



TAKASHI MURAKAMI



Funky Flower
2008, acrylic and platinum leaf on canvas mounted on board, 400 mm diameter, 1 of 50 pic set

Front page: *The Emperor's New Clothes*
2005, fibreglass, resin, oil paint, lacquer, acrylic plates, fabric, iron, wood, 1890 x 1090 x 1020 mm

Takashi Murakami's works may be full of grinning cartoon figures in gaudy psychedelic colors, fields of wide-smiling daisy-like flowers, many-eyed mushrooms and giant, 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 led 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



*The road to illumination stretches too far ahead.
How can I fend off the crashing waves of earthly desires?
I am therein a mournful beast.
The husk of humanity, too cruel.*
2008, acrylic and platinum leaf on canvas
2430 x 2820 x 50 mm

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 vocabulary that became quickly recognizable as his own. Handmade sketches were enlarged, scanned and reworked with computer graphics software, where scale, form and colouration could be endlessly modulated before being carefully painted on separate panels to produce the blank perfectionism that, while clearly part of the Murakami 'brand', were paradoxically the result of production-line style fabrication. "The art I believed in," said Murakami, "was an art that makes your mind go blank, that leaves you gaping, that makes you ask questions because there is nothing you know you can compare it to."



And then, and then and then and then and then / Super Blue DOB
2006, acrylic on canvas mounted on board, 1000 x 1000 x 50 mm



DOB in the Strange Forest (Red DOB)
1999, FRP, resin, fibreglass, acrylic and iron, 1520 x 3040 mm (12 elements)
Photo by Christie's Images, Ltd.

Of course such a laboured production required assistance, and already in 1995 Murakami had established what he called the Hiropon Factory (later re-christened Kaikai Kiki), a large studio where numerous assistants were engaged in the production and promotion of his artwork. This came to comprise studios in both Tokyo and New York employing scores of people, mostly young artists themselves (some of whose own work Murakami supported and marketed through the biannual Geisai art fair he founded). Not only works of art, but also reams of merchandising – T-shirts, figurines, mouse pads, footballs, all branded with Murakami imagery – emerged from Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., to extend Murakami's outreach far beyond traditional 'pop art' territory and towards the large-scale marketing of 'low-range' broadly accessible objects, as vital a part of his production as the 'high-end' six-figure-fetching unique works of art.

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 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 Macy's Thanksgiving Parade in Manhattan, and the spectacular exhibition of his work in the 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.

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Kansei
2007, acrylic and platinum leaf over canvas mounted on board, 1500 mm diameter x 50mm

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Text by Kirsty Bell