TAKASHI MURAKAMI

Takashi Murakami’s works may be full of grinning cartoon figures in gaudy psychodelic colors, fields of wide-smiling daisy-like flowers, many-eyed mushrooms and sexually pneumatic manga characters, but their apparent embrace of the populist and appealing masks the artist’s wide-reaching cultural ambition to change the status and perception of contemporary art in Japan. It was only on arriving in New York in 1994, however, having mastered the traditional Japanese painting techniques of nihonga at Tokyo’s University of Fine Art and Music, that Murakami experienced a sense of cultural displacement that lead him back to the otaku culture he had been immersed in since childhood. His re-acceptance of otaku – the obsessive fandom of Japanese manga comics, anime and computer games which he had long since abandoned in his attempts to create a form of high art – led Murakami to develop his first internationally acclaimed works: oversized fibreglass versions of manga figures, the wide-eyed, bionic-breasted Hiropon (1997) and My Lonesome Cowboy (1998), a blond-haired boy spinning a rigid lasso of semen from his erect penis; the first provocative examples of his signature brand of Japanese art.

Murakami was searching for a more broad-based cultural appraisal, however, and returned to a more congenial figure he had devised shortly before leaving Japan: a large-headed creature with round ears, ‘o’-shaped mouth and diminutive body he christened ‘Mr DOB’, who was to form one of the cast of characters that have populated Murakami’s oeuvre throughout the subsequent fifteen years. Together with the white-suited ‘Kaikai’, the three-eyed ‘Kiki’, and the horn-crowned Mr Pointy, Mr DOB provided the basis for an ever-metamorphosing fantasy world, accompanied by wreaths of smiley-faced flowers, comical mushrooms and graphically rendered daisy-eyed skulls. Adapting the meticulous painting techniques learned from his traditional education, Murakami set about creating a hybrid contemporary art form that was derived from, but also continued to compound and explore, aspects of historical and contemporary Japanese culture, not only for native audiences, but also as a valuable export capable of articulating the sensibility of post-war Japanese culture to non-Japanese audiences.

Murakami coined the term Superflat to describe the style of his and his Japanese contemporaries’ work, characterized by its flat appearance, lack of modeling or foreshortening and its suggestion of multiple viewing perspectives that directly contradicted the single-point perspective historically characteristic of Western painting. The perfectly smooth surfaces of Murakami’s paintings, with no visible brushstrokes, coupled with their wide range of bright but unmodulated colours, created a new and distinct visuality that became quickly the signature on his canvases, but the familiar LV logo appeared on his canvases, in a range of candy colours. As his output has expanded to include five-metre-high sculptures of a genial, round-headed Buddha glittering with platinum leaf, and paintings of the wild-eyed, bad-tempered Buddhist monk Daruma, Murakami has extended to include five-metre-high sculptures of a genial, round-headed Buddha glittering with platinum leaf, and paintings of the wild-eyed, bad-tempered Buddhist monk Daruma, Murakami has continued to span a cultural gap between traditional and contemporary Japanese cultures. Meanwhile, the giant helium balloons of Kaikai and Kiki that will grace this year’s Chateau de Versailles, prove that his aim to introduce a unique brand of Japanese art to the rest of the world is nothing if not an outstanding success.

This provocative merging of fine art and commerce went a step further with Murakami’s 2003 high-profile collaboration with luxury goods manufacturer Louis Vuitton. Not only did the artist design a range of highly covetable handbags and accessories for Vuitton adorned with his signature ‘jellyfish eyes’ and smiling cherry blossoms, but the familiar LV logo appeared on his canvases, in a range of candy colours. As his output has expanded to include five-metre-high sculptures of a genital, round-headed Buddha glittering with platinum leaf, and paintings of the wild-eyed, bad-tempered Buddhist monk Daruma, Murakami has continued to span a cultural gap between traditional and contemporary Japanese cultures. Meanwhile, the giant helium balloons of Kaikai and Kiki that will grace this year’s Chateau de Versailles, prove that his aim to introduce a unique brand of Japanese art to the rest of the world is nothing if not an outstanding success.

The road to illumination stretches too far ahead. The husk of humanity, too cruel.