

GAGOSIAN



South China Morning Post

New Takashi Murakami show at Gagosian Hong Kong looks to youth and the inevitable future

Japanese contemporary artist's new exhibition blends fine art with commercial media in another example of his knack for blurring the lines between what is regarded as high and low art

Fionnuala McHugh



Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami's new exhibition "Change the Rule!" is at the Gagosian Hong Kong art gallery in Central. Photo: Jonathan Wong

If Takashi Murakami had had his way, the original title for his new show at Gagosian Hong Kong would have been a first-person narrative almost worthy of his namesake, Haruki (a Japanese author known for this style of writing).

It originally began, "I think 2018 has been quite an amazing year for artist Takashi Murakami"; he then compared himself to a fish (at its peak fattiness), included congratulations on his guts, energy and spirit and concluded by noting that the Hong Kong exhibition takes place in the autumn of this optimal year. Nick Simunovic, the gallery's director, preferred something snappier, however; the exhibition is now called "Change the Rule!"

The tale of the two titles is told, in Japanese characters, on a relatively tiny acrylic painting at the entrance to his show. This, apparently, is an act of contrition for not finishing a more monumental piece in time for the show. Visitors to the gallery are provided with a translated version of his artistic torment: "Right at this moment, as I write this text on this painting ... I feel like crying for help." As excuses for missing a deadline go, it's a glum picture. Meanwhile, brilliant Murakami flowers grin, with sinister insistence, from nearby walls.



Murakami's painting "Tan Tan Bo: Having vomited five viscera and six bowels along with a lump of ego, he swallows them back into his empty stomach as everything disperses into the void; along the process he starts his journey into meditation." Photo: Takashi Murakami

The past 18 months have certainly been relentless for him. Murakami has been the subject of at least half-a-dozen major shows, including "The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg", which originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago – where it broke the visitor record previously held by a David Bowie retrospective – and ended in Fort Worth's Modern Art Museum on September 16.

When Gagosian London mounted a show in March called "Future History" with Murakami and Virgil Abloh, founder of designer label Off-White and now artistic director of menswear at Louis Vuitton, the queues began forming at 3am. The gallery had, cannily, timed it during London Fashion Week and the pair created a limited edition of 400 T-shirts.



Murakami with some of his work at Gagosian in Central. Photo: Jonathan Wong

On the back of that collaboration, Gagosian in Paris held another joint show this summer called "Technicolor [sic] 2", and the collaboration is due to have a third outing next month at Gagosian in Los Angeles.

"The scale is much bigger than London and Paris," says Murakami, perched on a Gagosian sofa in Hong Kong with his interpreter opposite. He speaks English when he is being direct. Japanese is for more complicated concepts (and evasion). "After today's opening, I go back to Tokyo. Have to take care of that immediately."

Where's the pleasure in such a grind? "You ask about happiness. It's true. At [the] same time I have to do something next."



“The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg” was also staged at the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris. Photo: AFP

Six years ago, in 2012, he’d sat on the same sofa discussing his previous Gagosian show, “Flowers & Skulls”. Then, he’d pulled his jumper over his tummy to demonstrate how large it was and he’d jiggled his sockless legs. Now, as the show’s edict suggests, he has changed the rule – or at least the look. Plucking each layer, he recites the labels: “Balenciaga, Prada, myself [a Murakami-flowered top], Louis Vuitton, Supreme, Nike.”

He also brought his own stylist with him. There are, after all, particular expectations of a man who hangs out with Abloh, Pharrell Williams and Kanye West. “This is [an] idea of context,” he explains of dressing the part. “Fashion making cool, fashion making fresh.”

Murakami has a history with luxury labels. Abloh, who trained as an architect, has said it was seeing Murakami’s Louis Vuitton monogram that encouraged him to go into the creative arts. The two men met when Murakami did Kanye West’s “Graduation” album cover, for which Abloh was an art director, but their recent collaboration was born at last year’s ComplexCon.

This event, which describes itself as “the world’s largest gathering of visionary pop-culture enthusiasts”, has Pharrell Williams as its cultural director, Puma as its Official Footwear Sponsor and Murakami as its emphatic fan. “When I go two years ago, my feeling is very comfortable because this is same kind of people as me – geek people!” It’s, literally, to his taste: the next gathering, in November in California, will feature Murakami Flower Burgers (Wagyu and vegetarian options available). The stated theme is Chaos. Growth. Enlightenment.

“When I first started making merchandise, one of the things I was imagining was this kind of audience – very materialistic,” he says with approval. “That was 20 years ago. So I was creating the works and that kind of audience didn’t exist yet. And now they are the real audience!” They are, also, mostly male and young.

At 56, Murakami sits at the midway point between ComplexCon’s demographic and his mentor, Professor Nobuo Tsuji, 86, who has educated him in Japan’s artistic history. In the same way, the Gagosian show of new works seems to reference both shiny youth and thoughts of the inevitable future: Doraemon facing off The Lion of the Kingdom that Transcends Death, for example.

One of the largest works – and longest titles – is: “Tan Tan Bo a.k.a Gerotan: Having vomited five viscera and six bowels along with a lump of ego, he swallows them back into his empty stomach as everything disperses into the void; along the process he starts his journey into meditation.” Tan Tan Bo was already puking in another Murakami painting back in 2002. Does such devouring now suggest he is feeding on himself?

“I don’t know,” the artist says when asked to explain. One of his artistic avatars is Mr DOB, cute but fanged, who takes his name from dobojite, Japanese slang for “why?” – the very question Murakami, on the evidence of this interview, least likes to hear. Twice he refers to his own “mental illness”.

“I feel that because I was born with this disability of a sort, that is why I’m creating – and when a normal person asks why, it’s difficult.”

After a little prodding about the title of his latest show, however, he admits he chose the words out of a desire for sincerity. “[A] very honest feeling – I have no new something this 10 years. I’m not even going to the next.”



Mr. DOB by Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. Photo: Takashi Murakami

Murakami still lives in his studio. He still collects cactuses. He still employs many people in Tokyo (about 50) and New York (about 25) to create the perfect layers of his work. He used to run Geisai, an event to help young artists get exposure, but that ceased in 2014. Annoying question: why? “I lose the money, tons of money. Also, I have to make show myself because I’m getting old.”

Age and finance, those eternal stresses. “I can get the big project, big money, but every month I’m ...” – he clutches his throat – “... kind of choking.”

In his Hong Kong show, Doraemon holds open the Anywhere Door through which the viewer may pass to a desirable place. Where would he like to go? “I want to go to my past. When I was young, when I was 20.” A surprising answer: Murakami is usually disinclined to look back at his earlier days. “I’m still living a dream then. That is a great thing.”

And now? “No dream. Reality.”