Can Takashi Murakami and his generation of Japanese Warholites reanimate contemporary art?

Tokyo Spring!
By Arthur Lubow

Also: The Japanese fashions that conquered Paris, Tyler Brûlé takes a Tokyo product-design tour and Hellen van Meene’s street portraits of Tokyo girls.
Inspired by comic books, cartoon heroes and monster movies, as well as by traditional painted screens, Japan’s answer to Andy Warhol has constructed his own theory about what an artist is — along with a sprawling high-low, commercial-artistic enterprise. And his products are very much for export.

By Arthur Lubow

AT THE MORI ARTS CENTER, which is perched atop a skyscraper in the glittering Roppongi Hills development in Tokyo, I recently visited a museum show, “Universal Symbol of the Brand,” that displayed (to quote its catalog) “the fascinating development of the history and endeavors of Louis Vuitton, the brand that is not only incredibly popular in Japan but also beloved throughout the world.” A sequence of galleries exhibiting luggage and handbags proceeded to a large advertising photograph of the actress Uma Thurman and smaller shots of runway models, all wearing Vuitton fashions. What drew me to the show, however, were two bags in the variation of the Vuitton pattern that the Japanese contemporary artist Takashi Murakami developed with the company in 2003. The brightly colored Murakami line has been phenomenally successful, with sales reported to be in the vicinity of $300 million. Murakami’s handbags were presented along with two small paneled screens painted in the same patterns that appear on the bags. The handbags in the museum exhibition were hardly Murak-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MBG</th>
<th>高井画廊</th>
<th>高井画廊</th>
<th>B&amp;P</th>
<th>B&amp;P</th>
<th>EPG</th>
<th>EPG</th>
<th>EPG</th>
<th>EPG</th>
<th>B&amp;P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

未入稿作品

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>日程</th>
<th>出所</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10月</td>
<td>10月</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11月</td>
<td>11月</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12月</td>
<td>12月</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PG 3 of 13
kami's only contribution to the Roppongi Hills complex of glass-and-steel towers. Cute cartoonlike characters that he had created as branding elements for the center — Barney-like brontosaurus, droopy-eared rabbits and smiling aliens — gripped down on me from pennants and from express buses to Roppongi Hills. In the same development, at a large Vuitton store, new handbags in a cherry design by Murakami would soon be introduced, along with a couple of the artist's sculptures of a red, smiling cherry. Last year at another Vuitton shop in Tokyo, Murakami displayed a large fiberglass sculpture and a four-panel screen painted in his LV monogram design.

So, in Tokyo, an art museum was displaying luggage, a luggage shop was exhibiting art, an artist had developed a branding campaign — and nobody thought anything out of the ordinary. If you want to understand why Murakami's art feels so dizzyingly up to date, this leveling of status grades among art, advertising and merchandise at Roppongi Hills is a good place to start. When I asked Tomio Koyama, Murakami's dealer in Tokyo, why he hadn't shown the monogram work in his gallery, he explained, "In Japan, a gallery has no meaning, and a Louis Vuitton shop is a more powerful place to see art."

The Tokyo Art Scene

The Tokyo art scene, particularly the brings new art to the capital, is quiet compared to New York, but it's recent trend toward new materials and forms is evident. Murakami is a key figure in this trend, and his work has been influential in shaping the current state of Japanese art. His use of popular culture, especially in his collaborations with brands like Vuitton and Louis, has helped to bring attention to the role of art in the consumer culture of Japan.

We are surrounded today by too many images to source or rank. While it would be fatuous to say that we are all Japanese now, we are surely all living in Murakami's world.

Arthur Lubow, a contributing writer for the magazine, last wrote about Beck.

At 8:50 every weekday morning, unless he is not in Tokyo, Murakami leads the staff of his art studio, Kaikai Kiki Company Ltd., in a round of calisthenics. Then the employees go off to their various jobs: refining sketches on the computer, daubing paint meticulously onto paintings and sculptures, fielding requests for commercial tie-ins or press interviews with their boss, negotiating licenses and other business contracts or coordinating with friends in New York. In Japan, the studio is called "the Factory," but that was a joke; although silk-screened images of flowers and Brillo boxes did flow out of it, the silver-walled, amphetamine-pumped clubhouse — with its entertainments, intrigues and exquisite costumes — resembled an 18th-century court in Versailles more than it did an auto plant. Yet it's no joke to call Kaikai Kiki a factory.
kami's 60 employees punch in with computerized timecards, and the company has training manuals for new hires. The hours are regular — and long. One daily ritual is the question-and-answer period, in which staff members book a slot of specified duration to ask the chief a question; when I attended, 14 had requested interviews, typically of two minutes each.

The Kaikai Kiki factory complex is situated in a drab suburban district an hour from central Tokyo. One of the little buildings, without toilet or bath, is Murakami's home, in which a sleeping bag serves as a bed. Next to the shed that houses Murakami is an even smaller one that houses potted cactuses. Hybridizing cactus from seed is Murakami's hobby, one for which he has little time. Apparently he has no time for romantic or family attachments, either. "He makes art and sleeps," said Dana Fris-Hansen, executive director of the Austin Museum of Art in Texas and co-curator of a 1998 Murakami exhibition at Bard College in New York. "Some curators are really frustrated, because he'll ask for and usually get the right to sleep in the gallery while he is setting up. He'll bring assistants and sleeping bags, and they'll cook noodles there."

The son of a taxi driver and a housewife, Murakami grew up in Tokyo, then attended Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music, the country's most prestigious arts institution. He holds a Ph.D. in nibonga — the refined hybrid of European and traditional Japanese painting that was invented in the late 19th century. Nibonga, in which traditional resins and pigments are employed to render likenesses of bouquets and landscapes, is a rarefied branch of present-day Japanese art. All the time he was practicing it, Murakami said, he wished instead that he had the talent to draw the manga and anime of otaku culture.

The word "otaku" is usually translated as "geek" or "nerd," but its more precise meaning is steeped in the particularities of Japanese society and language. Literally, the word means "your household." It is a way to refer to another person in conversation without implying either superior or lesser social status. Employed by postwar Japanese housewives, the usage was adopted by the fans — all right, call them geeks — who became obsessed with the minutiae of a particular bit of popular culture. Isolated in their individual homes, these youths shared a passion for the television programming — "Astro Boy," "Ultraman" and so forth — that expanded rapidly in the 1960's. They organized around their fetishistic fascinations to form otaku subcultures, whose members come together periodically in large conventions to discuss, exhibit and trade the objects of their highly focused affections.

The typical otaku is a young male, and some of the manga and the plastic figures are explicitly sexual, often blatantly pedophilic; even when they aren't, the otaku tends to relate to his collection, with caresses and ministrations, as to a girlfriend — if he had a girlfriend. (A Web-site message board heavily frequented by otaku was known as "The number of years I have not had a girlfriend is the same as my age.") In its defiance of the mores of proper Japanese society, otaku culture was disreputable from the outset. It became much more so following a notorious criminal case in 1989, when an otaku named Tsutomu Miyazaki was arrested for the kidnapping and mur-
• VERY KAWAII
Part of the atomstragram sculpture by Chenhwa Bae, 3 Muralumi acolyte, to be installed in Central Park.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DENNIS WINTERS FOR THE NEW YORK
Commercial Value

Toy-size versions of Murakami’s figure “Inochi,” which stands five feet tall when its body is attached, were exported to the United States.
The crisis of modern civilization, the Japanese people were "like a boy of 12." The remark ignited headlines across Japan, with furious resentment superseding the tributes that had hailed MacArthur’s departure. For a show on otaku culture that would demonstrate how Japanese artists responded to their nation’s wartime suffering and postwar subordination, Murakami realized that the title “Little Boy” was perfect. As he told me this story, he sugaredcoated the underlying anger and bitterness, as he does so often both in his conversation and his art, with a joke. “Little Boy and Fat Man—now both things are true exactly of the Japanese people,” he said, patting his potbelly and ordering an extra helping of sushi.

At the beginning of his career, Murakami appeared to be content with the lot of most successful contemporary artists: to create work that is admired by critics and desired by wealthy collectors but leaves the general public baffled or hostile. He was the one conceptual piece similar to the art being made in the West. Among those early works, which began attracting attention in the early 90’s, was “Polyrhythm,” a seven-foot-high slab of yellow resin, minimalist in form, on which many toy United States infantry soldiers climb. Another colossal piece, which he titled “Sea Breeze” after a man’s fragrance, was fabricated of steel plates that open automatically to reveal, like figures in a shrine, a ring of high-intensity floodlights. Probably his most talked-about youthful work was the 1991 “Randoseru Project.” For it, he collected hides of endangered or exotic species—whale, hippopotamus, cobra and so on—and had them brightly dyed and fabricated into the distinctive book bags, called randoseru, that Japanese schoolchildren have carried on their backs over the last century. Koyama, his Tokyo dealer, who has known Murakami since their university days, recalls that the project began with Murakami’s desire to construct an object out of whale skin at a time when Japan, controversially, refused to join an international ban on commercial whaling. Someone suggested the shape of the randoseru. Behind its cuteness, the bag has bellicose overtones: it was adopted by the Japanese in the late 19th century on a Western military model. Murakami has kept an impassioned distance from the elaborate commentary the work inspired from critics. “Randoseru,” my early work, got a really good reaction.
From the art scene," he told me. "But I hate that reaction. It looks like political art, but I am just joking."

In 1994, with a fellowship from the Manhattan-based Asian Cultural Council, Murakami came to live in New York. During that year he started to re-emphasize his Japaneseess. Upon returning home he began to create objects that looked as if they were applying for admittance to the otaku world even as he also tried to cast an unfamiliar critical spotlight on this insular subculture.

For two years, Murakami researched the concept and execution of "Miss Ko" (pronounced "ko-ko"), the sculpture that would begin to fascinate Western collectors and set a record at Christie's New York. Collaborating with the designers at Kaiyodo, the pre-eminent manufacturer of figures in Japan, he designed a high-breasted, stiletto-heeled, rapidly smiling blonde in a skimpy waitress uniform. Made of fiberglass, "Miss Ko" is six feet tall, commanding attention in an art gallery but arousing anxious displeasure among otaku, who like their figures small and submissive.

Murakami provoked the otaku again in 1997 with his next figure, which he titled "Hiropo," after a popular recreational drug in postwar Japan. His idea was that the erotic pretty-girl figures known as brisebois were addictive for the otaku who collected them. Once again he made the figure big (seven feet high), but this time he was anything but vapid. Inspired by a magazine cover he had seen while attending a comic-book otaku gathering, of a bare-breasted woman with a nipple shaped like a penis, he designed a nude (although, in keeping with otaku preferences, one lacking genitalia or pubic hair) who is squeezing from her gargantuan breasts and oversize nipples a stream of milk that swells behind her like a jump rope. The following year he created a male companion piece, "My Lonesome Cowboy," of a masturbating naked man whose ejaculation floats laso-style in front of him. Both "Hiropo" and "My Lonesome Cowboy" have the big eyes and grins that are found on popular children's anime and manga characters like Astro Boy (the Japanese name is Might Atom) and Sailor Moon. While otaku people generally ignored the "Cowboy" figure, they loathed "Hiropo." "Hiropo is like a satire, and these figures are the object of affection for otaku people," said Masahiko Asano, an otaku expert whom Murakami has enlisted as a consultant.

"Once Mr. Murakami asked me why his characters cannot be the object of affection. I said: 'When you see Miss Ko', can you masturbate to her? If not, it can't be.' He said, 'No, I couldn't do that.'"

In 1999, at an otaku festival, Murakami released "Second Mission Project. Ko?", a three-piece sculptural installation that depicts a favorite otaku theme—a young woman morphing into an airplane. Triumphantly, it was praised by both art critics and otaku. In hindsight, however, this work was a coda. Murakami's sculptures of sexually charged figures, difficult for viewers and expensive for fabricators, form a discrete chapter in his artistic career and his infatuation with otaku. Although this work may be the most interesting he has yet produced, he was dissatisfied. He wanted his characters to be objects of affection. He was a pop artist who longed to be popular.

IF YOU WERE to draw a map of Japanese popular culture (a map like one from the Magellan era, grossly oversimplified but still useful), you might say that male-oriented otaku culture lies at one pole and that the female domain of kawaii (cuteness) is situated at the other. In the mid-90's, Murakami set sail from otaku toward kawaii. Even while he was investigating otaku model figures, he was already researching cute cartoon characters. Such characters, of course, had been a mainstay of Pop Art in the United States since the early 60's. Warhol used images of Mickey Mouse. Lichtenstein raided the funny pages. Murakami, however, did something else. He created his own characters.

His first, Mr. DOB, got his name from an abbreviation of a nonsensical phrase that alluded to many things—a popular television entertainor, a sexual imitator, the indigenous Ainu people and who knows what else. The phrase also translates, more or less, as "Why? Why?" Since this could serve as Murakami's motto, it was a good choice for a character who became his alter ego. Initially, the DOB character resembled Mickey, but over time he evolved, first turning toothy and fierce, then becoming terribly cute—kawaii. "In 1994, Mr. DOB had an ironic content," said the critic Mitori Matsui. "It became something different later on—almost like Murakami's own house brand. He was always interested in competing with popular art on a real popular level. The things he did up to 'S.M.P. Ko' were..."
Chinatsu Ban and the headquarters of her sculpture “V W X Yellow Elephant Underwear/H.U.Kiddy Elephant Underwear” for Central Park. Naho Kusukata is so obsessed with eating that it seeps into every aspect of her art. Masakatsu Iwamoto, known as Mr., has a very claustraphobic interest in young girls, as evidenced in his work in progress.

way too intellectual for his purpose. He wanted to become his own industry.”

With his customary devotion to research, Murakami analyzed the principles of kawaii. "I found a system for what is a cute character," he said. On a whiteboard at Kaikai Kiki, he drew me a circle with the top half blank and the bottom half containing two dots for eyes and a smiling mouth. “In the kawaii system, this scale is very important,” he said. Over the last decade, Murakami has released numerous cute characters; among them, Mr. Pointy, smiling flowers, colorful mushrooms and the good and bad toddlers Kaikai and Kiki. Emblematic of his reorientation from confrontation to cuteness, he changed the name of his studio in 2001 from the Hiropon Factory to Kaikai Kiki. He said he hopes to expand his audience by making animated films with his characters, and he has already opened a six-person animation facility in Tokyo and leased space in Los Angeles. (He plans to include an animated film in a midcareer retrospective of his work, to be held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007.)

The apothecary of kawaii culture is Hello Kitty, the big-eyed, beribboned, expressionless pussy-cat character that stalks a billion-dollar-a-year business for the Sanrio company. Created in 1974, the Kity character took off in 1985, first in Japan and then internationally. When I asked Matsui how she accounted for Kity’s popularity, she practically shrieked in response: “Because I think humanism is dead! Because people are weak and scared.” In a more measured tone, she added: “It’s easy to accept Kity because it’s so dumb and expressionless. It doesn’t demand that you make any reference.”

For an authoritative view, I paid a call at Sanrio on Yuko Tanno, who has been the chief designer of Hello Kitty for 25 years. With long auburn hair and wearing brown artificiul-leather pants, she didn’t look the least bit kawaii herself. When she discussed the enduring popularity of Kity, she was all business. Hoping to gauge how far Murakami has gone in his quest for widespread popularity, I asked her to rate Kaikai, the sweeter, rabbit-costumed half of the Kaikai Kiki toddlers, on the kawaii meter. She was troubled by Kaikai’s smiling mouth. "In most Sanrio characters, we don’t express an emotion through the mouth," she said. "With Kitty, you don’t even see a mouth." She credited this mouthlessness for much of Kitty’s popularity. "When someone feels blue or depressed, they may want the character to sympathize with their feeling or to get angry with them or to offer encouragement," she said. "Without a clear expression of the mouth, this is possible. It can be interpreted in different ways."

Murakami understands the infantilism that underlies the Hello Kitty phenomenon. Like otaku culture, kawaii culture for him is an expression of Japan’s postwar impotence. (In a photograph with the strapping General MacArthur, the diminutive, once divine Emperor Hirohito looked very kawaii.) However, Murakami is also designing characters that for those unacquainted with his analysis seem simply — and irresistibly — kawaii. It’s a delicate balancing act, reaching a mass audience while maintaining a critical distance. "I created Mr. DOB for a really serious reason, but girls would say, ‘Oh, cute,’ ” he told me. "Japanese don’t like serious art. But if I can transform cute characters into serious art, they will love my piece." The early DOB’s were often distorted and belligerent or combined with jagged lines and distressed surfaces that alluded to traditional Japanese painting. More recently, they seem simply cute.

The appearance of Murakami’s DOB coincided with the emerging popularity of Yoshitomo Nara, the other Japanese artist of Murakami’s generation who has found great favor in the West. Like Murakami, Nara was drawing cute cartoonlike figures, but more sincerely. His characters were
In Japan, there is no pecking order whereby an original outranks a well-made copy — or a work of art in a gallery is more precious than a piece of merchandise in a shop.

children who might be spitting obscenities or brandishing weapons but retained a look of adorable purity. At first it seemed that Nara, like Murakami, was offering a critique of the character culture while profiting from it. However, while it is still uncertain whether Murakami can walk this tightrope, the Nara enterprise appears to have relinquished any pretense of critical detachment. The artist himself, with his well-advertised love of punk music and a popular Web site, attracts a rock star’s following. The openings of his shows are attended by flocks of admiring female fans, who are known as Nara girls. Koyama, who is Nara’s dealer as well as Murakami’s, said: “People feel they can enter his painting, and they feel very close to him. Takashi’s paintings have a distance, very cool. Takashi is speaking to a public in an official way. Nara is talking to the neighbors.”

At heart, Murakami is a detached observer. It was in that role that he elucidated his “Superflat” theory — in a 2000 catalog essay for an exhibition by that name that he curated in Japan and then took the next year to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The show exuberantly jumbled an extreme range of Japanese art products, from 18th-century Edo screens to erotic plastic figurines of schoolgirls, all to illustrate Murakami’s argument. With great cleverness and convincing specificity, he took the well-known absence of any native division in Japan between fine art and craft and linked it to the visual characteristics of traditional Japanese artwork — particularly the patterned surfaces and lack of spatial perspective. Both socioculturally and aesthetically, Japanese art was flat, which made it superflat. In Murakami’s view, the multilayer composition of a group of roosters on an 18th-century gold-leafed screen requires a viewer’s eye to dart here and there, without providing a comfortable place to rest. In the same way, there is no pecking order in Japanese tradition whereby an original outranks a well-made copy or a work of art in a gallery is more precious than a piece of merchandise in a shop. The time-honored Japanese worldview, in other words, closely resembles the postmodern one, in which sensations and images rain down incessantly and you have no choice but to take it all in as it comes.

In his artwork, Murakami has applied the “Superflat” theory most strictly in his recent paintings of the Vuitton monogram. On canvases panels of different sizes, with black or white backgrounds, his studio meticulously reproduces his designs for Vuitton. When the fashion designer Marc Jacobs, who, as artistic director of Vuitton, commissioned Murakami to reexamine the monogram, saw the paintings at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, he was, unsurprisingly, pleased. “Anything like that I love, when things go back and forth, chicken and egg,” he told me. “Does art imitate life or life imitate art?” But some art-world people grumbled. Painting one panel in the monogram pattern could be seen as a comment on the similarity between artistic and commercial production; corralling out many of them compressed the artistic and commercial to an uncomfortable degree. “He took a few kidney punches on it,” said Tim Blum, his Los Angeles dealer. “The bag thing was interesting — the show was something else. A lot of people really hated the show. Highly schooled people, who look carefully at Murakami, think, ‘This is weird — what’s he doing?’ That project was the perfect endpoint for the arc of that part of his career. He became superflat.”

Murakami perceives the hostile critical response to the monogram paintings, but he trusts his own instincts. When I first met him in New York in November, he invited me to watch his inspec-
MURAKAMI

Continued from Page 57

tion of nine monogram paintings at his satellite
studio in a converted cinder-block garage in Wil-
liamsburg, Brooklyn. He keeps the studio to avoid
shipping fees on work for the American market.)
As usual, Murakami degraded his own
technical skills. Unlike Nara, for example, he
ever applies his hand to his own work.
He is a conceptual artist. Yet even though the
painting is performed by studio assistants, Mu-
arakami exerts tight quality control. That day he
was especially on the lookout for panels in which
the paint had been applied more thickly on the
background than on the motifs, a problem that
had been recurring mysteriously in the Williams-
burg plant. A smooth surface without visible
brushstrokes is characteristic of both monogam
painting and factory production. It is also a fea-
ture of Murakami’s art.

He estimated that he had made 62 or 70
monograms and would stop at about 100. He
added that he had done approximately 102
Murakami surrounds himself with artists who are quirky
or obsessive. ‘I think he is a very lonely person,
and he needs to create his own family,’ one critic says.

DOB’s and 62 mushrooms. “Just like with War-
hol soup cans or Marilyn, if there is a need in
the market, I can put them out,” he said. “The
-gallery worries that there are too many, the
value will go down and their auction prices will
bellow. But I don’t think so. If there is a demand,
I will keep making them.”

When the subject of the monogram paintings
came up again in Tokyo, he elaborated on his
motivations. He said the paintings allowed him
to transform work for hire into his own art. As
prevalent, he mentioned an appropriation piece
that the American artist Jeff Koons did, in
which he put his own frame on a poster of a bas-
ketball star. He also cited the “dollaring paint-
ings” that Warhol composed by pasting down real
doll bills. He admires the naked transparency of
these artists’ cashing in on their reputations
to make money. “My concept is, anytime we do
the honest thing, we get the win,” Murakami
said. “People find it very difficult to find their
honest desire. Andy Warhol did that. I love his
dairy: the dryer two weeks, the coffee is too
sweet, the weather is cold. It’s a life. Warhol is a
master artist for me because he was a really hon-
est person.”

IN ADDITION to being a factory, Kaikai Kiki, as
the curator Dana Els-Hansen said, is “a home
for wayward artists.” Murakami surrounds him-
self with young people and enthusiastically
promotes their careers. He looks for artists who are
quirky or obsessive. Although as a theorist he
subscribes to the Japanese depreciation of ori-
inality, as a curator he knows that the appearance
of originality is a selling point. If Kaikai Kiki art-
ists go on to have their own shows in the West, he
takes a 10 percent commission (from the gal-
lery’s share of the sales, not the artist’s). But
commercial profit is a secondary motivation.
“He wants to become a schoolmaster,” the critic
Midori Matsui said. “I think he is a very lonely
person, and he needs to create his own family.”
Once Murakami tried to establish a school. “Like
a very small school, a tribe of artists, in the Edo
era — one teacher with 10 students, very close.”
Murakami said. “It sounds very sentimental. I
wanted that school.” He said that a young wom-
an in the class developed a stalker’s crush on him,
forcing him to abandon his dream. In a less struc-
tured way, however, his studio continues.

Like most Kaikai Kiki employees, Chintani
Ban, Murakami’s secretary, studied art in college.
When she met him, she was selling cellphones
to earn a living while painting in her spare time.
She would send him invitations to her exhibitions
and he would offer encouraging replies. Eventu-
ally he asked her to join a group show he curat-
ed of young female Japanese artists. Two years
ago he offered her a position at Kaikai Kiki.

Along with several other Kaikai Kiki artists,
Ban will be included in the “Little Boy” exhibi-
tion. She paints mostly elephants that are ex-
tremely kawaii. Tom Eccles, director of New
York City’s Public Art Fund, who helped organi-
ze Murakami’s past installation at Rockefeller
Center, was looking for a sculpture to place at
the southeast entrance to Central Park in con-
junction with the Japan Society show. “Tom Ec-
cles was really interested in a cute character,”
Murakami told me. “So I said to Chintani, ‘Do
you want to do that?’ She said, ‘Sure, why not?’

Which is how, on a February morning, Ban
came to be standing alongside a nine-foot-tall
elephant sculpture in a chilly fabrication facili-
ty in suburban Tokyo.

“Great,” she said approvingly to the manager
of the plant. They were both waiting for Murar-
 kami to arrive.

“What is it made of?” I asked Ban. She went to
ask the manager.

“FRB, a kind of fiberglass,” she reported.

“What does it weigh?” I wondered. She once
again sought out the manager.

“Five hundred kilos.” At more than half a ton,
that was a respectable weight for an elephant.

Murakami, once he arrived, scrutinized the
sculpture more critically. He observed it from all
angles, indicating to the manager different bulges
and hollows that needed smoothing. Mainly,
though, he discussed with the manager whether
there might be a way to divide the sculpture before
it was shipped. He had recently discovered that
flying a piece this bulky to New York would cost
about $75,000. On top of that, the cost of fabrica-
tion — including the painting, which was still to
be done — added another $125,000.

“It was a mistake,” he told me. “With the Ja-
pan Society, everything loses money.” Eccles
communicated about $75,000 to Kaikai Kiki for the
sculpture. “That’s already big money for a young
artist,” Murakami said. Kaikai Kiki is helping it
underwrite the Japan Society show, a long-term
investment with at best a delayed payoff.

Still, this New York event will be an opportu-
nity to showcase the talents of several of Mur-
arakami’s acolytes. The exhibition includes work
by one of his earliest volunteers, Masakatsu Iwam-
to, a 35-year-old man with dyed-blond hair and
dark mustache who calls himself “Mr.” As a paix
staff member, Mr. now administers the Gesiai,
supernatural little brother for Japanese art. Mr.
Murakami has staged since 2000; in his creative
time, Mr. has a very object-like interest in barely
pubescent girls, which Murakami has en-
couraged him to express in his art. Chiharu Aoshi-
ma, 32, who administers the design department
at Kaikai Kiki, uses illustrator software to create
fantasies that typically place girls in luridly col-
ored natural settings. Aoshima is having a one-
woman show in late May in Los Angeles at Blum
& Poe; thanks to the Public Art Fund, at the time
of “Little Boy” she will display huge paper-
like mural, printed with ink jets onto vinyl, in the
Union Square subway station in Lower Manhat-
tan. Arguably the most talented of the Kaikai Kik
younger set is Ayaka Takano, 29, a former volunteer
who now lives in Kyoto. Her cartoonish androg-
yous figures recall the Vorticists of 1910 and the
realism as well as her lifelong devotion to science
fiction. Whatever their abilities, all of these artists
owe their positions in the limelight to Murakami.
They can exist as artists only within the context
of what Murakami has devised as a stage, like ‘su-
pernatural little brother’ for Japanese art.

An aspiring artist who especially interests Mu-
arakami is Mthorni Kunikata, a chubby, bushi
woman who looks younger than her 25 years.”

“Any time I am looking for a Kaikai Kiki artist,
I look for an original artist that is hidden,” he
said. “Mthorni, if she wants to create new
manga or painting, she has to go back to her his-
tory; Moiger brother is dead, and my younger
brother is psychologically ill and screaming, I
can’t escape from here, but I am very fat and I
cannot escape. She cannot organize herself —
how to escape, how to create something.” Murar-
aki is gratified by the progress she has made in
the five years he has known her. “She can open
her heart and now do her art,” he said. It is
characteristic of his deep-rooted ambivalence that
Murakami is drawn to Kunikata’s original and re-
pellent take on kawaii culture when his own art is
becoming kawaii in a simpler way.

Hardly fat, Kunikata nevertheless thinks she
is overweight. And, as Murakami indicates, she
has a troubled family background. At her suggest-
ion, we met for our talk at a cake cafe in Yokohama
near the camera store where she works as a greeter.
Unable to decide what to eat, she ordered slices of
two kinds of strawberry shortcake, which she
crushed consumed while I browsed through note-
books of her pencil-drawn manga.
In the first one, I opened to a drawing of very
cute kawaii dogs — ka-
Continued on Page 76
Continued from Page 64

wai, that is, except for the fact that they were killing and eating children. I turned the page and saw graphic depictions of naked girls being sexually violated.

Kunikata looked up from her cake. "I’m very embarrassed," she said. "Don’t open it wide. People are eating.

More discreetly, I flipped past a drawing of a girl with bleeding arm stump to find more girls, sometimes bound, frequently confronted by boys with huge erections. I saw a puzzling one of a girl, a boy, and a strange cat. I asked about the cat.

"The cat is dead," she said. "It’s Valentine’s Day. I knew that in Japan on Valentine’s Day, women and girls give chocolates to males they are fond of. "The girl killed the cat," Kunikata continued, "and made a chocolate fondue from the cat and gave it to the boy." I nodded and kept turning, not having anything in particular to inquire about the pictures of boys performing oral sex on tied-up girls and girls being forced into fellatio with very well endowed boys.

Reaching into her backpack, she showed me her recent work. On the backs of plastic models of sushi, the kind that are seen in restaurant windows, she had painted likenesses of slim, sexy girls.

"I see why Murakami loves Kunikata’s art. It reveals the fear and anger that lie just beneath the surface of the kawaii culture — or, to adopt the metaphor of superflat, the feelings that are embedded right on the surface, for those who look closely and knowledgeably. The manner in which Kunikata’s eating obsession seeps into even the art of her art also reminded me of how, in Murakami’s view, the atom-bomb trauma permeates his country’s culture. The pictures of Japan’s past destruction are transposed into a catastrophic science-fiction future, and the country’s childhood relationship to the United States is embraced in a celebration of the kawaii (a word derived from karaaizoo, meaning “pitiful” or “pathetic”). A similar thing occurs in another fraught area: sexual relations between young men and women. The otaku portrayals of sexuality — fixated on compliant, air-brushed schoolgirls — are divorced from emotional reality, even from physical reality. This neutering of real life was epitomized by the enthusiastic reaction of Japanese children to Murakami’s generation to the animated versions of atomic explosions and fire-bombings they watched on TV. One reason these kids cheered the demolition of Tokyo is that it was accomplished by a wizard: the most influential special-effects designer of the day, Eiji Tsuburaya, who learned his craft as a propagandist during World War II, preparing a rousing and convincing recreation of the (unfilmed) Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. After the war, Tsuburaya redirected his talents — and his agents of destruction — into Godzilla, Ultraman, Rodan and Mothra. The imagery retained its stirring power. The context was secondary.

Anime and manga are intact copies of Mickey Mouse, Betty Boop and other American cartoon characters, modified for Japanese taste and (at the time they were developed) for the limitations of Japanese technology. The Japanese have always had a genius for these adaptations. Murakami is a great admirer of the Kano School, a dynasty of painters who catered to the shoguns for almost four centuries by taking the principles of Chinese art (like prominent brushstrokes and ink monochrome) and Japanizing them. The Kano School centered on the successive generations of the Kano family, supplemented by talented students who went off on their own and took the Kano name. It is another model for Kaikai Kiki, which means "brave, strong and sensitive," was borrowed from a critic in the late 17th century who used it to describe the paintings of Eitoku Kano. One of Murakami’s favorite artworks is a screen depicting an old plum tree that was painted for a temple in Kyoto by Sansetsu Kano in the 17th century and is now owned by the Metropolitan Museum in New York. In his "Superflat" essay, Murakami pointed to similarities between the spiky lines in Sansetsu’s eccentric masterpiece and the designs of the leading anime artist Yoshinori Kanada. At about the same time, he produced a few paintings of his own in this style. Aside from his appreciation of the work, Murakami wonders why the Kano School perpetuated itself. He would like to start a line of comparable longevity. "How did the Kano School survive 300 years or more?" Kanada once said to me, "Japanese culture doesn’t need to create an original something. A school is OK. A little difference is great. Kaikai Kiki School is OK. — Mr. and Chibi and Chinatsu.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, there is currently a small show centered on the Kano School. I walked through it not long ago with its curator, Miyoko Murase, a leading scholar of Japanese art. "I’m sure the Kano artists felt they were upholding the principles of Chinese painting," she explained. "But to sell, they had to accommodate Japanese tastes. That went first of all to the introduction of color. By the time Sansetsu painted the old plum trees, the distortion and almost Cubist sense of form was possible because there was that breadth al-

owed in the Kano School." Along with their love of color, the Japanese preferred ornamental patterns over Chinese naturalism. And they had a long-standing fondness for narrative. The word "manga" in its current usage was popularized by the great 19th-century artist Hokusai to describe his illustrated, often comical, narratives. But the form by another name goes back much further. At the beginning of the exhibition, Murase showed me an early-14th-century hand scroll, known as an enoki, that vividly depicted an unfolding battle. This is part of a genre of stories of homosexual love between monks that was popular at the time. In this relationship, the love occurs off the page. With minimal alteration, the Met could package this emaki and sell it in a manga shop in Tokyo today.

Of course, many of the esoteric otaku references in Murakami’s art are lost on Western observers. But he isn’t interested in all that much if Westerners lack the background to recognize them. "In the 70’s, Japanese culture loved American rock ‘n’ roll," he noted by way of analogy. "Eagles’ ‘Hotel California,’ we cannot really understand, but ‘Mmm, mmmm, mmmmm, Hotel California,’ Oh yes, I understand." Still, he emphasized, "if the audience is really interested, they have to learn everything." It may be that Americans feel they understand Murakami without conducting research because he is reacting to a hyperstimulated, over-commercialized Japan that looks a lot like their own society. For unique historical reasons, the Japanese arrived earlier at an ahistorical worldview. Sawaragi compares the manners in which the Japanese have dealt with political reality in the postwar years to the capsule toys, known as gachapon, that can be purchased for a dollar or two from vending machines. "War or history have come to be sealed inside the anime or manga world," he said. "It is a sterilized, innocent, purified experience, defined by putting everything war-related inside a capsule." The battle planes and atomic monsters reside in the gachapon machine in cute, tiny images. Sanitized, they pop out, one after another, in no particular order. 

PG 13 of 13