Economies of Scale

PAMELA M. LEE ON TAKASHI MURAKAMI'S TECHNICS

Opposite page: Takashi Murakami, Cosmic Flower, 2006, acrylic on canvas mounted on board, 59 x 59". All works by Takashi Murakami © 1998–2007 Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki. All rights reserved. This page: Takashi Murakami, Flowerball Brown, 2007, acrylic and platinum leaf on canvas mounted on board, 59 x 59".

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WHERE QUESTIONS OF MEDIUM and making are concerned, most art criticism seems patently uninterested in (if not fundamentally incapable of) dealing with issues of production. Why obsess over the stuff of MFA curricula and fabrication trade manuals, goes the rationale, when more urgent issues are at stake? Given the choice between a meditation on aesthetics and politics, say, or on the latest shoptalk about rapid-prototyping technology, the decision seems made in advance.

Perhaps it’s a decision worth reconsidering. We should hardly need convincing that questions of production are continuous with matters of labor; and where labor is at issue, politics at once precede it and trail in its wake. So maybe it is high time for us to revisit that old Marxian saw “the means of production,” precisely because such concerns can illuminate deeper readings of the art-and-politics question. This recollection is especially pressing when it comes to a topic that seems to have dropped precipitously off the art-world radar: globalization. Indeed, if we are to treat current accounts of aesthetics and politics seriously—politics being, as Jacques Rancière critically reminds us, a function of “the distribution of the sensible”—we are obliged to confront production as always politically and ideologically freighted, in spite of the current stress on consumption within the fields of visual and cultural studies. “Artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making,” Rancière writes. Any art criticism that takes up this argument demands rigorous consideration of what constitutes these ways of “doing and making” and the ideologies that sponsor and naturalize these processes by turns.

My specific task here is to treat what we might call the “technics of globalization,” since such a discussion may offer a means by which to understand art otherwise considered largely in terms of iconography and representation. No doubt the past decade has seen its share of provocative accounts of art and the global question. What is curious is how glancingly production is acknowledged, as if the processes entailed in the manufacture and distribution of works of art were somehow irrelevant to the world-making processes we assign to globalization. To be fair, it’s easy to see why an interest in representation (and indeed, consumption) might trump concerns over production for many critics. When we look at a monumental C-print of a market floor by Andreas Gursky, to take one example, we are undoubtedly less intrigued by the niceties of lossy protocols than by the antlike colonies of traders hustling in the service of global capital. But however seduced we might be by the content, scale, detail, and crystalline finish of such images, in point of fact, some attention to data-compression technology might shed light on the politics of information and on the market much of Gursky’s work ostensibly engages.

But while Germany’s large-format photographers are the documentarians nonpareil of world spectacle, when it comes to actually deploying the technics of globalization within the parameters of an artistic practice, no one surpasses Takashi Murakami. Thus his production is the subject of what follows. Murakami’s paintings of blithe flowers and goggle-eyed mushrooms typically inspire readings in which references to the global marketplace of Hello Kitty and anime are inevitable, and he makes no secret of his fascination with “market survivability,” but we need to address just how he engineers this condition beyond such thematic interpretations. What we discover in the process is that the technical logic at the crux of his practice is contiguous with the rhetoric of “Superflat” that the artist deploys to theorize his work. And that equation, in turn, chimes with the behaviors and ethos of a world market that has become synonymous with the politics of globalization.
To make this argument, we need first to account more generally for recent art's ways of doing and making. These processes might seem transparent, appearing to warrant little investigation beyond a casual nod to medium and to what that medium connotes for basic principles of fabrication. An unscientific survey of the last few art-world seasons seems to yield dramatically divided results. On one side of the spectrum, the technoaesthetics of digital film and video projection appear to dominate: Viewers from Beijing to New York to Mexico City risk having their pupils permanently dilated for all the black-box diversions on offer. In apparent contrast with these media arrangements, “craft,” however loosely defined, is back. From the explosion of practices that get lumped under the rubric of “drawing,” to the umpteenth revival of figurative painting, to the proliferation of objects that border on preciousness, artisanal values would seem to confront technological ones—with “technology” generically understood as pertaining to any mode or method that has arisen since the advent of the industrial revolution, up to and including, of course, the digital, and with painting and drawing standing as code for the intervention of the human hand. (Of course, this conceit does not even begin to address the fact that painting and drawing are technologies in their own right, with their own protocols every bit as circumscribed as industrially inflected approaches—or even more so, given the much longer histories of these preindustrial practices.) In short, the collective obsession with things handmade, no matter how slick or gauche their iterations, provides a striking and unavoidable counterpart to the apparent glut of new media we confront today.

What are we to make of this seemingly radical split in process, besides gesturing limply toward big-tent inclusiveness? An immediate response to the question might find in the return to painting and drawing a kind of neo-Luddism, an eschewal of the seductions of advanced technology for the humbler stuff of pencil and paper, canvas and linseed oil. Media fatigue, in other words, may be partially responsible for this shift. After all, there’s cold comfort at best to be taken from the excesses of the projection apparatus, and even less relief is granted by the images typically associated with it, evocative as so many are of CNN. The decisive turn to the cinematic in recent art has only exacerbated this condition for spectators, collectors, curators, and critics. So why not turn to the realm of the hand, imagined in valiant struggle against the incursions of the multichannel video installation?

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newfound affinity for painting, which has emerged since his sell-off of the unruly installations and vitrines of pickled animals emblematic of ’90s Brit art, must be seen as so much business as usual in the cycles of art-world speculation.

We know of course that in both bright and dark economic times, painting remains the blue-chip object of choice, and the artistic practices adjacent to painting (i.e., drawing) likewise confirm the suspicion that the artist’s hand remains the market’s most consistently salable product.

What this should alert us to is that the putative surge in “craft”-based practices—specifically painting—cannot be treated as merely oppositional to the media operations such practices are alleged to resist. In fact, with respect to larger issues of production both within and outside the spheres of current artmaking, we shall see that the two terms (technology and craft) might be less contradictory than they are complementary, each as much motivated by productive impulses as by aesthetic ones. Enter Murakami, who hardly needs introduction at this point. His place in the art-world firmament is secure, precisely and paradoxically because he has ranged widely beyond its privileged borders: If you can’t afford a painting (and how many of us can?), a Louis Vuitton handbag might do the trick; and if this rank of luxury goods proves beyond reach, a T-shirt, key chain, or plush toy is yours for the taking. Yet no matter what rung of the economic ladder these objects appeal to, Murakami’s work (but especially his painting) has been identified with a generic notion of globalism, in which a conflicted history of Japan-US relations—from the bomb to the bubble economy—finds peculiar expression in his manga-inspired cosmography. His system of production is no closely guarded trade secret, either. We are all familiar with his Kïkï Kï Kï factories in Tokyo and Queens, New York, with their small army of dedicated artist-employees and the Warholian homage necessarily evoked by the reference to “factory.” (Although the term is no longer officially used by the company itself, it remains common parlance.) And we know too, through fascinating and informative books like the artist’s Summon Monsters? Open the Door? Heal? Or Diet? (2001), that the Macintosh plays a critical role in the composition of his work.

But we have not quite dealt with Murakami’s best-known work—his painting—as a materialist practice, nor have we determined just where this most conventionally artisanal of approaches sits relative to the use of computer graphics, about which he is so plain-spoken. Writers on the artist scarcely reflect on the actuality of his process relative to its wider implications for the global question. Instead, the critical tendency is to pursue a kind of thematic source-chasing using the clues abundantly furnished by Murakami himself. For example, those who follow the literature on the artist know that references to nhonga—a style of traditional Japanese painting established in the 1880s—abound. (Murakami received an advanced degree in nhonga from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music.) Students of his practice can also speak the language of Superflat, using it to frame the wealth of his painterly and extra-aesthetic references. In 2000, on the occasion of “Superflat,” the wildly successful traveling group show he organized, Murakami published his now-infamous manifesto, explaining the emergence of seemingly depthless work, by himself and by other Japanese artists, through its rampant admixture of past and present, art and entertainment, high and low, its simultaneous embrace of Hokusai and anime master Yoshihito Kanada, of Godzilla and the Nikkei index. This “unique Japanese sensibility,” as Murakami called it, was compressed into a painterly image of flatness, a theatrical backdrop before which his figures, whether habitues of the floating world or denizens of the comic-strip demimonde, act out their various dramas. Murakami’s more recent paintings, shown at Gagosian Gallery in New York last spring, continue to mine the terrain of historical Japanese iconography. His monumental portraits

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of the grand patriarch of Zen, Daruma, appeal instantly to Western notions of what constitutes “Oriental” spirituality while evoking the concentrated brushwork of the great Zen masters, albeit through the support of computer technology.

There is, then, a built-in flexibility to the interpretation of Murakami’s work, with the most appropriate staging ground for this condition of malleability being flatness: a space that resists a unique point of view; that lacks a central, organizing perspective; and that can therefore accommodate a staggering range of references. On the ground, however, what allows Murakami to exploit flatness in this way is not painting as such—canvas, stretcher, and acrylic, à la Clement Greenberg—but a constellation of technics, including the organizational ethos of his Kaikai Kiki “factories” (in which teams of workers are assigned discrete tasks that do not conform to the Fordist model of assembly-line technology) and, most critically, digital graphics. In detailing the artist’s use of such graphics, what might at first sound like so much trivia for Murakami completists may come to be understood as the causal mechanism of his world picture.

Consider that the paintings that first garnered Murakami acclaim are composed—that is, digitally drawn—with Bézier curve programs. Named for the French mechanical engineer Pierre Bézier (1910–1999), the Bézier curve is a parametric equation that finds its most quotidian application in Adobe Illustrator, the program Murakami uses. In contrast with raster graphics programs like Photoshop, vector graphics programs like Adobe Illustrator are not organized around bitmaps but by the geometry of points, lines, and curves. This distinction is critical not only for the production of Murakami’s art but also for a theory of Superflat.

To parse the difference a bit further: The salient point is that raster graphics are resolution dependent, with the quality of a given image deriving from the concentration of information in each pixel and the number of pixels ranged across a bitmap. Best approximating the tonal values of the photograph, raster graphics resist being easily scaled without the loss of image quality; here, the need for greater file size—that is, for files containing more information—trumps the ease of scalability. Yet if raster graphics live and die by the quality of their resolution, the exact opposite is true of images produced with Bézier curves, in which information is not fixed to anything so regulating as a bitmap, nor determined by anything so inflexible as the quantity of pixels. Rather, Bézier programs are resolution independent. And as a result, the images generated through Bézier programs are infinitely scalable.

The consequences of this scalability are radical and wide ranging for Murakami’s production, supporting his acknowledged
Takashi Murakami, Daruma—Jikkai jinshin kensho jibutsu (By directly pointing to one's heart, one realizes one's true self and attains Buddhahood), closeup version, 2007, acrylic and platinum leaf on canvas mounted on board, 19 3/4 x 19 3/4 in.
motivations in market survivability and finding concrete articulation in all arenas of his work. Each of his paintings is based on an initial sketch drawn by the artist and converted by assistants into a digital file, and the file’s capacity to be customized for any number of formats finds its analogue in the shape-shifting avatars that are Murakami’s stock-in-trade, appearing and reappearing not only in paintings but in penguins, on soccer balls, or on mouse pads. For the data contained in a template based on vector graphics can be used to cover any surface: it can be scaled way up or way down to conform to the contours of any medium; it can be stretched to the thinnest and tautest proportions, or it can be radically compressed to produce the type of roly-poly forms identified with the Japanese cult of cuteness (*kawaii*), as is evident in the elastic morphologies of

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the many characters that populate his canvases; it can be repeated and repurposed and customized to meet the needs of disparate markets, whether hedge-fund collectors or the tween set. And this programming has decisive consequences for the very appearance of his painting, which with its extraordinarily seamless finishes and concealment of painterly facture mimes the depthless aesthetics of the Bézier desktop. Infinite scalability in the computer, in other words, means a diminishing in the appearance of volume, space, and perspective on canvas. Colors, too, are flat and uninflected, pooled, saturated, and vibrant, without the continuous tonal range associated with photography (and by extension with Photoshop).

Admittedly there’s a certain danger to discussions of this sort, the fear that all this talk of vector graphics amounts to little more than technological determinism with a French accent (courtesy of Bézier, if not Rancière). Yet Murakami’s ways of doing and making are wholly consistent with the ideology of a world market that sees itself as infinitely scalable: that is to say, *without* traditional concerns for scale; without fixed determinations and stable, organizing perspectives; and without a center in which a monolithic and controlling referent holds. The capacity to produce goods flexibly through identifying specialized niche markets is indeed the hallmark of a post-Fordist world view, and Murakami’s production strategies cheerfully confirm this view on numerous fronts, but most resoundingly in their meshing of painting and digital protocols. The serialization and customization made possible through Murakami’s use of vector-based programs not only generates the volume and range of his low-end commodities but, paradoxically enough, serves to highlight the singularity of his paintings, with all their artisanal associations miraculously intact despite the cool detachment of his methods. Indeed, those paintings still project the aura of the atelier (or rather, its vaunted mythology), precisely because they are not the mass-produced bibelots that have garnered Murakami a fan base outside the art world. It’s in this regard that Murakami’s practice dovetails with what engineers of post-Fordist production have called “automation with a human hand,” in which the blankness and sterility of digital control are softened by the gesture of human agency, in large part a response to the demands for customization. And with these techniques of globalization at his disposal, Murakami is able to produce and reproduce—to borrow the words of neoliberal apologist Thomas Friedman—an infinitely “flat world.”

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