

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Takashi Murakami

Edmund Lee



He's sad to be called Asia's Warhol and he regards himself as a minor artist nowadays. Takashi Murakami offers Edmund Lee a glimpse into the fanciful mind of one of the most recognisable artists of our time.

When Takashi Murakami closes his eyes, what does he see? "I'm not napping now, right?" The iconic pop artist looks up, grinning brightly. "I'm thinking," he clarifies jokingly when he's asked about his curious daily routine, which often includes four naps a day. This episode also happens to be one of the few moments that he has his peepers open in our interview at Galerie Perrotin Hong Kong, where he's showing a set of new paintings in his Mr Dob series. For the record: like an analysand at a psychoanalytic session or a psychic channelling mysterious wisdom from afar, Murakami does regularly spend perhaps 90 percent of his print media interviews with his eyes tightly closed. And here's what comes out of our session...

You've long been labelled as the Andy Warhol of Japan. Are you okay with that tag?

I'm okay, you know, but I'm just sad because... ah... you know, yesterday [I was interviewed by] Bloomberg TV, [who called me] 'Asia's Warhol' – or something like that. It's... okay, but one day, if I can make my own style, people can't say 'Asia's Warhol' or 'Warhol versus Murakami' [any more]. If I can make it stand alone, [that'll be] great. But I don't know. Now is okay, no problem.

When you started, did you take a little bit of inspiration from Warhol's working model?

Yeah. Very much. When I visited his museum in Pittsburgh, it had a big room of glass saying Time Capsules. That room is really amazing because when Warhol [was] dead, his assistants brought everything from his house, including toilet paper or something, and then each piece was organised [and put] into a box. Ten years ago, when I visited the Warhol museum, the curator said ‘maybe [for] 15 years, we’ll spend the time and search everything for the story [of Warhol], like a diary’. So that is a very nice project that I hope, [when I] die... I don’t know... maybe some studio people or my friends will have one place to hold everything. That kind of a project is great because we can see not [only] me but kind of what is going on with this generation – so we can watch. That project is a really nice example from the Warhol idea – not Warhol idea but Warhol’s studio director’s idea.

So, in the future, what do you think we’ll see from the Time Capsules of Murakami?

You know, now, this is really confusing. I’m not thinking about my museum stuff. I used to, but now I’m not. Because after the earthquake [in March 2011]... artists alive now can affect the lives of people. One of the big jobs of artists is to pass the message to the future [generations]. At the same time, if I can do that, I want to communicate with these people.

Alongside the likes of Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, you’re one of the most prominent artists working today. Do you feel a special affinity to them?

Yeah, at Gagosian Gallery I have a good relationship with them. When I was having a charity auction, these artists gave us a lot of big paintings. That is a really good help. We also went to several parties and dinners. Damien is really nice to talk to any time. He’s really fun. And Jeff Koons is very serious every time: he’s really philosophical with his talking with clients, with the gallery or with me. [Chuckles] He’s kind of super serious. He talks about what death is or something like that. [Laughs] I hate death, but it looks like he knows a lot of examples about what death is. They’re super intellectual people. I have so much respect for these people.

Do you think your fame may have got too big for you?

I used to have this kind of feeling: yes. But now, it’s no. I’m not a major artist. I’m a minor artist. Like you guys, you know my past, my career – but now my career is focusing on minority stuff.

Your work is well-known for merging pop culture, art and business. Do you ever get tired of people asking you about the commercial side of your practice?

Well, I think your question is ‘am I getting tired?’ But you, like us, have to like the readers, and some of them may not necessarily know art very well. And even if they know about art, very few people know about my art method – very few. Yet our collectors are paying a high price to buy my work. But then, really, looking at how I work, the technical method, those things I’m not expecting the normal people to understand them very well. So I keep explaining to them.

You’re also quite a collector yourself. Can you tell us a bit about your collection?

My interest is in the giant pieces – the super giant pieces. [In front of] these pieces, I’m shaking. But this is a primitive reaction. [Another reason is that] gigantic pieces are [usually] not good sales, so that’s why I ask the galleries if they can make a big discount: ‘yes or no?’ Sometimes

they can trade with my paintings. Each time I want to get these giant pieces because maybe no-one would care about them... but my storage can do that. [Laughs] So it's [like], come on! Come to my storage. That's my feeling.

There are people who observe that the market may have reached the top, sometimes citing the gradually plateauing interest in the work of artists like Hirst and Koons. What's your take on it?

I just told you about this: I'm out of the game. I'm not standing for this area. These people are in the centre of the game – but my position is completely out.

You mean because you're more concerned about Japanese society nowadays?

No, no, no. I'm just focusing on other parts, such as making a movie. I have no concern about the money game. I have no connection with the auction stuff. I was [involved] and I enjoyed it, but now I'm not.

Takashi Murakami's solo exhibition is at Galerie Perrotin until Jul 6.