MOCA's Takashi Murakami retrospective takes aim at cultural commerce gone crazy.

ART REVIEW

Hello, creepy cutie

By Christopher Knight
Times Staff Writer

BASED on his work from the past dozen years, you might expect Takashi Murakami to be the illegitimate love child of Tinky Winky and Minnie Mouse, as home-schooled in Amida Buddhism. Or maybe the test-tube spawn of E.T. and Little Annie Fanny, given to unexpected scholarly interest in the erudite traditions of Japanese screens and scrolls.

He's neither, of course. But Murakami's art jumbles manga with Nikonga — postwar Japanese comic books and prewar paintings that synthesize a dense array of traditional Japanese techniques and motifs. His sprawling mid-career survey, opening today at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary, is awash in sculptural androids, CinemacScope paintings, etereal video animations and lavish merchandise.

Certainly it's fitting that the Tokyo-based artist, 45, is having his retrospective in a Little Tokyo museum. A psychologically conflicted relationship between East and West, especially Japanese and American culture, is pivotal to both manga and Nikonga. It's the tuning fork that sets the constant pitch for Murakami's art.

MONSTROUS: The show displays 96 paintings, animations, sculptures and other works made since 1995, such as "Tan Tan Bo."

Take "Miss ko." This sleekly painted fiberglass figure is the Jetsons' version of a pleasure-house geisha, by way of Hooters restaurant. It may be one of the creepiest artist's dolls since German Surrealist Hans Bellmer lovingly cobbled together some flax fiber, plaster, wooden ball joints and glue in 1934, so he could take dirty photographs. (The creepiest of all is Charles Ray's big mama fashion mannequin, "Fall '91," which may have directly inspired Murakami.)

The Playboy Bunny-like waitress, dressed in a miniskirt and cherry red high heels, holds out a welcoming hand at the show's entrance. She's here to serve paying customers a giant pair of pneumatic breasts, impossibly extruded limbs and an adolescent aura of wide-eyed innocence, all tied up in a bow atop cascading blond tresses.

Did I mention that "Miss ko" is also larger than life? Like Ray's Vogue magazine dominatrix sculpture, Murakami's stands 8 feet tall. Male Surrealists like Bellmer idealized the child-woman as a fantasy muse, capable of dismantling rational forces. But not Murakami. His art appears resigned to global culture's truly monumental irrationality.

Nikonga, which he studied from 1988 to 1993
Murakami’s brand of high and low art

Murakami, from Page K1

as a university doctoral candidate, was a stiff reaction against Western influence on a hitherto cloistered Japan. It emerged at the Modern era’s start, fusing sometimes-contradictory traditions and techniques in an improbable quest to assert the “Japanese-ness” of Japanese art. 

Murakami, by contrast, was partly fueled by the lengthy post-1945 U.S. occupation of Japan. Young American GI’s imported the boisterous artifacts of popular culture by the ton.

These two threads are tightly knotted throughout the show: Ninety-six paintings, sculptures, animations and other works have been assembled, all but six made since 1965. There’s also a display of about 500 commercial trinkets — T-shirts, plush toys, postcards, coffee mugs, paperweights, ad nauseam and absurdum — produced by his company, Kaikai Kiki Corp.

Fantastic myths and legends find contemporary form in candy-colored works whoseочевидная смеющаяся сила, в этой колоссальной массе, становится одним из главных действующих лиц в этой истории. Видно, что ностальгия — это результат воздействия на ее изначально-милитаристской культуры, теперь превратившейся в адекватную культуру, в которой современность — это нечто большее, чем простое смещение стилей.

“Tan Tan Bo Puking — a.k.a. Gero Tan” is a mural-size, multipanel painting in flat, bright colors that shows an engorged cartoon monster spewing buckets-full of rainbow pigment through jagged teeth. Tiepolo clouds billow lightly in the azure sky. Like a Japanese Saturn devouring his children, destroying the future in order to protect himself from being supplanted by them, Gero Tan’s repulsive feast produces magnificent art.

Murakami has spoken about the shikona-like proliferation of ultra-cute imagery in Japanese culture — Hello Kitty, say — as a colossal index of repressed confluence in the wake of a militaristic nation’s humiliating battlefield defeat 62 years ago. Even death now seems infantilized, as in his remarkable paintings of a skeleton whose mushroom-cloud shape is horribly adorable.

The conceptual debt to Andy Warhol, here and everywhere in the show, is obvious. But the squeamishness induced by Murakami’s distinctive brand of Pop Art is entirely different.

And I emphasize brand. Murakami is the first major artist, Eastern or Western, to make our pervasive culture of branding a primary subject, rather than simply exploiting it.

Pop Art endures. Murakami was born the year Warhol painted his first Campbell’s soup can and Edward Ruscha drew his 290th Century Fox logo. Jim Isermann resurrected the stylized flower motif in 1986, when Murakami was an undergraduate, while Jeff Koons was casting an inflatable dime-store bunny rabbit in pristine stainless steel. Layer upon layer is feasted on in this show; no wonder Gero Tan barfs.

The show is unambiguously titled “to Murakami.” The copyright symbol reads as a defiant, paradoxical assertion that the artist — not the private collector or public museum — retains perpetual ownership of the art idea. That’s something we need to
© Murakami

Where: The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, 152 N. Central Ave., Los Angeles

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays and Fridays, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Ends: Feb. 11

Price: $8, free 5 to 8 p.m. Thursdays

Contact: (213) 626-6222 or www.moca.org

WHAT'S THIS? A Louis Vuitton boutique selling Murakami handbags designed with Marc Jacobs is part of the package.

constructed inside the exhibition, the mezzanine gallery is just beyond a room of beautiful Nihongo-style manga paintings and overlooking the platinum Buddha. MOCA took scrupulous care not to receive rental fees or profits from the shop, which would jeopardize the museum's nonprofit independence.

What's actually cheesy is the "Dear MOCA Members" letter from LV's Jacobs, filling Page 3 of the museum's quarterly magazine and mostly just a pretentious ad. But the show focuses on [Murakami's] work and how it functions in the world, as MOCA curator Paul Schimmel sensibly writes in the thick catalog, and that's more than enough justification for including the store. Think of it as a ready-made sculpture, expanded to 21st century dimensions.

When French Dadaist Marcel Duchamp developed the ready-made concept nearly a century ago, he simply shifted industrially manufactured objects—a urinal, a snow shovel—from the hardware store to the art museum. The boutique does the same, now moving an entire commercial apparatus inside.

At MOCA, the artist's multi-colored "LV" on handbags is to Robert Indiana's "LOVE" what HGTV is to Home and Garden Television. "LOVE" was originally commissioned as a 1965 Christmas card by the Museum of Modern Art and only later consecrated as art in paintings, prints and sculptures.

Murakami wrapped the sleek store in a lush video animation of flowers—cheery cartoon chrysanthemums, an infantilized symbol of Imperial Japan. They proliferate across the facade like a jungle, reclaiming civilization's magnificent ruins.

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