

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Mashable

Post-disaster angst fuels Japanese pop artist's tablet-focused works

Adario Strange



Image: Mashable, Adario Strange

If art is the most honest barometer of technology's effect on the human condition, Takashi Murakami's latest works uncover a Japan still quietly reeling from 2011's Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and struggling with the ever-present specter of the ongoing nuclear crisis at Fukushima.

But aside from cultural imperatives, Murakami's new tech-themed work was largely powered by his adoption of tablets.

"The reason I can now execute some of these new large scale and very complex images is because I've been using the Wacom tablets," Murakami told me during a meeting at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, just hours before the show's official opening.

"You can draw directly on the tablet and then that becomes data, [that goes into] Illustrator, and that gets processed and we make the silk screens to create these large paintings," says Murakami. "Now I have 15 or so drawing artists working at the computers, designing and then making them into data that eventually becomes a painting. So with this technology, these paintings are now made possible."

Far from his brightly colored "Superflat" mutations of pop art and anime themes of years past, Murakami's new show, "In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow," is like a trip through a surreal graveyard of ghosts and demons threatening to swallow Japan in space-borne black holes.

Several years ago, Murakami, working in his Kaikai Kiki studio in Tokyo, began experimenting with tablet technology to fuel his new experiments with abstract art, a decision that gradually pulled him in the direction of sci-fi.

“Rather than just abstract painting, my interest in in black holes and sci-fi was more relevant to what I’m interested in,” says Murakami. “So I started to add that type of meaning into the abstract paintings I was creating.”

When you first step into the exhibit you must pass through a massive wooden gate called “Bakuramon,” similar to the kind you might find at the entrance of an ancient Japanese temple, but emblazoned with tiny vortex images. Then you’re met with two giant 14-foot-tall demons, guarding a triptych of large black holes in Murakami’s version of space.

But underneath all the tech-powered, sci-fi imagery, Murakami’s work signals the very real angst of post-Fukushima Japan, which, despite its absence from western headlines, remains the No. 1 topic in the third richest nation on the planet.

“When I was in my 20s I was participating in the anti-nuclear movement,” says Murakami. “Now, with the Fukushima disaster, Tokyo and the surrounding areas where I live are also contaminated with radiation. The level of radiation [initially emitted from the Fukushima disaster] is more than the levels in Chernobyl, but the government will deny things. Of course, people can’t really go anywhere so they’re in denial and they continue to live in Tokyo... Maybe if I were younger I would try to change things, but now I’m resigned to just record and report.”

Murakami’s attitude toward the still unfolding nuclear dilemma even as some national political forces push for a restart to nuclear reactors in the earthquake-prone country and protestors continue to take to the streets, is in many ways reflective of the widespread feeling of helplessness in the country.

However, the fact that he’s now embracing technology and the themes around it to deliver his new, darker message signals that the artist remains connected to the country’s tradition of harnessing technology to reveal its cultural pulse.

It’s “almost like we’re living in a sci-fi, post-apocalyptic movie come true,” says Murakami. “So the expression of art might be influenced in a darker direction, but for me I’m really trying [to] depict something hopeful in this show.”