

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Murakami Misinterprets History in a Psychedelic Sprawl at Gagosian

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Visitors to Takashi Murakami's new sprawling exhibition at Gagosian Gallery might reasonably assume that the artist has committed the ultimate act of hubris: uprooting an ancient Buddhist gate from a historical site in Japan and installing it within the walls of the gallery's pristine white cube. Murakami's *Bakuramon*, as the wooden gate is titled, is in fact a very convincing replica of Rashomon, the historical gate to the Heiankyo capital (794–1192), the source of numerous legends and stories, including Kurosawa's famous film (produced in 1950) of the same name. The 56-ton structure, replete with chipped wooden pillars and weathered walls, fills the largest space in Gagosian's 24th Street gallery with a sweet, sandalwood-like scent, accompanied by the aroma of incense sticks that are regularly lit within the gate's small chambers. At one end of the gate stand two towering wrathful deities, grimacing psychedelic monoliths with spiralling horns and Day-Glo-colored toenails. Pass through the gate and find yourself face-to-face with the centerpiece of Murakami's exhibition and the work that gives the show its name, *In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of the Rainbow* (2014).

Spanning the entire length of the gallery, this vast acrylic painting is a maelstrom of imagery, teeming with skulls, dragons, and a ship riding a tempestuous sea of snaking, rainbow-colored waves. Too big to take in in one glance, the composition must be viewed up close and from afar, and requires treading a path along its considerable dimensions. Abutting *In the Land* are three of

Murakami's semi-abstract "Arhat" paintings, mandala-like compositions that are filled not with deities—as in the Buddhist faith—but with eye-like voids. Here, and in the exhibition at large, the artist plays fast and loose with religious iconography. Considered a source of divine power capable of curing ailments, "arhats" in the Buddhist tradition are those who have achieved enlightenment or are on a path to nirvana, such as the Buddha's disciples; Murakami's arhats are cartoonish, somersaulting figures that form a ring around the central mandala form. Elsewhere in the show, reflective Koons-like balloon characters, "superflat" manga-inspired creatures, and what look like drugged-out street urchins, rendered comic-strip-style, abound. Adding to this eclectic cast, Murakami arrived at the press preview for the show wearing robes and giant, pull-on rubber feet, with long curling fingernails in various shades, and a grotesque headdress resembling a totem of mashed-up heads.

Many of the works on view are based on historical Asian artworks through which Murakami delves into one of his persistent themes: misinterpretation. The show manifests an extraordinary fusion of ancient and contemporary references, but at its heart, it evokes something altogether grander than their sum. Calling on Buddhist origins and themes, Murakami searches for order in a chaos of allusions to death and devastation—and for healing in the wake of natural disasters like the 2011 Tohoku earthquake in Japan, which the artist has spoken about as marking something of a turning point in his artistic concerns. Here, Murakami explores the artist's role in the face of human suffering and catastrophe, drawing on the work of others, such as the 19th-century Japanese artist Kazunobu, who emerged following the 1855 Ansei earthquake. There is violence and excess in Murakami's dystopic world, but at its core lies an antidote: faith.