The Two Faces of Takashi Murakami

He's high art. He's low culture. He's a one-man mass-market machine.

By Jeff Howe

Takashi Murakami is often billed as the next Andy Warhol. Like the American pop art icon, he fuses high and low, pulling imagery from consumer culture to produce visually arresting, highly original work. He is vigorously, ingeniously self-promotional. In the past few years, Murakami has swept across the US and Europe, receiving fawning media attention and exhibiting at big-name museums. Just shy of 42, the charismatic artist even lives and works in what he calls a factory. How much more Warhol can you get?

But there's a key difference. Warhol took from the low and gave to the high. With ironic detachment, his work - paintings few could afford, films few could understand - appealed to an audience in on the joke. Murakami, on the other hand, takes from the low and gives to the high, the low, and everything in between. He makes paintings, sculptures, videos, T-shirts, key chains, mousepads, plush dolls, cell phone caddies, and, last but not least, $5,000 limited-edition Louis Vuitton handbags. Murakami's work hits all price points: This fall he plans on selling plastic figurines packaged with bubble gum - a Murakami for $3. Warhol died before a T-shirt company licensed his soup cans and made a bundle. Murakami, who reads Bill Gates for management tips, knows better than to make that mistake.

It may be old hat to draw ideas and imagery from the mass market, but it's something else to hawk your wares in the candy aisle. In this as in other things, Japan may be leading us into the future. Murakami, who grew up in Tokyo, sees his heritage as key to his art: "The Japanese don't really have a difference or hierarchy between high and low." His "art merchandise" is dominated by a cast of creepily cute characters inspired by manga comics and anime cartoons - the twin pillars of Japanese pop culture. Cartoon characters have figured in high art since Roy Lichtenstein first transferred a Sunday comic to canvas in the early '60s. But the art establishment - steeped in old-world prejudices against mass merchandising - took Lichtenstein and Warhol's art as a critique. Murakami's work celebrates commerce, and commerce returns the favor: His Vuitton handbags have become one of the French fashion house's best-selling lines. Speaking through an interpreter, Murakami explains that his art process is "more about creating goods and selling them than about exhibitions." Not that he's shunning the big shows. In September, a 23-foot sculpture of one of his trademark characters - Mr. Pointy, a cross between a blissed-out Buddha and a space alien - went up in New York City's Rockefeller Center.

Murakami began his art career as a traditionalist. During his twenties at Tokyo National University, he worked on a doctorate in Nihonga, an amalgam of Western and Eastern painting styles dating to the late 19th century. But after witnessing the rise of anime and manga in Japanese culture during the '80s, he grew disillusioned with Nihonga, finding it irrelevant to daily Japanese life. He wanted to create something that would leave a lasting impression. "I set out to investigate the secret of market survivability - the universality of characters such as Mickey Mouse, Sonic the Hedgehog, Doraemon, Miffy, Hello Kitty, and their knock-offs, produced in Hong Kong," Murakami wrote for a 2001 retrospective of his work. The result, in 1993, was Mr. DOB, Murakami's most ubiquitous and enduring character.

Now, as president of Kaikai Kiki, Murakami presides over an art-making corporation that operates from a campus of buildings known as the Hiropon Factory, outside Tokyo, as well as a studio in Brooklyn. While Warhol's Factory featured such colorful characters as...
Candy Darling, Lou Reed, and Edie Sedgwick, Hiropon is peopled by accountants, publicists, managers, and a computerized administrative system. "Staff members type up reports of what they work on each day. We then send everyone an email that compiles all the reports," explains Yuko Sakata, Kaikai Kiki's New York exhibition coordinator. Murakami, she says, got the idea for daily logs after reading Gates' Speed of Thought.

Murakami's business acumen suggests healthy margins and careful attention to costs. He won't discuss his corporation's balance sheet, but his New York dealer, Marianne Boesky, says paintings from his most recent show sold for up to $250,000. And in September, the owner of Christie's, Francois Pinault, purchased the Rockefeller sculpture of Mr. Pointy for $1.5 million - a remarkable price for factory-produced art.

Murakami owes much of his success to the highly efficient Hiropon Factory. Hardly a reclusive artist toiling in his garret studio, he employs 25 assistants to perform specialized tasks, and he uses technology in pragmatic, labor-saving ways. Because his work features a number of recurring motifs - eyeballs, mushrooms, flowers - the factory maintains an immense electronic archive of renderings that he can cut and paste into the files he's working on. Murakami may be the first artist to make paintings from his own portfolio of digital clip art.

Each creation begins as a sketch in one of numerous pocket-sized notebooks. Full-size drawings are then scanned into the computer. From there, Murakami "paints" his works in Adobe Illustrator, tweaking the composition and cycling through thousands of colors until at last he hands the finished versions off to his assistants. His staff then prints out the work on paper, silk-screens the outline onto canvas, and commences painting. Without this embrace of technology, Murakami says, "I could have never produced this many works this efficiently, and the work wouldn't be as intense."

The fusion of art and computing led Murakami to a pictorial style that rejects the illusion of depth and perspective. Dubbed superflat, the approach isn't entirely new - Warhol's paintings often read flat - but Murakami has something else in mind. Superflat captures the aesthetics of our technological age: PDAs, digital billboards, flat-screen TVs. An exhibition curated by Murakami, titled simply Superflat, made its way to the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 2001. "I'm amazed at how that show continues to reverberate," says Michael Darling, an assistant curator at LA MoCA who helped bring the show to the States. "Superflat also refers to the leveling of distinctions between high and low. Murakami likes to flaunt that he can make a million-dollar sculpture and then take the same subject and crank out a bunch of tchotchkes."

The danger is that Murakami's unapologetic hucksterism may obscure just how good his art is. His images are disturbing and beautiful, and, above all, full of ideas. This alone won't secure his place in art history. What should is the way he marries talent to a keen understanding and manipulation of market forces. And unlike Warhol, when college kids plaster Mr. DOB on their dorm walls, he gets paid.

http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.11/artist.html