

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Takashi Murakami review: a welcome return to a more disturbing style

His collaborations with Kanye West and Louis Vuitton have made him rich and famous, but the Japanese artist's new works, inspired by Fukushima, are more than gaudy trinkets for the super rich

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Takashi Murakami: In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow. Photograph: Robert McKeever/Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co/Gagosian gallery

The Japanese artist Takashi Murakami has become a divisive figure in the contemporary art world: hailed by some for his merging of high and low styles, reviled by others for his commercial slipperiness and taste for the media spotlight. His newest show, which opens this week in New York, may not win over all his detractors. But it will go a long way to convincing sceptics that the goofy-seeming Murakami is actually a serious artist – in this case, a deadly serious one.

Murakami's exhibition *In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow* represents a strong shift towards darker and bleaker subject matter from an artist who had grown a reputation – partly justified, partly not – for uncritical happiness and market complicity. It responds, obliquely but with verve and anger, to the Tohoku earthquake of March 2011, as well as the nuclear meltdown at Fukushima that resulted.

The largest gallery features a giant *sanmon*, or sacred gate, modeled after gates from the Heian period (the ninth to 12th centuries AD) and, according to the artist, inspired by the titular gate of Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashômon*. The gate incorporates his frequent motif of druggy,

stupefied eyes, as do several paintings in which the giant eyeballs look like the centers of a nuclear blast. Three massive panoramas, whose narratives progress horizontally like a traditional scroll painting, incorporate angry divinities, distressed fish and dragons, and multiple tsunamis: of waves in one case, of human skulls in another.



Tan Tan Bo – In Communication, 2014. Photograph: Robert McKeever/Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co/Gagosian gallery

Other, smaller paintings feature Murakami’s familiar anime characters from decades past – such as Dob, the artist’s big-eared alter ego – in states of trauma. In one case they seem to be collapsing from the effluvia of nuclear cooling towers. In another painting, whose background consists entirely of black skulls, the character Mr Pointy appears with a thought bubble that reads in part: “We feel the futility and sadness of war and yet we cannot atone for this inescapable human behavior.”

Murakami came to international prominence in the 1990s for his cartoonish paintings and sculptures – sometimes cloyingly cute, sometimes erotic and even perverse – in a style he called superflat. He also played with the Japanese subculture known as *otaku*, and its intense obsession with sexualized animated figures, in sculptures depicting a winsome girl with giant lactating breasts who uses strands of milk as a jump rope, or else a young blond man harnessing a gushing strand of semen as if it were a lasso.

His garish style, and its congruence with anime, tended to obscure Murakami’s historical rigor (he holds a doctorate in traditional Japanese painting from Tokyo University of the Arts) as well as his political convictions. In his youth Murakami was an engaged anti-nuclear activist, and in his writings and exhibitions he often insisted on the legacy of the 1945 bombings, as well as Japan’s US-written pacifist constitution, as antecedents for his art’s traumatic cuteness.



The Golden Age: Kōrin – Kansei, 2014. Photograph: Robert McKeever/Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co/Gagosian gallery

But in 2002, Murakami took a sharp turn when he was invited to collaborate with Louis Vuitton, emblazoning the fashion label's leather goods with his cartoon characters, grinning sunflowers and googly eyes. It was one of the first mashups of high art and luxury that have now become omnipresent in an age of extreme wealth inequality – Tracey Emin purses at Longchamp, or Damien Hirst skulls and butterflies on Alexander McQueen frocks, were still to follow. Murakami's complicity, however, went even further than the department store: he began incorporating the LV monogram into his paintings, and even installed a Vuitton boutique in his retrospective at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art. Unfortunate collaborations with Kanye West and Pharrell Williams further cemented the view that Murakami had abandoned any antagonistic flair.

These new works mark a welcome return to a tougher and more disturbing style.

The smiling flowers are still here in a few works, but they're modulated by backgrounds of skulls and dark, polluted rivers. The familiar cartoon characters seem in one large sculpture to be melting down, victims of a nuclear disaster or some other catastrophe. "Even using the cute characters, I was trying to portray an apocalyptic world," Murakami remarked at the exhibition opening. "But maybe they're now morphing into something darker and more sinister."

Takashi Murakami: In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow. Gagosian, 555 West 24th St, New York, until 17 January.