

TAKASHI MURAKAMI FROM ART TO MERCHANDISE AND BACK AGAIN

Contemporary Art

By

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Introduction

Andy Warhol once famously wrote: “Business art is the step that comes after Art. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art...marking money is art, working is art and good business is the best art.”¹ Takashi Murakami holds Warhol to his word escalating what Pop Art started by challenging even more the division between art and commodity. Murakami had major exposition in Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles, London and Versailles. But his work extends beyond galleries and museums into the arenas of fashion, television, toys, merchandise... He teamed up with Marc Jacobs on designs for Louis Vuitton, designed a concept car for Nissan and collaborated with hip hop singer Kanye West’s last CD with creation of artwork, animation and merchandising for the album.² In a decade he was able to establish a world reputation as a new kind of pop artist inspired by the world of Japanese cartoon culture of *manga* and anime, chasing after high-profile collaborations, broader range of services and larger market share.

Murakami attracted attention because he is not an artist who is trying to preserve the appearance of standing just outside the consumer world. Rather than investigating the nagging and idiotic issue of the art world conflict of interest between commercial art and fine art, the goal of this paper is to analyze his approach to art and how he blurs the difference between a commodity and a piece of art. Now the question emerging from Murakami’s work is when a good stops to be merchandise and becomes a piece of art?

¹ Andy Warhol, “The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)” (New York: Harcourt, Inc.,1975): 92.

² Francesca Martin, “G2: Art Diary” (The Guardian, London, August 1, 2007): 27.

First I will introduce Takashi Murakami and the influences behind his theory of the *Superflat*. The second part of the paper will focus on Mr. DOB to illustrate how Murakami's inspiration translates in his work and how his theory leads to the notion of branding in art. Finally, in last section by using the example of his partnership with Louis Vuitton, I will discuss how the distinction between fine and commercial art does not entirely disappear, but it is frequently rendered pointless.

Superflat and resonance with Japanese modern culture

It will be hard to understand the *Superflat* theory without digging in the Japanese culture; it would be like trying to have a grip on the meaning of Pop Art by not including an explanation of the consumer culture in America. Takashi Murakami was born in Tokyo 1962. He was part of the generation that grew up during a period of massive economic growth. At that time, Japan embraced fully the capitalistic dogma and the culture was dominated by the importation of the Western pop culture especially from the United States.³ As a child he loved *manga* and animation, so naturally he enrolled in an art school but yet suspecting he did not have what it took to become an animator, he decided to study a more traditional form of art called the *nihonga* (a type of Japanese figurative painting). After

³ Jen Library Savannah College of Art and Design, "Murakami, Takashi", Savannah Jen Library, <http://0-www.oxfordartonline.com.library.scad.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T097680> (accessed March 14, 2011).

completing his doctorate in 1993, Takashi Murakami grew bored with the stagnant world of traditional Japanese art.⁴

Also Mr. Murakami turned his attention to the contemporary world to look for aspiration, finding it in the manifesto of westerner pop artists and the urban art style of the *Otaku* subculture and the *Kawaii*.⁵ Through his work he wanted to contextualize within Japan's crisis of national identity as merely a symptom or side-effect of mass consumerism. He dubs his style *Superflat* referring to the way he flattens tradition, modernity and other new media to indicate a mix of high and low art (the refine and the banal or vulgar).⁶ The flatness implies by the name is not much a formal stylistic concern, but a conceptual one. Under the appearance a cartoonish appearance he wants to address the national displacement of emotions such as anxiety, impotence or shame (finding its roots in World War II brutal defeat and the prolonged American occupation) toward popular culture. The *Otaku* and *Kawaii* reflect those feeling in opposite pole, the first through an immature fascination with power and violence, the second by the obsession with cute characters. Both have in common an infantilized sense of powerlessness and a vanishing sense of hierarchy between bad and good resulting to a sort of dumb down culture, a flatten culture.

The *Otaku* culture emerged in the early 1980's; it is a wide introvert group of obsessive fans and consumers of *manga*, video games, anime and collectors of all sort of

⁴ Carol Vogel. "The Warhol of Japan Pours Ritual Tea in a Zen Moment." (The New York Times, May 7, 2007).

⁵ Amada Cruz, Dana Friis-Hansen and Midori Matsui. *Takashi Murakami, the Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning*. (Abrams, NY, 1999): 16.

⁶ Micheal Darling. "Plumbing the Depths of Superflatness." *Art Journal*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (autumn, 2001): 76-89.

derived products. The grand majority of work created for those media revolves around a general the storyline of power struggle that can only be resolve through battle. During convention commemorating their passion, *Otakus* will dress up in the costumes of their favorite characters, acting out their roles and assuming their personalities. Infatuated to the erotic fantasy of the feminine image (often of Lolita or school girls like) created in those media, the otaku is pledge to celibate. The sexual image of women is fetish through toys and merchandising celebrating those characters.⁷ They exemplify the *Otaku* sexualization of *Kawaii* along Lolita-like lines of figurines and other derived goods.

Kawaii, literally translated in English by cuteness, is a pervasive marketing of an idea indicator of the childhood innocence. It is rendered in the Japanese society by cute emblems and mascots appearing on almost every product and form of media. Such characters are also use to guide the public everywhere from police station to hospital; they suggest cuteness as public policy.⁸ This national campaign for a warm soft friendly quality with immediate appeal can sometimes feel like an infantilized and anti-intellectual cloud has been cast over the country. The significance of the childish appearance is perhaps necessary to provide some optimism in the wake of the series of traumatic events plaguing Japan modern history.

The *Superflat* illustrates how mass-produced entertainment and consumerism as a supposedly source of happiness have led to the infantilization of a culture and contemporary aesthetics. Consumerism is founded on pleasure not happiness. A French moralist named

⁷ Jennifer Robertson "The Erotic Grotesque Nonsense of Superflat: Happiness as Pathology in Japan Today". (Michigan Quarterly Review, Vol.49, No.1, winter, 2010): 19.

⁸ Jen Library Savannah College of Art and Design, "BBC, Japanorama, season02 Episode06, Kawaii cute," Savannah Jen Library, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxd6GO2Q!Qo> (accessed March 17, 2011).

Nicolas Chamfort said pleasure may come from illusion, but happiness can come only of reality. By basing his work on a popular culture founded on empty happiness, Murakami accentuated the lost of touch with reality for a fantasy world where apocalyptic or cute imagery and fetishistic commerce meet. The primary idea of the *Superflat* is not to create meaning behind the artwork but embody the idea of the lost of sense responsible of the flatness of a culture. By creating artwork with no apparent significance Murakami is cynically playing on the non-sense of society and reducing his work to art for the art's sake, to an object of pleasure.

Murakami's theory and the notion of branding in art

Like other Pop artist, Takashi Murakami embraced the marketplace; to do so he spins on Andy Warhol's idea to turn customer products to art. Murakami turns his own art to consumer products. His approach to art blurred the difference between merchandise and a piece of art with the goal to create a concept that was originally Japanese.⁹ Also, he is not the first person to transform comic or cartoon imagery to fine art but at difference of artist like Roy Lichtenstein he is not copying. Instead, he creates his own lovable characters with name like DOB, Oval, Kaikai and Kiki... by appropriating the index of the Japanese cartoon motif such as the characteristic big eyes. The core of his artwork revolves around a collection of

⁹ Amada Cruz, Dana Friis-Hansen and Midori Matsui. *Takashi Murakami, the Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning*. (Abrams, NY, 1999): 33-35.

characters with no particular meaning on their own besides resonating with an audience that consume similar popular images in *manga* and anime. They come in a variety of shapes and colors from psychedelic mushrooms, curvy girls or hopelessly happy emoticon like flowers, to strange little multiple-eyed animals. One recurrent character in his work is Mr. DOB. Although he resembles to a paranoid incarnation of Mickey Mouse with sharper teeth, Murakami claimed he was actually based on a monkey like figure from Hong Kong pointing out the frequent misunderstanding happening between cultures in a global age.¹⁰ Like in the media from where he was inspired, Mr. DOB as Murakami's other characters goes off in adventure, a journey in art. He is squeezed in the abstract boundary of the image, float shapeless in surrealistic landscape, surfs on waves reminding "the Great Wave off Kanagawa" wood print of Hokusai, or like in Jackson Pollock action painting, he is splattered across the canvas.

Even if the work is not suppose to really mean anything may be the grotesque smile and tortured form of the characters echo the trauma of the nuclear attack of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, under a cute and colorful appearance they evocate a war, mutation and death. At the first look the artworks seem childlike, friendly and colorful, but soon the pieces unveil a growing repulsive felling, the vibrant colors become over powering, the amicable childish features appear slightly off and turn to be a disguise to menacing shape. The result is a contradictory feeling of pull and abjection. By being monster like, Murakami gives an ironic

¹⁰ Paul Schimmel, Dick Hebdige, Scott Rothkopf, Paul Schimmel, and Mika Yoshitake. *Copyright Murakami*. (Museum of Contemporary Art, CA and Rizzoli International Publications inc, NY, 2007): 67.

critics of the *Kawaii* mascots and the dumb done feeling attach to it. His creations are a group of rogue creatures that do not seem to worry about the viewer best interest.

As a recurrent subject of the art the characters become the main actor of the artwork, therefore they can stand in their own fame without the artist. However, since they do not endorse or remind any existing product the only thing they actually promote is the artist, Murakami himself. By turning his own art to consumer products he embraces the culture he draws his inspiration from. The merchandise address the reality of the relation between art and the contemporary world through the over the top pop iconography world of glamour, glitz, fashion and consumerism culture. In a way, his mountain of merchandises (key ring, toys, sweets, badges, calendars...) is an effort to elevate the kitsch aspect of his work to art.

Murakami's venture with the *Superflat* principles started in 1996, the name of his studio (the Hiropon Factory) was chosen not only as reference to Andy Warhol but because it suited the commercial world.¹¹ There, Murakami acts as an art director supervising his assistants in all the aspect of the artistic output from painting, sculpting to the creation of goods and accessories celebrating his characters. Murakami creates the design, his helpers then follow the blue prints which cover every aspect of the production line. As any company with the a good business plan his factory grew to a multinational corporation named Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., with hundreds of employees stationed between branchy in Tokyo and New York.¹² This is the artist as global brand in the age of information.

¹¹ Paul Schimmel, Dick Hebdige, Scott Rothkopf, Paul Schimmel, and Mika Yoshitake. *Copyright Murakami*. (Museum of Contemporary Art, CA and Rizzoli International Publications inc, NY, 2007): 146

¹² Ibid 148

Murakami push the envelope of art as brand when he created a series of *Superflat* monogram, creature and two short animations for the fashion house Louis Vuitton. The elements he fashioned for monogram's design and the other works shares a vocabulary indistinguishable from Murakami's other creation. Even if his work appears on other brand it does not automatically endorse it, it is just another format or adventure for Murakami's characters. In this case, the Murakami's "brand" sales his artistic insight and vision to respond to a demand. By integrating sense of fashion to art, it can be co-opt as nothing more than a good design.

During the "Copyright Murakami" show at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (October 2007 to February 2008), Murakami chose to add a fully functioning Louis Vuitton outlet in the middle the exhibition.¹³ Louis Vuitton bags bearing his monogram aside with other of his products were sold there. The MOCA's exhibit is only on example during the "Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture" show in New York, Murakami displayed collections line miniatures inspired from his work next to fine art work and other artifacts from the Japanese Popular culture.¹⁴ The choice of the artist is comparable to Marcel Duchamp infamous Urinal called "Fountain" once exposed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁵ The piece raised number of questions about visual art; but the most relevant for the argument is: could something that was created industrially, become

¹³ Peter Schjeldahl Peter, "Buying It; A Takashi Murakami retrospective". (The New Yorker, Vol.84, No.9, April 14, 2008). 68

¹⁴ Roberta Smith, "From a Mushroom Cloud, a Burst of Art Reflecting Japan's Psyche". (The New York Times, April 8, 2005)

¹⁵ Paul B Franklin "Object Choice: Marcel Duchamp's Fountain and the Art of Queer Art History". (Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2000): 25

"art" by being put on a pedestal and included in a museum? If it could, then presumably anything could. The museum created the symbolic pedestal for Murakami's merchandises, elevating them to the status of art.

Conclusion

Murakami looms the idea of art and trade which underline a conflict of idealism to preserves a body of work integrity as a serious work of art. However, by taking out all tangible meaning to his art (or merchandise), they are left with no useful function turning them to object of desire or fetish with no concrete value on their own. This leads into Jean Baudrillard's idea of absolute merchandise. If art is reduce to the status of mere object whose value is zero, it will take to the extremes the magical glamour of exchange value.¹⁶ Murakami created a parody of the market with his work and trying to differentiate merchandising from fine art is futile because they are both part of his concept and they are indifferent of the equivalences. The only thing Murakami's art worth is how much a person (collector) desire to own it and how much this person his willing or capable to pay for it. With this principal the artist takes almost the role of a fashion designer. The designer is an important factor, as is the individual consumer who chooses and buys; to certain extend Murakami's work objectifying itself as art after it is purchased.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard "Absolute Merchandise. Andy Warhol: Paintings 1960-1986." (Martin Shawander, Lucerne: Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1995). 19

In the modern world the consumption of art is not reduce to a monopole of an enormously rich class or aristocrats buying and commissioning big art with big money. The middle class however cannot afford some of the more pricey and unique works, those are still reserved and a sign of the social elite. Art fundamentally emerges in the friction of class. For that reason, Murakami merchandise can be interpret as an effort to expose art to a general audience, entering an open competition for their approval and/or purchase.

A lot of critics give a bad reception to Murakami's work, describing it as mediocre at best or saying that his success is artificial and the hype around him is fabricated by prominent galleries curators. It is hard to say what make art or what doesn't. If the answer is based on modern theories about art, then Murakami's merchandises can only be considered art. I could have proved it simply by using the definition of conceptual art. In this theory the end result itself does not matter, it could be artworks, merchandises or a urinals if they are part of the concept what is making them art is the idea behind. Therefore all expertise is simply good marketing passing itself off as knowledge, maybe it is just what the *Superflat* is about. In a way Murakami approach is not far from what Charles Baudelaire once thought about what should be the relation between art and capitalism.¹⁷ Murakami may save art from falling into the banal of capitalism because by over identifying his work with consumerism, the essence of his art is capable to detach itself from it and stand on its own.

¹⁷ Jean Baudillard "*Absolute Merchandise*. Andy Warhol: Paintings 1960-1986." (Martin Shawander, Lucerne: Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1995). 18

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Kaikai kiki: bizzard but charming, Baudelaire once said the beauty is always strange. Nicolas Chamfort (a French moralist) said the pleasure can be supported by the illusion but happiness can only be found in reality.