

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTINFO

Oversized and Oversexed, Murakami Mines the Past With Racy New Gagosian Show in London



All artworks © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved Photography by Muir Vidler/Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery Takashi Murakami at his Gagosian Gallery show in London.

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Published: July 6, 2011

LONDON— **Takashi Murakami** has a confidence crisis. Perhaps bored with the Manga imagery always associated with his name, the **Jeff Koons** of Japan clearly wants to prove in his new **Gagosian** show in gallery his artistic roots reach further than the relatively recent Anime culture. This is most apparent in four triptychs that pay imitative homage to the turn-of-the-century painter **Kuroda Seiki**, best known for having introduced Western style of painting to Japan. One of Murakami's triptychs is a copy of Kuroda's own "Wisdom, Impression, Sentiment," a 1900 composition of three realistic female nudes to which Murakami has boldly added a double signature: "Seiki Kuroda – Takashi Murakami 1899-2010." The claim for a lineage couldn't be more explicit.

The three other triptychs develop the theme of the three graces, each in a different Manga style: from the sleek cartoonish perfection of the gold-leafed takeoff — expositively titled "An Homage to Seiki Kuroda 'Wisdom, Impression, Sentiment' – TONY + Kaikai Kiki Factory" to indicate the involvement of figurine artist TONY in its production — to the more marked and aged figures in "An Homage To Seiki Kuroda 'Wisdom, Impression, Sentiment' – Ashito Oyari + Kaikai Kiki Factory." The differences between them are striking.

Seeing these triptychs so aligned sent me back to Kyoto's **Manga Museum**, where for the first time I really understood the full measure of this art's variety. What's at play in this show, though, is more subtle than a catalogue of styles: Murakami updates the work of a historical figure, simultaneously showing off his heritage and contemporary relevance.

This twin process continues with two acrylic-on-board paintings inspired by *shunga*, the erotic woodblocks particular popular during the Edo period (1603 to 1867). Murakami focuses on details and instead of depicting embraced lovers, showing closeups of male and female genitalia that are then echoed in the space by monumental sculptures of a golden phallus and a silver vagina — both adorned with his trademark stylized smiling faces. Taken to such an extreme, these sexual representations lose all their erotic appeal. They become shapes, blown up to the point to sheer absurdity.

But absurdity, here, might well be what it's all about. And it is this, combined with Murakami's humor, that saves his undisguised attempt to earn historical credibility points. "3-Meter Girl," a giant 2011 Manga chick with breasts so heavy that they pull her whole body forward, takes *otaku* fantasy to new heights. The sexy teenager turns stupid ogress, ready to suffocate foolish suitors. "3-Meter Girl" is triumphantly preposterous. The confidence crisis won't last long.