

interview

takashi murakami

by jérôme sans

村上隆

ジェローム・サンス

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TAKASHI MURAKAMI,
EMBODIMENT OF "UM," 2014.
FIBER-REINFORCED PLASTIC,
STAINLESS STEEL, ZELKOVA
WOOD, AND ACRYLIC



PORTRAIT BY CLAIRE DORN, COURTESY OF PERROTIN

The renowned Japanese artist Takashi Murakami introduced his *Superflat* manifesto in 2000 in the catalogue for a group exhibition of the same name, which he curated at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. His art theory suggests a legacy of flat, two-dimensional imagery in Japanese art history, reflected in manga and anime. Unlike the Western focus on depth, this art movement emphasizes flat surfaces and planes of color. Murakami also used *Superflat* to comment on postwar Japanese society, arguing that distinctions between social classes and popular tastes had “flattened,” creating a culture with little separation between “high” and “low,” between art and consumerism. Here, he talks with the French art critic and curator Jérôme Sans about the evolution of art and society from his Japanese perspective.

JÉRÔME SANS — You’re seen as an icon of Japanese contemporary art — the “Japanese Andy Warhol.” Do you feel comfortable with this comparison?

TAKASHI MURAKAMI — I believe that American and British Pop Art emerged as concepts and works that “popped up” with the prosperity of countries that won World War II, thriving economically in the postwar period, as their backdrop. That’s why I’m not particularly fond of the term “Japanese Pop.” In the late 1980s, Japan experienced the benefits of the bubble economy, but that prosperity was by no means something we Japanese earned through our own efforts. It was more a prosperity as ephemeral as a mirage and that arose in a fleeting moment by sheer chance, and it never truly “popped up” — rather, it completely collapsed afterward. It was in this context that I coined the term “Superflat,” so when people call me “the Japanese Warhol,” I must say, “No, no, no.” Warhol emerged in a country that had won the war, while I was born and raised in a country that was defeated. Our starting points are fundamentally different, and that’s something I want to clarify first.

JÉRÔME SANS — Why did you evolve from an obsessive manga iconography to monsters?

TAKASHI MURAKAMI — To begin with, I was a student in the *Nihonga* (a Japanese style of painting) department at Tokyo University of the Arts, where I studied historical paintings. In my third year of university, our class went to Kyoto to study classical art. Over the course of about two weeks, I was shown a vast number of paintings from the Edo and earlier periods, and got imprinted with the idea that I was to learn the history of Japanese painting. Now that I’m older, I can say that what was almost physically ingrained in me back then has started to overflow from within.

JÉRÔME SANS — Are these monsters driven by a form of ancient mythology, or are they a metaphor for today’s world?

TAKASHI MURAKAMI — Japan’s climate is temperate and humid, with frequent rainfall and abundant sunshine. As a result, grass grows rapidly, and insects, small animals, and even larger creatures flourish, thriving on the blessings of nature. This means that the density of life here is remarkably high. However, this environment is also marked by frequent earthquakes, powerful typhoons, and tsunamis. Even ecosystems that have thrived are often wiped out in an instant by these harsh natural forces. Yet, the power of nature is so strong that, even after being completely leveled, life quickly begins to regenerate. Because of this, rather than praying to some religious gods, nature itself becomes the object of prayer here. The four or five major natural disasters that occur every year evoke an inevitable sense of fear. Both in the past and present, Japanese people have developed a deep reverence for the power of nature. This enduring relationship with fear and awe forms a very real part of the Japanese experience, and I believe this serves as the foundation for many themes in my work.

JÉRÔME SANS — Who are these monsters in your work?

TAKASHI MURAKAMI — Since ancient times, Japan has likened various calamities, such as natural disasters and epidemics, to *mononoke* or *yōkai* — supernatural

entities — and passed down these tales with a sense of fear and reverence. Inspired by the *mononoke* depicted by Japan’s great painters throughout history, I have tried to portray them in my own way.

JÉRÔME SANS — Have you always created monsters in your head over the years?

TAKASHI MURAKAMI — I didn’t create Mr. DOB and other characters because I wanted to create such characters. As I studied contemporary art, particularly conceptual art, I began contemplating how to express Japan’s postwar society and the distortions within it. When I explored those ideas, what emerged happened to be creatures with facial features. In that sense, I believe I have been creating *mononoke*-like entities ever since I debuted as an artist.

JÉRÔME SANS — Do you sometimes verge on the monstrous yourself?

TAKASHI MURAKAMI — When I was 36, I developed gout. My right leg swelled to more than twice its normal size, to the point where I had to cut my jeans vertically just to wear them — it was a shocking experience. That was the moment I truly felt the reality of my own mortality for the first time, and it was then that I conceived the idea for *Tan Tan Bo Puk-ing*. I depicted a character with a body that could no longer be controlled; as it consumed more and more, eating and drinking excessively, it swelled until it finally vomited everything out. It was as though I had become a *mononoke* myself, unable to control my body and falling ill.

JÉRÔME SANS — Do you see yourself as a part of the monsters within the characters you have created and who form a kind of large family today?

TAKASHI MURAKAMI — I created all of these works through various inspirations that I encountered. So, in a way, they are extensions of myself — or rather, I consider my characters, paintings, and sculptures to be like my own family.

JÉRÔME SANS — You created the Superflat movement, which at the time was seen as a transgression of contemporary art, introducing

TAKASHI MURAKAMI, *RAKUCHŌ-RAKUGAI-ZU BYŌBU: IWASA MATABEI RIP* (DETAIL), 2023-2024, ACRYLIC AND GOLD LEAF ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON WOOD PANEL, IN TWO PARTS, 9 FEET 10 1/8 INCHES X 42 FEET 10 7/8 INCHES, COURTESY OF GAGOSIAN, PHOTO JOSHUA WHITE

imagery from pop culture and criticizing consumerist society. Does Superflat still have the same resonance today?

When social media began permeating society, I was astonished to see society becoming superflat, the way I had envisioned with the term “Superflat.”

However, once the pandemic started and people’s activities became restricted for over four years, social media began to take on a life of its own. It was no longer flat, and human emotions started spilling directly into the online world, writhing and pulsating as though they were living organisms. I imagine that those who founded platforms like Google were driven by a desire to democratize information globally. Yet now,



far from being democratic, these spaces are overflowing with curses and toxic discourse. In that sense, I believe it has lost its flatness and transformed into a truly “super” space.

JÉRÔME SANS — Do you still believe in the power of transgression in subculture and Japanese pop culture? TAKASHI MURAKAMI — Japan is unique geographically in that it is surrounded by the sea and prone to frequent natural disasters — this has made the country extraordinarily resilient. After devastating experiences of disasters, man-made or natural, the Japanese have a tendency to almost completely forget about them and move on. Every time we are beset by an earthquake or tsunami, we have to be able to forget it in order to live our lives the next day. I believe this mindset is a form of coexistence with natural disasters.

JÉRÔME SANS — What do you still like about Japan as an original culture? TAKASHI MURAKAMI — I like how we tend to forget all bad things.

JÉRÔME SANS — Tokyo is known for being ahead of its time in the way it operates. How do you see Tokyo today? TAKASHI MURAKAMI — Online media talks almost daily about how Japan is struggling economically, but when you look at the construction boom happening in Tokyo, it’s hard to wrap your head around how that can be the case. Perhaps money is being concentrated solely in Tokyo, while the rest of Japan is becoming increasingly impoverished — maybe Tokyo is sucking up all the resources.

JÉRÔME SANS — How do you see the young generation today? Do you feel a connection to them? TAKASHI MURAKAMI — During the pandemic, social media took on an explosive new life, and I believe today’s young people are living alongside this monster. They aren’t yet entirely accustomed to this new creature and are being constantly overwhelmed by it. Or put it this way: it seems as though they were born and raised inside the belly of this monster, and they don’t know what the world

outside looks like. I hope that, sooner rather than later, the monster’s belly will split open and release its decaying contents into the world, bringing about some kind of awakening for them.

JÉRÔME SANS — You created your own gallery, Kaikai Kiki Gallery, where you support the work of young artists, and have your own activity as a curator. How do you see your role as a curator and supporter of younger artists? TAKASHI MURAKAMI — I think that when Japanese people create something, we don’t have the same strong desire to excessively pursue originality as people do in the West. In the field of art as well, the concept of *honkadori* — drawing inspiration from existing works — is considered very important in Japan. Our company’s name, Kaikai Kiki, comes from a phrase that praised the extraordinary genius of Kanō Eitoku, the second-generation leader of the Kanō school, a group that thrived for 300 years producing paintings during the Edo period.

The term *kaikai kiki* means “wonderful” or “amazing,” and with that as my company’s name, I aspire to digest the postwar Japanese culture of

manga, anime, and games, and to share these ideas with my team in order to continue evolving over the next 300 years.

So, although I used to dislike the apprenticeship system when I was younger, I now aim to follow such a model.

JÉRÔME SANS — In your more recent large-scale works, one can sense something almost mystic, religious. Does your work feel more spiritual now than before? TAKASHI MURAKAMI — I am now 62 years old, and I debuted at the age of 29. For 33 years, I have been able to keep running as an artist. I can only think of this as incredible luck. Especially when, during the pandemic, my company almost went under but we managed to survive, I felt as though I had been given something by a higher being. Since then, I have found myself paying more attention to the events happening around me. I have come to place great importance on the mood of the present moment, the time I am living in right now, rather than on what I merely want to do. To listen closely to the entirety of the space I currently inhabit. In a way, it might be considered a form of spirituality.

JÉRÔME SANS — Regularly, you post live videos where you talk about your life and document your everyday events, whether they are happy or not. Do you consider that your attitude, media presence, and life are fully part of your work?

TAKASHI MURAKAMI — The majority of my artwork is sold outside of Japan. For each work, I must make an effort to explain in detail why it was created. Language, however, remains a significant barrier for me. To overcome this obstacle, I communicate through activities on social media. Recently, in particular, I created a YouTube channel where I interview people who have subtle but unique stories buried in everyday life that I happen to come across, and I ask them about various aspects of their lives. It’s a project I’m very fond of.

JÉRÔME SANS — As an artist, are you happy or depressed about the evolution of the planet? TAKASHI MURAKAMI — From a broad perspective, the universe was born somewhere and will eventually die somewhere. According to astrophysicists, the universe will ultimately dissolve into ether. I don’t fully understand what that means, but it’s clear it won’t be the situation we’re in right now. In that sense, constant change is the natural state of things. While I fully understand the feelings of those advocating for environmental issues, I also believe that human thought itself is part of nature, and that if humanity’s actions result in changes to the Earth’s natural environment, then that, too, in my view, is a natural phenomenon. To me, this is neither positive nor negative — it is simply the reality.

END

TAKASHI MURAKAMI, *OCTOPUS PARENT AND CHILDREN*, 2023-2024, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON WOOD PANEL, 24 5/8 X 19 3/8 INCHES, COURTESY OF PERROTIN

