MARTER OF THE UNIVERSE

ARTIST, CURATOR AND BRAND PROMOTER TAKASHI MURAKAMI IS LORD OF AN EMPIRE THAT KNOWS NO BORDERS OR CREATIVE LIMITATIONS.

BY JUDD TULLY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY OSADA FUMINO
Bathed in the bright lights cast by a Japanese television crew on a balmy evening this past spring, Takashi Murakami held court in front of one of his new million-dollar paintings in the packed central gallery of Larry Gagosian’s Madison Avenue space. Young Asian hipsters with skateboards and cell-phone cameras recorded the opening-night action as elevator loads of art world types disembarked to take in Murakami’s unexpected new series depicting Daruma, the 6th-century father of Zen Buddhism. It was perfectly timed, if at least for the uninhibited, “Tranquility of the Heart, Torment of the Flesh—Open Wide the Eye of the Heart, and Nothing Is Invisible.”

The series is based on the decidedly grotesque works of the Eccentric artists, an obscure group of 18th-century Kyoto-based artists, and represents a stylistic departure from Murakami’s ultrapop manga-and-anime-suffused works. Seeing the pictures in Gagosian’s space initially made this visitor feel as if he had accidentally entered one of the Metropolitan Museum’s rooms of ancient Japanese art before reaching the contemporary wing. Was Murakami trying to confuse his audience? Announce to the world that the era of such sexy and Westernized works as his fiberglass sculptures Hirigana, 1997, and My Lonesome Cowpoke, 1998, and the mural-size Super Nova, 1999, was over? That it was time for a shift back to the ancient arts of Japan, but melded with the cutting-edge, corporatized production approach of his hero, the American filmmaker George Lucas?

The moment was classic Murakami, a kaleidoscope of a man who is never quite one thing or another, but rather many things at the same time. He deftly plays off the twin themes of high and low culture, moves effortlessly between artist and impresario and presides over an empire that is part 21st-century international corporation and part 18th-century Japanese artists guild. Widely known to leave the making of his pieces to a bevy of assistants who work off his digitized schemata, Murakami nonetheless exercises a furtive control over all aspects of production that makes him a constant, palpable presence in his Kukai Kiki (meaning “supernatural” or “bizarre”) studios in Tokyo and Long Island City, New York. There his 90 or so employees check in with a fingerprint system.

Assessing Murakami’s standing in the art world is also a bit slippery. Works by Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons have sold for much more; Maurizio Cattelan’s conceptual shenanigans have garnered more publicity; and Keith Haring’s Pop Shop came earlier. But no artist working today matches Murakami’s insatiably ambitious output, cross-branding exploits and vigilant defense of his intellectual property. Besides overseeing the production of a staggering line of paintings, sculptures and multiples, the 45-year-old artist curates exhibitions, produces an art festival, makes animated and live-action films and collaborates on commercial projects ranging from the luxurious handbags he designed for Louis Vuitton in 2003 to this year’s album covers, MTV promotions and cross-merchandising with rap star Kanye West.

Capturing the breadth of Murakami’s world is part of the aim of © Murakami,” a major midcareer retrospective that opens October 28 in Los Angeles at the Museum of Contemporary Art before traveling to the Brooklyn Museum; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt; and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. It is the most ambitious effort to date to chronicle the evolution of the artist’s startling post-Pop style, which analytically and audaciously mirrors contemporary Japanese culture.

“We don’t want the business of Murakami to obscure Murakami the artist,” says exhibition curator Paul Schimmel, who has selected 90 works spanning 35 years, from Signboard Takashi, 1991, a modestly scaled work in plywood and stickers that appropriates the logo and slogan of a famous Japanese toy company, to the just-completed Oral Buddha, a self-portrait more than 18 feet high that is based on a 12th-century sculpture. “The circling back that he’s doing to the traditions of Japan—it’s not intuitive,” says Schimmel. “But it’s really part of who he is, where he began and where he will always be. Increasingly, people are going to understand how much more his work is grounded in the broadest traditions of Japan.”

Despite Schimmel’s concern, it may not be possible to separate commerce from art when it comes to Murakami. As if to underscore the intricate intertwining of the two, the LA MoCA show will feature a Kukai Kiki merchandising shop and a fully operational, though temporary, Louis Vuitton boutique selling limited-edition accessories designed by the artist and Marc Jacobs exclusively for the museum. “Everyone thinks all these kinds of ventures—Vuitton, what he’s doing with Kanye West—are an indication of greed,” says Schimmel. “But from a financial standpoint, I assure you, for Murakami, doing a painting is by far the most efficient way to make money. There’s a greater demand for his paintings because of all these other things he does.”

Although his luxurious artworks might suggest otherwise, Murakami leads a rather...
Top row, from left:
And then, and then and then and then and then and then, a 1994 acrylic;
Signboard Takashi, 1991, appropriates the logo and slogan of a Japanese toy firm.
Center row: Studio assistants work on new pieces at the Asaka art compound.
Bottom row, from left:
Cosmos, 1996; installation view of two 1995 balloon sculptures depicting Mr. Ooba.
monastic, workaholic life. Last fall he entertained a small group of journalists at the new Kaikai Kiki world headquarters, in the exclusive Motoaizabu section of Tokyo. (Murakami’s original art compound, in Asaka, an hour’s drive from Tokyo, remains the main production center.) Sleek as a Richard Gluckman–designed gallery, the espace of pale wood, glass and white walls, tastefully accented with tatami mat flooring, appears invitingly hip and minimally corporate. A small exhibition of Kaikai Kiki artists dominates the gallery area, featuring works by such rising stars as Mr., Chiho Aoshima, Aya Takano, Chisato Ban, Mahomi Kunikata, Rei Sato and Murakami himself. Farther inside is a series of conference rooms, animation and production studios and Murakami’s own spartan officedesk, where he often takes catnaps on a small futon. “Even through all the success, he doesn’t give a hoot about any kind of trappings,” notes Blum & Poe’s Tim Blum, the artist’s Los Angeles dealer and longtime friend. “He invests everything back into his projects. He has no savings; he’s not hoarding money.” Yet, Blum adds, “his level of ambition is endless and insatiable.”

Earlier that day, the striking profile of the ponytailed, bespectacled artist loomed on a giant screen, like the image of a rock star or perhaps Orwell’s Big Brother, over the aisles of the biannual Geisai Art Festival, in a Tokyo convention center. Murakami has produced the one-day event for the past five years, to promote young Japanese artists and to battle what he calls Japan’s “sans-art-scene wasteland.” He envisions “overseas bases” of Geisai, like the one being planned for December in Miami, as vehicles for introducing aspiring Japanese artists to the West.

The strategy of bridging East and West certainly seemed to be working that morning in Tokyo, as Renault heir and avid contemporary-art collector Johnny Piggozi bargained animatedly with a young Japanese painter for a sprawling wall mural. Piggozi’s Hawaiian print shirt and bulbly figure clashed piquantly with the crowds of otaku–charged youngsters sporting costumes that imitated those of their favorite comic-book characters. The remarkable scene, at least to Western eyes, made Murakami seem more a messianic politician campaigning for an art revolution back home than the red-hot artist and slick marketer that most people think him to be.

“He cares about Japan,” says Marianne Boesky, the New York dealer who represented Murakami for 10 years and organized three solo shows before he jumped ship to Gagosian, in 2006. “He doesn’t care about the West.”

That might be a minority view, but Murakami is, in fact, a highly trained academician steeped in the esoteric art history of Japan. Born in Tokyo in 1962, the youngest son of a taxi driver and a traditional housewife, Murakami for a while followed in the conservative footsteps of his older brother, Yuji, receiving a doctorate in 1991 from the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in Nihonga painting, a late 19th-century style that emphasized such traditional Japanese genres as seasonal landscapes and historical scenes while introducing Western perspective, chiaroscuro and bright colors. Asked at this year’s Basel fair about his return to creating works with deeply historical associations, Murakami joked, “Now I’m getting old, and that’s why I go back to Japanese history.”

Remarkably, Murakami jetsioned his hard-won Nihonga credentials, and in barely four years of intense experimentation, he developed the opening chapter of his super-slick post- Pop style. In 1995, Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, in Paris, staged the artist’s first one-man show in the West, introducing his large helium-filled vinyl chloride balloon sculptures depicting Mr. Nose, a kind of raffish cartoon character that Murakami eventually copyrighted for his exclusive use. His first real exposure in New York came a year later, at one of the early Gramercy fairs (which later morphed into the Armory Show), when Tokyo dealer Tonio Koyama showcased some of the artist’s small drawings in a tiny hotel room.

It was only in 2002, however, that Murakami received significant recognition, with a show—appearing initially at the Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain, in Paris, and then at London’s Serpentine Gallery—that featured a wildly imaginative, almost hallucinogenic installation that literally wallpapered the soaring space with his jellyfish-eye iconography. In May that year, Murakami made a splash on the auction circuit when his bikini-clad mannequin with supersized milk-sucking breasts, was snatched up by Chicago collector Richard Cooper at a Christie’s New York day sale for a then-record $427,500, nearly four times the high estimate. The piece was featured on both the front and back covers of the catalogue—a rare marketing coup, especially for an untested younger artist. “Murakami perfectly captures popular culture in Japan in the ‘90s, and his art is an extension of his philosophical investigations,” says Colorado philanthropist Kent Logan, one of the artist’s earliest and biggest collectors. “That’s what drew me in. There’s quite a bit of depth to his work.”

Although Murakami received a doctorate in Nihonga painting, a traditional, 19th-century Japanese style, it didn’t take him long to develop the sexy, post-Pop works, such as My Lonesome Cowboy 1998, that catapulted him to international fame.
THE MANY WORLDS OF MURAKAMI.

In 2001 Takashi Murakami established Kaikai Kiki, The multifaceted art enterprise whose activities include the production and promotion of artwork and merchandise, the management and support of young artists, and the general management of events and public projects such as the one-day Geisai (market) festivals. There’s also an animation component that produces feature-length films.

ART PRODUCTION

Easily the most lucrative of the divisions, the workshop staffed by highly trained Kaikai Kiki employees (left) churn out artworks that sell in primary markets around the world. Last May, at Gagosian Gallery in New York, for example, Murakami’s new Zen-themed paintings sold out at prices between $1 million and $1.6 million. More than 30 smaller and identically scaled flower paintings sold out at $10,000 apiece. Larry Gagosian was reputedly so enthusiastic about having Murakami to his stable of artists, he personally sold the lion’s share of the paintings to his favorite clients.

虽然直接与该企业的经营方面无关，但 Murakami 的稳定的客户群体意味着他的画作在一级市场上以百万美元的价格卖出，是几位百万美元的收藏家的最爱。今年 5 月，他的新 Zen 风格的画作在纽约的 Gagosian Art Gallery 以 100 万美元到 160 万美元的价格售罄。30 幅稍小一些并且同样以花卉为主题的画作也以每幅 10 万美元售罄。拉里·高古轩个人以他的收藏家的最爱为主导，他销售了 Majority 的作品给他的忠实客户。

MANAGEMENT

A Murakami disciple, Mr. had his international debut this past May at Lehmann Maupin, in New York, selling large-scale paintings and sculpture at prices reaching $500,000. In Paris last month, Chiharu Shiota’s fantasy landscapes opened the fall season at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, priced from $10,000 to $20,000. Kaikai Kiki gets a portion of the sales’ proceeds.

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SHOWMANSHIP

Since 1996, small Pop art series have been an integral element of the Kaikai Kiki cash machine, spawning a small industry of post-Pop art accessories from pillows and towels to key chains and soccer balls (above). Prices for the cutely and cuddly items range from $3 for a small badge to $800 for a giant flower cushion. At every press conference staged by Kaikai Kiki, you can be sure to find a goodie bag of the stuff packaged in a distinctive and most likely collectible Kaikai Kiki shopping bag.

自 1996 年以来，小巧的 Pop 艺术系列一直是 Kaikai Kiki 的现金机器的一部分，催生了一个小型的后 Pop 艺术配件行业，从枕头和毛巾到钥匙链和足球。这些可爱和舒适的物品的价格从 3 美元的小徽章到 800 美元的大型花卉靠垫。每次 Kaikai Kiki 主持的新闻发布会，都可以找到各种装饰物，装在一个独特的并且很可能具有收藏价值的 Kaikai Kiki 购物袋里。

MERCHANDISING

In 2001, chokers have been an integral element of the Kaikai Kiki cash machine, spawning a small industry of post-Pop art accessories from pillows and towels to key chains and soccer balls (above). Prices for the cutely and cuddly items range from $3 for a small badge to $800 for a giant flower cushion. At every press conference staged by Kaikai Kiki, you can be sure to find a goodie bag of the stuff packaged in a distinctive and most likely collectible Kaikai Kiki shopping bag.

COLLABORATIONS

Although Kaikai Kiki artist Aya Takano produced a design series for Wrangler jeans this year and Chiharu Shiota’s futuristic cityscape murals were displayed in the London Underground, nothing has come close to the global frenzy sparked by Murakami’s collaboration with Marc Jacobs on handbags and accessories for the storied Louis Vuitton brand (right). So far, three separate projects have been launched using the patterns and color schemes of Murakami’s fashionista side, with the artist’s fame—and fees—growing with each success. Although he doesn’t get a cut of the profits, it is believed that Murakami has reaped in “millions of dollars” from his effort, according to a source close to Kaikai Kiki.

Cover art for a single by rap star Kanye West.

Similarly, Louis Vuitton’s $40 billion parent company run by art collector Bernard Arnault, declined to release any figures on the revenues or production size of the sought-after bags and accessories. The former are so hot that even today, five years after their introduction, they’re one of the most pirated icons of high-end merchandise.

“Little Boy” show, 2005, curated by Murakami.
A tabletop in the Aube art compound holds assorted tools and materials for spray painting. The site remains the main art production center for Kadokawa Kiki, which opened its new headquarters in Tokyo last fall.
"I LEARNED ABOUT THE MOVIE STUDIO SYSTEM AND TRANSFERRED THAT TO MY ART MAKING."

Three Anaka studio photographs, from top to bottom: Pieces for a new edition of "Second Mission Project PopZ!"; diagrams for painting and assembling work; ceramics for flower paintings. Other images, from top: Tam Tam Ba, 2001; PowerBall, 2003; Jellyfish Eyes, 2002, and two sculptures.
Logan’s enthusiasm isn’t universal; some find Murakami’s aesthetic too happy, facile and cute. Nevertheless, his work displays a complexity and character that resists instant understanding. “Hiropan is not some simple, sexed-up sculpture,” says Boesky. “That was all about tapping our vision and catching our attention. It was just a starting-off point, and he never made another sculpture like that again.” To her, Murakami “is always so steps ahead, so nothing is as it seems. It’s all part of a larger fabric that he’s weaving together.”

That unfettered drive got the artist into an embarrassing logjam earlier this year. Through Perrotin, his Paris dealer, he had taken on a $3.5 million commission from French billionaire art collector François Pinault to create 16 monumental works based on 12th-century Japanese picture-scroll paintings for Pinault’s Palazzo Grassi in Venice. Titled “272/272 Plus,” the series was to be shown this May, just ahead of the opening of the 2007 Venice Biennale. But Murakami was already stretched thin, having to complete new pieces for the Gagosian show in Manhattan and coaching Mr., one of his Kaikai Kiki artists, for his Western debut at Chelsea’s Lehmann Maupin Gallery that same month. As a result, Murakami, an unabashed perfectionist, was able to complete only three of the panels for Pinault. Scrambling for a solution, he made a documentary about the delayed project—partly tongue-in-cheek, since it was chronicling a miniseries. He also designed elaborate digitized mock-ups of the 13 unfinished works based on his preliminary sketches, to go along with the three completed ones. At the last minute, however, that plan was rejected by Pinault and the chief curator of his collection, Alison Gingeras.

“I did my best,” Murakami said with a sheepish expression during the June interview in Basel, where he was interviewed in a hotel lobby with six assistants. “But finally, I couldn’t finish it. That’s the reality!” (Gingeras says that she and Pinault have assured the artist that when the work is finished, it will be presented at the palazzo.)

Murakami isn’t exactly crestfallen about his version of death in Venice, since so many other projects are currently on the front and back burners of his international enterprise. “I was in Los Angeles last month visiting my friend Mark Grotjahn, who’s really focused on his next painting, and he does everything by himself,” says the artist, pausing to consult, in rapid-fire Japanese, with his translator and Kaikai Kiki New York director Yuko Sakata before turning back to his guest in a gust of laughter. “Oh, my God, that’s too much for me! I don’t know why, but I must do things for my company. I need to make phone calls or write e-mails. I want to make paintings by myself, but the reality is, the artist has to be thinking about his painting 24 hours a day, and I can’t do that. It’s much too complicated!”

Despite his nonchalant air and fits of nervous laughter about not having time to concentrate on a single canvas, Murakami displays a Koonsian obsession with the minutest details of his works’ production. Because of this compulsion, Blum says, MOCA staffers and his gallery, the financial backer of Oskar Kadets, feared it wouldn’t be completed in time. “It was a very grueling process for the fabricators,” Blum explains. “I mean, just to do one little eyelash of the sculpture, he went back to it times if it’s not exactly how he wants it.”

Murakami’s fussiness was evident during a tour in May of his 22,000-square-foot studio in Long Island City, just outside Manhattan. This visitor noticed a kind of contractor’s punch list tacked up on a bulletin board in one of the pristine and minimally appointed art production rooms. It was a staccato series of scolding memos from Murakami to his assistants about a painting in progress. One of them read, “The result hasn’t yielded itself positively because they don’t have the philosophy inside themselves to achieve good results. I’m upset with the washi paper and the silver leafing on the new paintings.”

That kind of micromanaging certainly doesn’t bring to mind Andy Warhol’s freewheeling Factory days, when many critics and pundits have evoked in describing Murakami’s business philosophy and art production. Murakami actually much prefers the George Lucas/Lucasfilm model, in which the creative founder sits at the helm of his global empire, directing a range of activities that include creating visual effects, licensing, producing online functions and even manufacturing limited-edition action figures. In the world of Kaikai Kiki, that part translates into offering a line of such mass-market items as key chains, mouse pads, sticker sets, pillows, bags, towels and soccer balls.

“I can create something really new,” says Murakami, “and people will say, ‘Warhol copy,’ or something like that. To be honest with you, when I started in this area, I never knew anything about Andy Warhol. I focused on George Lucas and the movie industry.” From reading about him in magazines and watching his films, “I learned a lot about the studio system and transferred that to my art making in Japan.”

Just as Lucas has fashioned a lucrative universe around his computer-aided artistic vision, so Murakami has sought to fulfill his dreams. “My talent isn’t about spending the whole day making a painting or a sculpture; it’s about creating an environment and a context to make all of those things possible,” he says. And, always mindful of what that enterprise entails, he observes, “My favorite part of the movies is watching the credits scroll down at the end.”

Murakami has a consistent track record of bringing auction prices in the high six figures, placing him in an elite club of secondary-market players. The 1996 fiberglass sculpture Miao Koo was one of the early record setters for the artist, fetching $567,500 at Christie’s New York in May 2003.