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Breaking Down Takashi Murakami's Wildly Popular, Expansive Art

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Takashi Murakami, MCA Chicago. Takashi Murakami, Who's afraid of red, yellow, blue and death, 2011. Gagolian

Takashi Murakami has one of the most expansive practices in contemporary art. Aided by Kaikai Kiki, a global studio of workers and budding artists centered in Tokyo, Japan, the renowned Japanese artist makes an expansive amount of work that riffs on his native country's anime and manga traditions. Masses of bright flowers with smiling faces are a common motif, as are flattened cartoon figures, all rendered to a simultaneously adorable and disconcerting effect. Murakami's signature "Kiki" figure, for example, features two fanged teeth and a third eye. Over the past three decades, Murakami has repeated and distorted such characters across all manner of media.

Beyond what viewers can see in galleries and museums, they'll also recognize the artist's work from luxury shops around the world, and in news stories about the art market. Murakami is famous for his willingness to collaborate with brands such as Louis Vuitton, and for his frequent appearances at auction. In 2008, a \$15.2 million sale of his sculpture *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998), at Sotheby's, established his record.



Takashi Murakami, We Came to the Field of Flowers Through Anywhere Door (Dokodemo Door)!, 2018. Gagosian. Takashi Murakami, A Red River is Visible, 2014. Gagosian

Beyond this superficial appraisal of Murakami's work lies the artist's weighty philosophies on art, commerce, and history. Murakami holds a PhD in *nihonga*, or traditional Japanese painting made after 1900, and his contemporary output critiques elements of the nation's art and culture. But while his works may be based in tradition, Murakami might be more closely associated with more recent Japanese cultural concepts like *kawaii* (roughly translated to "cute") and *otaku* (young people obsessed with computers at the expense of social interactions).

In 2000, Murakami developed his own theory of the "Superflat," which connects the flattened aesthetics of contemporary Japanese art with the flattening of cultural hierarchies. The artist posits that this style helped make the terrible truths of mid-20th-century Japan—namely, the havoc wrought by the atomic bombs—more palatable. As critic Arthur Lubow wrote in a 2005 profile of the artist, "Murakami maintains that respectable Japanese artists largely ignored the horrors of World War II and the humiliations of the postwar occupation, relinquishing the subjects to the *otaku*," who turned them into cartoon fantasies.

Despite all these disparate ideas, Noah Davis, a specialist in post-war and contemporary art at Christie's, sees cohesion in Murakami's oeuvre. "It's all part of building one aesthetic universe where Murakami's recurring characters, his hyper-saturated palette, the insane attention to detail...commingles into what feels like a cohesive, all-encompassing brand," he said.

Sculpture



Takashi Murakami, Miss KO² Original (Project KO²), 1997. Courtesy of Sotheby's. Takashi Murakami, Invoking the Vitality of a Universe Beyond Imagination, 2014. Gagosian

According to Davis, some of Murakami's best works aren't flat at all, but are three-dimensional. His sculptures reveal the same set of obsessions that have pervaded his work since the beginning: sexuality, storytelling, self-reference, and Japanese history, all viewed through the lens of heavy satire.

Among his sculptures are his famous, record-breaking *My Lonesome Cowboy and its counterpart, Hiropon* (1997). Both oil-and-acrylic-fiberglass works feature hypersexualized, cartoonish figures, blown up to larger-than-life scale (they reach around eight and seven feet tall, respectively). The nude, blond *Cowboy* twirls a lasso of his own semen, while the female *Hiropon*, wearing only a tiny green bikini top, appears to be jumping a "rope" made from her breast milk.



Takashi Murakami, The Birth Cry of a Universe, 2014. Gagosian. Takashi Murakami, 3m Girl (Original rendering by Seiji Matsuyama, modeling by BOME and Genpachi Tokaimura, full scale sculpture by Lucky-Wide Co., Ltd.), 2011. Gagosian.

Murakami completed his first work in this vein, *Miss ko²*, back in 1997. The series initiated a fruitful new phase for the artist, in which he was able to find his own voice.

Prior to *Miss ko²*, sculpture had interested Murakami for years. One of his most famous early works, *Randoseru Project* (1991), comprises backpacks made from hides of endangered species.

These functional objects are both beautiful and fraught—harbingers of Murakami’s future fashion collaborations.

Over the last decade, Murakami’s sculptures have included giant gold-leaf and silver-hued silicone totems that resemble a giant phallus, flames, the artist’s dog POM, and the artist himself. A recent hyperrealistic self-portrait turns the artist into what Davis called “a hallucinogenic Zen Buddha bursting in half to reveal another self under his own skin, like a trippy Russian doll.”

Collectibles



Takashi Murakami X Uniqlo, Doraemon, 2018. Heritage Auctions. Supreme x Takashi Murakami, BunBu-Kun, Ponchi-Kun, Shimon-Kun (set of 3). DIGARD AUCTION

In 2002, Murakami redesigned Louis Vuitton’s monogram (which debuted the following year) and kicked off a years-long relationship with the label, which was then under Marc Jacobs’s direction. Given Murakami’s long-standing desire to merge the commercial and “fine art” realms, and to flatten the distinction between high and low culture, the project was perfectly on-brand for the artist.

Over the years, the artist has also partnered with the famed skateboarding brand Supreme to create skateboard decks and casual clothing. His most recent collaboration with the brand—a white T-shirt featuring the Supreme logo against Murakami’s smiling flower backdrop—raised over \$1 million for COVID-19 relief.

Though mere mention of Murakami’s name can generate an incredible profit, the artist’s collectibles are, in fact, available at many price points. In museum shops around the world (and across numerous online sales platforms), you can purchase a flower pillow for \$280, stuffed Kaikai figures for £5,900 (around \$7,300), and an assortment of colorful, cartoony goods from Uniqlo for under \$90.

Monogram paintings



Takashi Murakami, Murakami Vuitton Brooch, 2010. EHC Fine Art Gallery Auction. Takashi Murakami and Virgil Abloh, SCULPTURE, 2018. Phillips

Murakami's high-fashion collaboration quickly seeped into his more "traditional" gallery-bound work. In the early 2000s, he created a series of paintings emblazoned with Louis Vuitton's label. The provocative move raised a series of questions for viewers: Were these branded collaborations or unique artworks? Was this Murakami's work, or that of a luxury lifestyle brand? Could paintings themselves be advertisements for a handbag?

Like Andy Warhol before him, Murakami insists that he's merely a producer and displays no ethical qualms about his desire to meet economic demands. "Just like with Warhol soup cans or Marilyns, if there is a need in the market, I can put [my work] out," he told Lubow. "The gallerists worry that if there are too many, the value will go down and their auction prices will be low." Murakami, however, ignores this, preferring to simply make work if people want it. This strategy has also led the artist to create a robust print practice, aided by Kaikai Kiki.

Collaborative art



Takashi Murakami and Virgil Abloh, "TIMES NATURE", 2018. Gagolian. Takashi Murakami, BILLIE EILISH, 2019. Dope! Gallery

In 2018, Murakami furthered his ideas about art, merchandise, and collaboration, partnering with superstar designer Virgil Abloh on paintings and sculptures. The pair showed their results at

Gagosian's Beverly Hills outpost. Murakami's cartoonish iconography blends with Abloh's bold graphic arrows to create art as divorced from individual expression as possible.

The following year, the artist produced his first-ever music video in collaboration with pop sensation Billie Eilish for her hit single "you should see me in a crown." Featuring an anime Eilish with Murakami's smiling rainbow flowers, the animated video is perfectly in keeping with both artists' cute-but-creepy aesthetic—by the end, Eilish combusts into a horrifying giant zombie spider that projectile vomits a pastel magma. The video has over 68 million views. The artist's studio also produced a series of collectible plastic Billie Eilish dolls.

DOB paintings



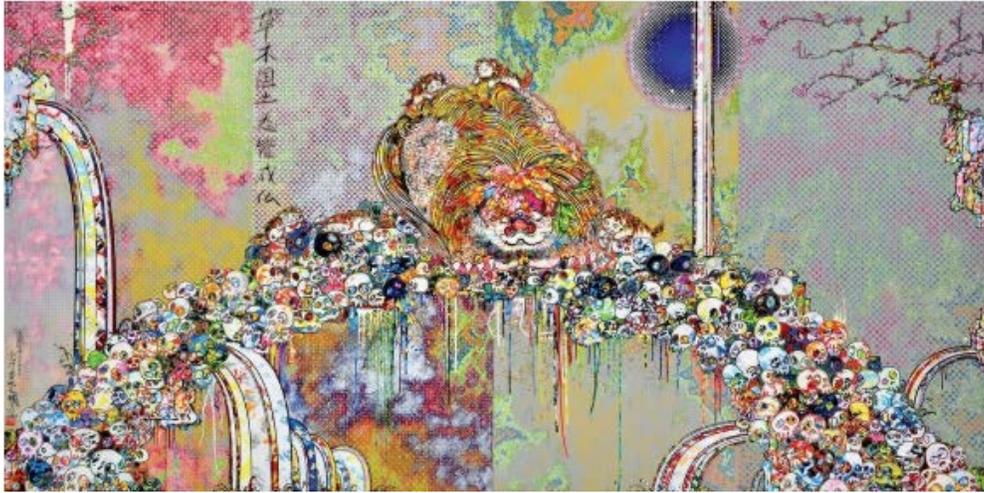
Takashi Murakami, And then and then and then and then and then and then (Red), 1999. Gagosian. Takashi Murakami, And then and then and then and then and then and then (Aqua), 1999. Gagosian

As with Murakami's sculptures, his paintings from the late 1990s and early 2000s have the greatest market demand. Davis noted that Murakami's large-scale canvases have recently achieved "huge prices" in Shanghai and New York. "Collectors will also splurge for paintings of Murakami's iconic Mr. DOB character, the artist's omnipresent shapeshifting alter ego," he said.

Murakami invented Mr. DOB in the 1990s after, as he told our writer Scott Indrisek last year, he began trying to "realize a mechanical line that couldn't be reproduced by hand." Using Adobe Illustrator, he generated Bézier curves (a graphic design tool) to make his own digital signature. The end result was a boldly hued, psychedelic Mickey Mouse. And while Mr. DOB's appearance changes from artwork to artwork, he always has two round ears that feature the letters "D" and "B," with the letter "O" forming his round head.

Paintings featuring Mr. DOB appeared in Murakami's first-ever monographic exhibition outside Japan, at Perrotin in Paris in 1995. The motif has persisted for decades.

Recent paintings



Takashi Murakami, The Lion of the Kingdom that Transcends Death, 2018. Gagosian

Murakami’s paintings have both embraced contemporary issues and invoked age-old imagery. For a 2014 exhibition at Gagosian in New York, Murakami mounted a series that reconsidered the devastation wrought by 2011’s Great Tōhoku Earthquake in Japan. To understand the contemporary tragedy, the artist looked to the past. He took particular inspiration from Buddhist painters who, after an 1855 earthquake, began to include spiritual protectors in their work.

Murakami began rendering spiritual figures as well—though not for the first time in his career. Spiritual, mythological, and personal symbolism are a decades-long interest for the artist. Before he turned to anime and manga influences, he’d actually been making paintings of fish, referencing both Chinese porcelain vases and his own childhood memories of watching fishermen and catching fish with his father. In 2019, he notably returned to this early theme for a giant ocean-themed wall mural, titled Qinghua, for Gagosian Beverly Hills.



Takashi Murakami, One encounters a multitude of hardships and disasters along the way to the netherworld, yet this process allows one to take the proper form of a human being and thus attain Buddhahood, 2018. Gagosian.

One of the most important shifts Murakami has made throughout his career, said Davis, was to “draw more deeply and directly from classical Japanese culture.” He noted Murakami’s “appropriation” of traditional Japanese scroll-painting techniques and “incorporation of narrative and explicit references to Japanese and Eastern folklore.”

Though Murakami’s work is unapologetically contemporary and focused on surfaces, atrocities and methodologies of the past forever lurk among his bright, pop creations.

“My own personal position is drawn from how well I can arrange the unique flowers of Asia,” Murakami has said, “moreover the ever strange blossoms that have bloomed in the madness of the defeated culture of post-war Japan, into work that will live within the confines of Western art history.”