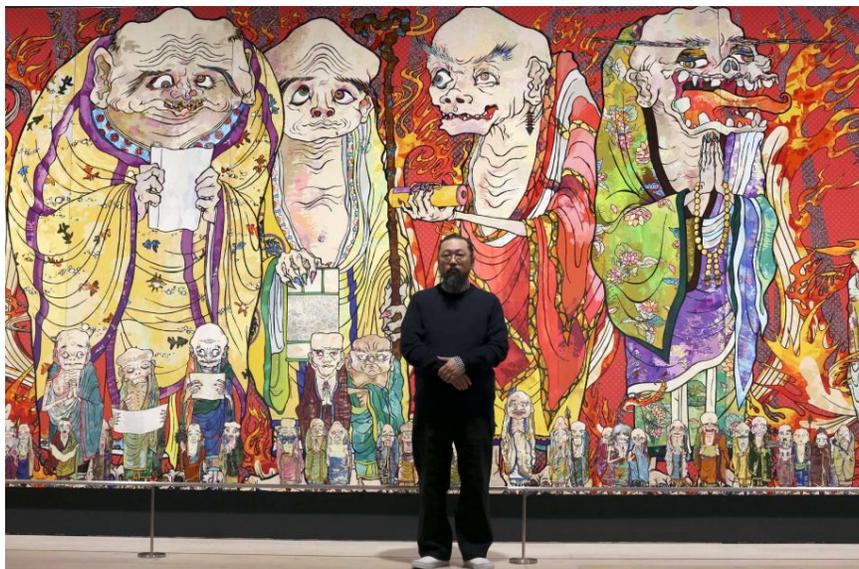


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

AP

Murakami's aged men show Japan's post-disaster spirituality

Yuri Kageyama



In this Dec. 29, 2015 photo, Japanese artist Takashi Murakami poses in front of part of his work titled "The 500 Arhats" exhibited at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. In the gentrified kitsch landscape Murakami depicts, 500 grotesque priests parade along dazzlingly colorful giant panels. Photo: Eugene Hoshiko, AP

TOKYO (AP) — In the gentrified kitsch landscape Takashi Murakami depicts, 500 grotesque priests parade along dazzlingly colorful giant panels.

The artist's zany ukiyoe-turned-manga world takes a spiritual, but uncompromising pop art, turn in addressing the 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster. But the old men in "The 500 Arhats" installation at Mori Art Museum in Tokyo also show reality in the world's fastest aging society.

"This is a self-portrait of Japan," Murakami told The Associated Press this week.

Dubbed the "Andy Warhol of Japan," Murakami is showing his first major retrospective in Japan in 14 years.

After the Fukushima disaster, Murakami felt a need to express the sense of desperation and catastrophe, and to try to contribute to healing.

The motif of Buddha's disciples is common in traditional Japanese art. But Murakami's arhat figures leer back at the world, some with toothless grins, as though stuck in half-crazed greed rather than seeking enlightenment.

The giant panels, 100 meters (328 feet) long in total, are covered with raging fire and glitter-speckled cosmic skies. Dragons strike contorted poses, next to elephants and a white tiger. And there are lots and lots of aging men, of various sizes and shapes, with pot bellies, bald heads and wrinkled foreheads.

"In another era, I'd be a grandpa," said Murakami, 53. "My art has always been about exaggerating the weird characteristics of Japanese society."

Art historian Nobuo Tsuji, who encouraged Murakami to tackle the arhats theme, says the work pays homage to Edo-period artists like Jakuchu Ito, Shohaku Soga and Kazunobu Kano. But ultimately the images of the old men are nothing other than "unadorned self-portraits of Murakami himself," Tsuji said.

The pony-tailed bespectacled Murakami has exhibited at the Rockefeller Center in New York, the Palace of Versailles in France and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

He uses dozens of assistants to create large-scale artworks — often with repetitive themes, be it laughing flowers, psychedelic skulls or deformed old men. They work in his version of Warhol's Factory, though he stresses gorgeous celebrities don't frequent the studio that's run more like a humble Japanese manufacturing company.

His signature icon is the Mickey Mouse-like Mr. DOB. Murakami has also created huge erotic sculptures of animation-inspired female figures that have fetched enormous auction prices. In recent years, he has become a filmmaker.

Murakami has won both praise and criticism for his unabashed commercialism, starting his own brand Kaikai Kiki Co., which sells not just the usual postcards and art books, but also mugs, cushions, cell-phone cases and T-shirts emblazoned with his designs, as well as figures and dolls.

In his typically defiance, Murakami recommends exhibit viewers keep their serious spirituality to about 30 percent of their energy, and revel in tourism, splurging and fun for the rest.

The official shop that's part of the exhibit is taking orders for a 486,000 yen (\$4,000) tote bag with Murakami's skull design, complete with a certificate.

Murakami designed Louis Vuitton bags about a decade ago that sold for similarly exorbitant prices, although Murakami acknowledged at the time he had never owned such an expensive bag in his life.

At the museum coffee shop, where walls are splashed with Murakami flowers and his balloon figures hang from the ceiling, visitors enjoy a selection of cakes and omelets in flower shapes.

At the entrance stands a striking life-size likeness of Murakami, with rolling eyes and moving lips — except the top face is peeling off to reveal yet another face — an eerie reminder that art, like life and truth, can be illusory.

But Murakami insists neither time nor fame has changed him as an artist.

He grew up poor, he said. Japan was in a perpetual identity crisis, having just been defeated in World War II.

A graduate of the prestigious Tokyo University of the Arts, he went on to invent his approach and named it Superflat — a take on that unique sense of perspective and emphasis of clear outlines that woodblock printers like Hokusai invented.

It all comes back, Murakami said, to the question he has addressed all his life: What is Japan?

“Superflat has not changed at all,” he said.