It looks at you with huge vacant eyes and a big wide smile. It’s made up of circles stacked one on top of the other, like a snowman made of some magical, two dimensional material. With a circular head endearingly bigger than its rotund body and two playful circles for ears on top, it’s familiar, but you’re not sure where you’ve seen it before. Is it some Japanese cartoon character? One of Pikachu’s pocket monster friends? A Hayao Miyazaki creation?

Negative to all the above. It’s the Louis Vuitton Panda of course! Created by Tokyo’s reigning King of Pop Art, Takashi Murakami. After Louis Vuitton artistic director Marc Jacobs worked with punk prince Stephen Sprouse to give the classic brand a shot of color and chaos, Murakami was recruited in 2003 to bring his Asian Cute sensibilities to the brand.
The resulting designs were incredibly popular. It was no coincidence that Louis Vuitton’s Japan and U.S. sales went up an incredible 20 percent in the third quarter of 2003 compared to the previous year.

Ironically, Murakami’s cute designs were even more jarring than anti-establishmentarian Sprouse’s. The latter came up with graffiti-inspired designs, which still managed to exude money, sophistication and glamour. But Murakami’s designs literally looked stamped on. The smiling cartoon characters in simple, candy colors printed over the classic brown and gold Louis Vuitton monogram were of such a gratingly discordant color-scheme and design, it seemed as if someone had printed the Murakami design on as an afterthought. Talk about real punk rock. In a world of calculatedly cool misfits, Murakami was the genuine nonconformist.

When asked what statement he thinks his LV designs made, he responded with a simple “I think it sent a message that it was not a bad thing for artists to have clients.” As if any hired artist would splash anime baby-faces over a revered and respected institution.

Perhaps the man really can’t help it. Or, perhaps there is a design behind his designs. His work is undoubtedly cute, but shockingly so. “I always emphasize that the power of the dark side exists even in cuteness and in the thoughts of peace-addicted people,” he explains.

Of course, how perfect! Those Louis Vuitton handbag designs are the supreme marriage of the “dark” and the “light.” A three thousand dollar handbag with a kid’s cartoon design. Stifled old European money meets childish computer-geek chic. High art meets consumerism, we can go with that, we love that here in America, it’s so Andy Warhol, we get it.

Then how about sexy, big breasted but pubescent cartoon characters as art?

Miss ko2 is over 6 feet tall with long, long legs and blond, flowing hair. But she’s no valkyrie. Her eyes are big and demure, her expression vacant but cute. She wears an impossibly short, frilly waitress’ outfit stretched tight over her ample Pamela Anderson breasts—that part of her anatomy is so aggressively sexual, it seems to not belong on her otherwise demure, childish frame. It looks like a figurine you would find in the room of an anti-social computer geek. Only much, much bigger. Freakishly big.

This isn’t any figurine. It’s a piece of art created by Takashi Murakami, and it sold for $567,500 at an auction at Christie’s New York in 2003.

Did that make you uncomfortable? There are few taboos in America stronger than pedophilia. The Virginia Department of Health even has a controversial campaign encouraging people to call the police when they see a father holding his own daughter’s hand. And that makes Miss ko2 a real combination of “the power of the dark side exist(ing) even in cuteness,” as Murakami says.

In a strange twist of cultural influences, American fans of Japanimation are much more in tune with the underground anime scene than the average Japanese person. It’s true that anime permeates society and adults read manga in Japan in much the same way adults read novels in the U.S. But the bizarre, violent and sexual world of underground geek-chic animation is almost unknown to the average Japanese citizen. Murakami is quoted as saying in Komori On Press, a publication by printing machine manufacturer Komori, “I… felt that the anime scene
in America was a bit too heavy. I wanted to present an anime/otaku [Japanese computer geek] world with a lighter and brighter mood.”

When I asked Murakami if he was bothered by the Western media’s focus on the “freaky” aspects of Japanese culture, his response was a joyous, “No, I think it’s great. It’s peaceful, it’s wonderful!” He referred to otaku culture as a symptom of “peace-obsessed people.” As if to say that, as a wealthy and pacifist country barred constitutionally from war, Japanese society has become full of vacant smiles and happy feelings. The very embodiment of the Louis Vuitton bag stamped with smiling cartoon faces.

To be fair, Miss ko2 and her kind don’t really have pedophile-connotations within Japanese society. Put your Western paradigm of right and wrong away, because in Japan, sexy is submissive, shy, demure and childish. And perhaps Murakami has heard the Western feminist attack on his work and his country too many times, because he was quite defensive when asked about the combination of childish and sexy in his work and in his society.

“No wait a moment,” he said. “American people’s feelings about sex are infinitely more aggressive compared to those of Japanese people. For example, I remember reading an article somewhere about how when this certain actress got married, she and her husband signed a marriage contract in which it was stipulated that they would have sex more than twice a week. I have never known a Japanese person to be as aggressive as that.”

He also claimed that there are no Japanese people who read erotic manga on commuter trains—an aspect of Japanese culture made famous by Lost In Translation. If he means hardcore pornographic manga, than he may be right. However average, adult-targeted monthly manga magazines often have what Westerners would deem sexually explicit content, and these magazines are read openly on trains.

Chalk it up to cultural differences. Across our countries there is a mutual fascination, as well as an impulse to recoil. What is normal for Japan is erotic or even perverse for the U.S., and vice versa, but at the end of the day, Murakami’s artwork is just as cute in America as it is in Japan. “Everybody loves cute,” he explains, “you don’t have to be Japanese.”
© Murakami, a retrospective exhibition, will be at MOCA in Los Angeles, October 27, 2007 - February 11th, 2008.