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Outside view of "Murakami-Ego," 2012, at Al Riwaq Exhibition Hall, Doha Qatar; photo by Gion



Welcome to Murakami – Ego, 2012, with Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, 2012, at Al Riwaq Exhibition Hall, Doha Qatar

Takashi Murakami HAPPY BIRTHDAY BUDDHA

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Today, February 15th, is the birthday of Lord Buddha, or Sakyamuni as the Japanese know him. It seems an auspicious moment, then, to review the new **Takashi Murakami** retrospective at Al Riwaq, a 5,000-square-meter exhibition space in Doha, Qatar.

Murakami himself greets visitors to this show of 70 works, 15 of them new. That is to say, a giant inflatable Murakami self-portrait, posing as Daibutsu, sits at the entryway with his legs crossed, garbed in custom-made replicas of his actual clothes and glasses, his head tilted forward and one hand outstretched, both humble and welcoming.

The inflatable is a brilliant introduction to the show, funny and irreverent, qualities that can often be found in Murakami's oeuvre. On a more serious note, the self-portrait was modeled after the giant statues of Buddha found throughout Japan, and opens a discourse on humility that becomes the overarching theme of this show, which is subtitled "Ego."

This is no small feat for an artist who has arrived at stratospheric heights of financial and institutional success, along with his confreres **Damien Hirst** and **Jeff Koons**. All have achieved such prominence that they have taken on the very issue of the art market in their own work. For instance, Murakami notoriously set up his own **controversial Louis Vuitton boutique** at the Los Angeles Museum of



Welcome to Murakami – Ego (detail), 2012; photo by Chika Okazumi



Installation View of "Murakami – Ego," 2012, with sculptures of Kaikai and Kiki, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar



Installation View of "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha,

Contemporary Art during his 2007 retrospective.

And courting controversy has been a constant for him, most recently during the 2010 Murakami exhibition staged outside Paris at Chateau de Versailles. The Qatar Museum Authority sponsored the show, which included works owned by Qatari collectors. After the 2011 earthquake, Qatar donated \$100 million to Japan for disaster relief. "Murakami-Ego" includes some of the work shown at Versailles, but this exhibition is a much grander statement. Murakami's big-breasted Hiropon and her various attendants are not on view, as a courtesy to the beliefs of the devout Qatari populace, but the artist was given the opportunity to create what the show's curator, **Massimiliano Gioni**, calls "Murakami city."

The astute and seemingly ubiquitous Gioni, recently tapped to helm the next Venice Biennale, was an ideal facilitator. Murakami was galvanized by the earthquake, the resulting tsunami and the potential nuclear disaster at Fukushima. It shifted his thinking away from fame and fortune and toward faith. This exhibition finds the artist re-evaluating Buddhism and Japanese esthetics. He trained for a decade in Nihonga and Japanese art history before embracing the anime and manga of pop culture that endeared him to a wide audience in the 1990s.

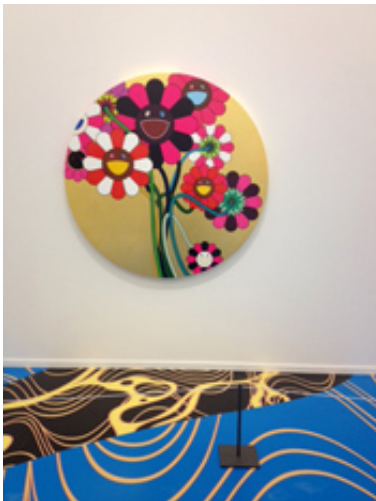
Through the flower-printed curtain at the gallery entrance are welcome examples of Murakami's earlier works. Kaikai and Kiki, the pink deities of good and evil, are surrounded by three expansive pink flower paintings that amplify both silliness and seriousness. The Mickey Mouse-like DOB paintings of 1996 are on display, and the startling blue painting of Tan Tan Bo of 2002, a massive extraterrestrial monster opening its mouth to vomit, scream or devour, shares a gallery with candy-colored mushroom sculptures covered in jellyfish eyes, reminders of the bomb and its relationship to post-1945 Japanese culture.

The perennial theme of mortality continues in Murakami's paintings of more recent years, including skulls shaped like mushroom clouds called *Bokan* and tondos of happy face flowers on silver or gold leaf backgrounds. The flowers combine references to **Andy Warhol** with the kakemono, or

Qatar



Installation View of "Murakami – Ego," 2012, with a painting of Tan Tan Bo on the wall, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar; photo by Chika Okazumi



Takashi Murakami, a tondo on gold leaf background in "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar



Takashi Murakami, *Arhat*, installation view, in "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha,

chrysanthemums, of Edo-period screens, a motif underscored by blue and gold swirls painted on the floor.

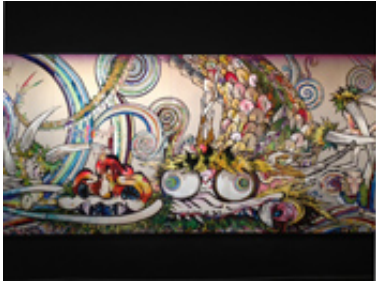
This hallway of flowers leads to a cavernous darkened warehouse, a one-ring circus that Gioni had in mind with his joking reference to "Murakami city." It is lined with a tour de force painting 100 meters long called *Arhat* that was only completed shortly before the opening of the show.

Arhat refers to a tenet of Buddhism that has the goal of defeating greed, anger and delusion in order to achieve transcendence from earthly limitations. The word came to mean the monks selected by Buddha to help propagate his teachings. In the 11th century, 500 arhats were portrayed together in Japanese painting and sometimes in sculpture. Given the renunciative position of Murakami in this show, it is worth noting that, in some accounts, the 500 arhats are merchants who have renounced their riches after accepting the teachings of Buddha. Though I did not count them, 500 monks large and small appear to be standing, sitting, meditating, praying, chanting or levitating across the expanse of Murakami's painting.

This epic endeavor, the most profoundly moving and esthetically challenging of the artist's career, progresses in four 25-foot-long panels dedicated respectively to wind, fire, mountain and forest. Binzuru, the best known of the arhats, can be recognized by his long bushy eyebrows. He is associated with healing, the ability most required in post-earthquake Japan. In the first panel, wind whips waves into spirals of tumultuous sea that transmogrify as a sea monster and a white whale, while a monk with unkempt eyebrows, long nails and bulging eyes looks on in cosmic dismay.

Though these monks appear cartoonish, in keeping with Murakami's background in anime, they recall forcefully the elaborately detailed and exaggeratedly grotesque renderings of monks in traditional Japanese painting. Monks with knobby knees, googly eyes, concave chests and snaggly teeth carry staffs, fans, bells and other symbols of their devotion and the Buddhist law. A series of small monks about six inches tall runs as a frieze of figurative connective tissue in scene after scene

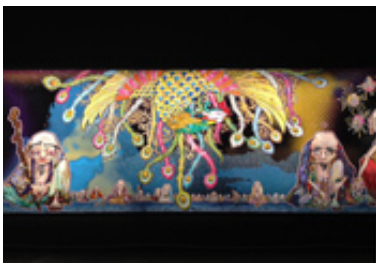
Qatar; photo by Gion



Takashi Murakami, the "Wind" panel in *Arhat* (detail), "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar



Takashi Murakami, the "Fire" panel in *Arhat* (detail), "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar



Takashi Murakami, the "Mountain" panel in *Arhat*, "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar

across the scroll of action as the flood in the first panel gives way to fire, a hellish red panel dominated by a blue rogue elephant.

The third panel features a phoenix of pink and aqua plumage against a deep blue ground covered in sparkling material, reflective of the cosmos, with one monk meditating beneath orbiting planets and conjuring prophets and deities such as Kannon, goddess of mercy. The fourth panel of frosty reflective white features monks gathered around a goat with a tree growing out of its back. It is Stasis, the calm and regenerative nature of the forest.

Birth, death, infinity, rebirth; Flood, fire, cosmos, earth. These grand themes of traditional Japanese painting over the centuries are the artist's highly personal response to his country's national crisis. Working with hundreds of assistants around the clock for months, Murakami directed this production like a feature film, a not unusual method for him but nonetheless an entirely intimate statement. With its layers and layers of precision silkscreening combined with free-hand painting, the work invites the viewer to become absorbed in admiration of a few square inches or square feet of any part of the work. In addition, the huge mural pulls together the warehouse environment and provides a poignant context for other works. Two elongated paintings of dragons in blue or red, and flowers on gold leaf, point to the fact that Murakami has been returning to his *nihonga* training in many ways for half a dozen years.

The center of this space is dominated by inflated balloons of Murakami characters like D.O.B. and anchored by an actual circus tent printed with jelly fish eyes. Inside is a changing program of his anime videos as well as a clip from a potential feature film, which is so annoying that I hope it never gets made. (The tent was inspired by the small circus regularly set up adjacent to the entrance to Art Basel, which the artist finds refreshing after the turmoil and tension of the art fair.) A towering silver sculpture of Oval Buddha and Tongari-kun, the pointy-headed deity surrounded by four guardians, are newly mounted on pedestals of ever-changing colored LED lights that add to the circus atmosphere.



Takashi Murakami, the "Forest" panel in *Arhat*, "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar



Takashi Murakami, the "Forest" panel in *Arhat* (detail), "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar



Takashi Murakami, the circus tent in "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar

The exit from the big top is as intentional as the floral-lined entrance. The floor of the hallway is covered with the artist's self-portrait in various states of emotion: sadness, anger, dismay, bliss. His humility is complete. The walls are hung with more self-portraits such as *Self Portrait of the Distressed Artist* (2009) painted on platinum leaf.

One of the last galleries features three Daruma paintings. Murakami included one of the first of the series in the last gallery of his 2007 retrospective at MOCA. At the time I thought they portended great things. In Japanese legend, Daruma is a monk who had his eyelids removed to prevent himself from falling asleep while attempting to meditate. Pain suffered for a higher goal is an exquisite allegory for any artist and it certainly means something to Murakami. When I exit the show, I come again before the inflated figure. I bow and say "arigato" before stepping out onto the corniche of Doha.

"Murakami-Ego," Feb. 9-June 24, 2012, at Al Riwaq Exhibition Hall, Doha Qatar.

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Installation view of "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar; photo by Guillaume Ziccarelli



Installation view of "Murakami – Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar



Takashi Murakami, a self-portrait in "Murakami - Ego," 2012, Al Riwaq, Doha, Qatar