CALL IT “LITE HAPPINESS,” it’s the contradiction Takashi Murakami activates in his work. It’s not surprising that pleasure should be the method of delivery as Murakami’s exhaustion with history — political, cultural, and sexual — comes at the height of Japan’s economic slowdown. While Japanese popular culture is marked by an obsession with the homogeneous, otaku sub-culture is noted for its isolation. Murakami sometimes calls himself an otaku and sometimes doesn’t, yet it is nonetheless fascinated by this super-world. Otaku literally means “house.” It has come to be the Japanese equivalent to fanboy or fangirl, “geek” or “nerd.” Either way, otakus are fanatics who have no personal life outside of the object of their obsession. Japan’s indifference to contemporary art may be what Murakami is reacting against, but touch slightly below that surface and what emerges is a decision to delete history, a practice that didn’t begin with Murakami. As artist Emiko Kasahara states: “The Japanese tried to ignore what they did in history, often recreating things that didn’t even happen.”

The keyword for Murakami is Super Flat — a spirited, fast-forward blurring between past/present and painting, sculpture, photography, film, and digital art. Pop art is his point of departure. As Lawrence Alloway suggested in The Long Front of Culture “instead of reserving (culture) for the highest artifacts and the noblest thoughts of history’s top ten, it needs to be used more widely as the description of what a society does. Then unique oil paintings, highly personal poems and mass-distributed films and group aimed magazines can be placed within a continuum rather than frozen in layers in a pyramid.” This is this version of Pop Art that Murakami connects with and simultaneously dissolves. While Super Flat has the look of an “ism” along with a well-designed program of branded souvenirs, mimicking the ready-made museum, Murakami’s interest in the trinket is more than a clever way to boost sales. Remove the obligations of history and what’s left is Super Flat as cultural criticism. I talked with Murakami several times in New York, before and after visits to L.A. where Super Flat, the exhibition he organized was on view at L.A. MoCA. Sitting in the storage area at Marianne Boesky Gallery, Murakami first spoke with me hours before his opening and just after the launch of Wink, his project with Creative Time and the MTA at Grand Central Station.

Cheryl Kaplan: What were you doing in Jackson Pollock’s studio?
Takashi Murakami: I acted as a commentator for Japanese TV. Jackson Pollock is still very new in Japan. His story is very romantic. I was surprised his wife was a painter.

CK: Is Jackson Pollock Super Flat?
TM: No. Yes and no. Abstract expressionism is linked with tradition and a Western way of painting. The start of Super Flat is Andy Warhol’s camouflage painting.

CK: Why do you think Pollock might be Super Flat?
TM: He used silver, which means you don’t want to make a layer.

CK: Super Flat is about eliminating layers of information?
TM: Yes. Boetti’s work looks similar to Warhol’s camouflage painting, but Boetti’s tapestries are linked with history.

CK: What’s the relationship of otaku subculture, manga and anime to your work?
TM: Otaku culture is linked with a deep feeling in Japanese and Asian people. Otakus have a memory for detail like a kind of historian. My memory is so bad.

CK: Why did you study traditional Japanese nihon-ga painting?
TM: I was looking for why I was impressed with animation. I found a very close link between traditional painters and contemporary Japanese animation. My brain is like the inside of the Guggenheim Museum, like a spiral; in animation I see frame to frame.

CK: How did you come upon the idea of Super Flat? It’s the name of Panasonic and Sony TV screens.
TM: Painting and images are just signs. I start on a computer, but 95% of my painting is through orders to my assistants. Super Flat is the keyword, but it starts to be confusing.

CK: To you or to us?
TM: To me. When I explain things the first time, I need layers. Finally I answer and tell you what the top of the pyramid is, but I’m looking for another way.

CK: Where did the name Super Flat come from?
TM: Super Flat began because my L.A. dealer, Tim Blum said: “Your painting has this amazing quality, it’s super flat.” Super Flat is a very good marketing word. When I think about animation, I’m thinking about what Japanese society is now, and how contemporary art is linked with historical things, with Western art history and the traditional Japanese way. Super Flat and its definition have started to be controversial. I thought with Super Flat I was creating what Richard Hamilton did when he defined Pop Art.

CK: Richard Hamilton defined Pop Art as “popular (designed for a mass audience); transient... expendable...; low cost; mass produced; young...; witty; sexy; gimmicky; glamorous; big business.”

TM: In Western culture the most important thing is the concept. My position is more fragile. I don’t have a Western history, my position isn’t standing, it’s floating.

CK: Who is Super Flat besides you?
TM: Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, Kevin Appel, Laura Owens, Sue Williams, Fred Tomaselli — I love Damien Hirst’s dot paintings, the animal slices, and the giant sculpture. Hirst really understands what it is to have a point of view in the contemporary art scene. If he has a history, he has an idea that everything is after Warhol. For our generation, we can’t say Damien Hirst is Pop, he’s Super Flat.

CK: And Maurizio Cattelan?
TM: No, he has history. He wants to manipulate things with a heavy history — like Joseph Beuys used history.

CK: Anything with real history isn’t Super Flat then?
TM: Yes, I visited Sue Williams’ studio with this TV show. She said “Maybe I’m not part of the group.” Her link with de Kooning is difficult.

CK: What are the souvenir sales figures?
TM: The first Saturday at Boesky we sold over $30,000 in merchandise, including 22 prints at $1000 each. That’s huge. It’s what I pay my 15-20 workers at Hiropon Factory each month.

CK: The explosion of sex in your sculptures, My Lonesome Cowboy and Hiropon, has a technical quality.
TM: It’s my self-portrait. My position in the sex issue is impotence. During phone sex, I’m very sexually excited and I have an erection, that’s why Hiropon and My Lonesome Cowboy are masturbatory. The sculpture made a big impact on Japanese society. Fifteen years ago I began having phone sex to get girls; it was great for my mind. I was an addict with phone sex and paid $10,000 dollars a month for phone sex. Then I said, I have to quit that!

CK: Are you still addicted to phone sex?
TM: No, that’s why I created the sculpture, a kind of monster, biting, flashing.

CK: So Super Flat is about things existing simultaneously in the present.
TM: That’s a good explanation of Super Flat. I would like to use that the next time I have to explain Super Flat. I really don’t believe in my talent. In a great movie many people collaborate.


CK: You’ve said some otakus are fond of wearing Nazi clothing.
TM: A bunch of otakus do wear Nazi clothes as an event. They don’t care how they are in the society. Maybe these people don’t link with the Nazi concept, they just wear the clothing.

CK: For them there’s no history and no physical reality to actual events. The video you showed at the Japan Society segregates romance and evil through a series of non-stop cuts of clips taken from films and commercials, but your paintings offer delight instead of horror, disquieting issues of evil.
TM: History is history, now is now. Forget about history. Now is happy. I went to Poland for a Japanese art show and went to Auschwitz. Auschwitz looks very similar to a Boltskani piece — maybe Boltskani was the idea for the Auschwitz installation, you will be very surprised. My friends and I said, wow, Boltskani, which is different, no, it’s totally the same. I don’t know who created that installation.

Chey Kaplan is an artist and critic living in New York. She is the founder of Square One, a curated series of public debates with contemporary artists.

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