

Hybridity en Masse: Takashi Murakami at the Vancouver Art Gallery

Review of *The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg* at the Vancouver Art Gallery

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Installation view of Takashi Murakami: *The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg*, exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, February 3 to May 6, 2018, with *Chakras Open and I Drown Under the Waterfall of Life*, 2017, in the rotunda, © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved, Photo: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery

The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg, the title of Takashi Murakami's retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG), borrows from an ancient Japanese fable that "refers to a situation in which one survives for the time being by feeding on or sacrificing oneself. The octopus eats its own leg to survive, but does so knowing the tentacle will regenerate."¹ This story is included in the introductory text to the exhibition, layered on a brilliant gold wall. Murakami doesn't need much introduction, as his work would likely be familiar to most visitors. The Japanese artist is known to mass audiences through his association with high-profile celebrities such as Kanye West, serving as the rapper's art director for his best-selling album *Graduation* (2007). Murakami is also recognizable from his collaborations with luxury retailers such as Louis Vuitton and "hypebeast" fashion designers like Virgil Abloh. This drive to sell and circulate Murakami's imagery through the various mediums and avenues of mass culture is immediately apparent as soon as one enters the VAG's Murakami-themed gift store, where you can pay \$165 for a silkscreen printed t-shirt of the titular work of the show. Other available knick-knacks include overpriced plushies, postcards, pins, and stickers with signature icons from Murakami's universe, such as animated, smiling flowers and the Mickey Mouse type characters of Mr. DOB or KaiKai & Kiki. All of Murakami's merchandise is manufactured and distributed by his art production and management company, KaiKai Kiki Co., Ltd., a trademark that reappears not only on the goods in the gift shop but also throughout the exhibition.²

The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg is organized sequentially. The viewer can choose to go left, proceeding backwards throughout Murakami's career, or go right and follow the chronological order. The fifty-five-piece show is a grand undertaking for the VAG, one of many in a string of ambitious shows (such as spring 2016's *MashUp: The Birth of Modern Culture*) which, aside from boosting the VAG's stature, helped buttress its long-term efforts to fundraise the gallery's proposed new site at Larwill Park.³ Once inside the neoclassical space of the gallery, we suddenly enter a spectacular reality of oversaturated colours, patterns, and animated creatures in forms of all-encompassing installations, paintings, sculptural figures, and prints. The exhibition's introductory wall text offers an explanation for its choice of title by referring to the repetitive and commodified nature of Murakami's oeuvre. "Murakami is the octopus: he consumes history, culture and even his own oeuvre and fame to persevere as an artist."⁴ This nonsensical justification somehow fits well with the cartoonishly hybridized works that follow. As the text notes, anime and manga heavily influence Murakami's style, as do ancient Japanese painting practices, Buddhism, and European art history. The majority of his practice reflects the contrasting themes of "Eastern" and "Western" pop and visual culture; supposed cultural dualities that Murakami blends into one homogenous and decontextualized unity. His insistence on flatness led him to coin the movement "superflat," a theory of art that combined the flat aesthetics of *nihonga* (the genre of traditional Japanese-style painting Murakami earned his



Installation view of Takashi Murakami: *The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg*, exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, February 3 to May 6, 2018, with *Tan Tan Bo Puking*—a.k.a. *Gero Tan*, 2002 (left), *DOB in The Strange Forest (Blue DOB)*, 1999 (centre), and works from *Tan Tan Bo* series, 2018 (right), © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved, Photo: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery

PhD in) and Japanese *otaku* culture. Superflat is exemplified by semi-abstract works such as *Tan Tan Bo Puking*—aka *Gero Tan* (2002) and the continual reuse of animated characters such as Mr. DOB in the series *DOB Genesis: Reboot* (1993–2017). Most of the superflat works are monumental compositions that swallow up entire rooms in the gallery. Elements from the superflat works, such as anime mushrooms, sometimes appear in glossy polychromatic sculptures. Visually stunning with their strangely hybridized and quasi-monstrous forms, the superflat wall pieces are set up to serve as ideal background imagery for viewers who

are encouraged by the gallery to "share their experience" of the show on Instagram by using the #VAGxMURAKAMI hashtag. An entire stretch of wall space is covered with layered masses of fluorescent smiling daisies. This central wall, positioned next to Murakami's famous renderings of Kanye West's *Graduation* bear, is the visual hotspot of the exhibition, where I observed extensive personal photo shoots by gallery goers on both occasions I visited the show. To highlight the social-media aspect of the exhibition, a nearby niche promotes posts from Murakami's Instagram and photos of the artist with celebrity collaborators. Reproduction is

the central philosophy of the exhibition, and this niche reminds us of our own opportunity to reproduce and rehash Murakami's imagery.

As a cosmopolitan, creative multi-millionaire, Murakami typifies the position of the artist within a bureaucratic, market-driven art world indebted to the processes of transnational capital. Murakami is not only an artist, but also a fashion designer, celebrity, businessman, and most importantly, a top-selling brand, as the placards beside each artwork reading "©Takashi Murakami Ltd." remind us. Throughout the exhibition, Murakami cites his use

of Japanese history for inspiration as a method of cultural critique that provokes a questioning of Western supremacy in the realm of mass culture. The VAG attempts to frame his commercial interests subversively, claiming that Murakami's collaborations outside the art world function as interventions into the "expectations of an elitist art system."⁵ But for an artist whose legacy is built on the act of appropriating, and thus transforming, "low" and cheap art forms into his copyrighted, profitable, and highly priced brand, it is hard to imagine that any critical motivations other than the mere drive of business fuel his commercialist worldview. Mass



culture was once able to rely on its qualities of cheapness and accessibility to defer from being completely derided as vacant, kitschy consumerism, but Murakami succeeds at importing the esoteric implications of high art and luxury goods onto the emptiness of mass produced imagery.

Murakami's efficient approach to artistic production reflects his position as one of the quintessential artists of the twenty-first century. An administrative type with a PhD, who runs a factory of art workers to produce his pieces, reads Bill Gates for management tips and suffers from endless comparisons to Pop Art inductor Andy Warhol,⁶ Murakami fits right in with the technocratic elite who run the contemporary art world. Alongside figures like Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Larry Gagosian, Murakami functions as a key player in determining what forms of art production sell and thus maintain visibility within the global art industry. The ethos of this type of art production has taken on the framework of the international corporation, in which the artist assumes the role of the brand, around which an institution of assistants, workers, managers, art dealers, agents, and administrators form a central component of production, reproduction, and circulation. In retrospect, such modes of art production seem cynically fitting for Vancouver's municipal art gallery. The city, suffering from an epidemic of gentrification and a brutal lack of affordable housing, often justifies its cultural identity and high-ranking on livability indices through touristic and beautified cultural spaces that provoke influxes of capital and rampant urban development. Within retail- and service-oriented postindustrial metropolises such as Vancouver, there is definitely an elite market for art that focuses on translating mass cultural forms into expensive luxury commodities. The long-term sustainability of this niche demand for consumable luxury art is in question.

The key to Murakami's success lies in the constant, cyclical effacement of historically or politically reflexive gestures in his work and the sheer formal overabundance of production for production's sake. Characters and tropes reappear so often they become comforting and familiar, constituting a mythos that encourages viewers to immerse themselves in the Murakami-saturated world of the exhibition. The exhibition could be most definable by the unnatural atmosphere it produces in the VAG. The sublime nature of many of the rooms, often plastered with wall-to-wall imagery and installation, provokes a sense of excess that is

Takashi Murakami
Flowers, flowers, flowers, 2010
acrylic and platinum leaf on canvas mounted on aluminum frame
Collection of the Chang family, Taiwan
© 2010 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.



Takashi Murakami
DOB's March, 1995
 acrylic on canvas mounted on board
 Collection of Javier and Monica
 Mora, Miami
 © 1995 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai
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reassuring in its pleasantly delineated multi-figured compositions and forms. The problem lies in the residual feeling that Murakami doesn't really seem to be *doing* anything besides rehashing the same icons and characters from his self-styled fantasy world. It's not so much that Murakami has pioneered some kind of innovative, cross-cultural approach to understanding artmaking in our globalized milieu, but rather that he has learned to acutely read the forces of the global art market and align his practice to its processes. We already knew that the "low arts" of commercial and consumer culture could be successfully fused with the pretensions of the high art world; Warhol acutely demonstrated this problem decades ago during the heyday of the 1960s American Pop Art movement. What resonates throughout *The Octopus Eats Its Own*

Leg are these same Warholian idioms, emptied of their alienating criticality and infused with the placating, universalist allure of multicultural consumerism.

The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg, Vancouver Art Gallery, February 3–May 6, 2018

Dates attended: February 19 and 28, 2018

Notes

¹ Wall text for exhibition, *Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC. February 3–May 6, 2018.

² Ibid.

³ Vancouver Art Gallery, "Future." Accessed February 27, 2018. <http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/future.html>

⁴ Wall text, Vancouver Art Gallery.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jeff Howe, "The Two Faces of Takashi Murakami," *Wired*, March 1, 2011. Accessed February 27, 2018. <https://www.wired.com/2003/11/artist/>