar actions against a Jeff Koons exhibition in Versailles were dismissed by the courts.

In numerous interviews, Murakami has pointed out that, in Japanese eyes, the difference between high and low art makes no sense. He ascribes the success of his childlike creatures to the infantilizing effect of Japan's defeat in World War II and the country's refusal to face reality.

The mushrooms, we are led to believe, are what Sigmund Freud called "the return of the repressed" -- the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Andy as Mentor

Murakami is a fan of Andy Warhol and his talent to turn pictures of Coca-Cola bottles and other trivial objects into expensive art. Warhol's "Factory," though, was a modest workshop compared with Murakami's Kaikai Kiki Co. (named after two of his creatures, a good and a bad toddler) which employs some 100 people in Tokyo and Queens.

Murakami is no longer involved in the physical production of his works: His job is to develop the concept. In an interview with U.K. daily the Guardian (Sept. 6, 2009), he likened himself to Rubens and his studio in Antwerp, Belgium.

In Versailles, you'll look in vain for the masturbating cowboy or other works that might offend sensitive souls. "After all," explains curator Laurent Le Bon in *Beaux Arts* magazine (September 2010), "most of the visitors come for the chateau, not for Murakami, and are unfamiliar with contemporary art."

Le Bon has brought together 22 works, 11 of which have been created for the occasion. With a few exceptions -- two canvases, a carpet and wallpaper -- all are sculptures.

Curvy Buddha

The first, in the Salon d'Hercule, is one of Murakami's trademark mushrooms. In the next room, you find a bespectacled head sitting on what looks like the lower part of an antique cup or candelabrum, named "Oval Buddha Silver."

A larger, gilded version of the "Oval Buddha" stands on the garden terrace.

In the Salon des Nobles, a tapestry with the portrait of Louis XV is hovering over another head with sharp teeth devouring a Pepsi can, a bottle of Heinz ketchup and a sneaker, all encrusted with diamonds and gems.

And so on.

Depending on your tolerance, you'll be amused or appalled by the contrast between the slick banality of the objects and the sophisticated surroundings.

Murakami couldn't care less. Like Liberace, the piano-playing king of schmaltz who was often panned by the critics, he's crying all the way to the bank.

"Takashi Murakami at the Chateau de Versailles" runs through Dec. 12. Information: <http://www.chateauversailles.fr>.

