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## J-pop sucker punch

By *admin*

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With brand names and bright colors, "MURAKAMI" gets you in the gut

› [a&eletters@sfbg.com](mailto:a&eletters@sfbg.com)

Visceral reactions are the last thing one might expect from the perversely brilliant "© Murakami," Takashi Murakami's well-publicized survey exhibition at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art. The telling copyright symbol that precedes the artist's name in the exhibition title fits the cool, post-Warholian corporate-style control he exerts over his art and his identity. The Japanese but globally recognized artist is the kingpin of tweaked J-pop, a genre associated with plastic Hello Kitty cute, and he's the CEO of his own brand and studio-factory, Kaikai Kiki Co., from which he produces his paintings, sculptures, products, and films, as well as promotes other Japanese artists who work in the manga-inspired vein he has dubbed Super Flat.

Yet despite the surface gloss in the sprawling exhibition of nearly 100 works — and throngs of viewers — I repeatedly experienced powerful gut reactions to a spectacle that is less interesting for any specific painting, sculpture, or animation than for functioning in totality as a well-burnished plastic mirror of a world driven by glittering global capitalism. The overall picture, not to mention the feeling that accompanies it, is surprisingly haunting.

I first felt the kick in a room wallpapered with Murakami's densely patterned 2003 *Flower (Superflat)* and fitted with equally floral paintings and a plastic spherical sculpture. The deceptively cheerful motif is smiley face rams flower power, their collision erupting in fields of multicolored daisies with superwide grins. The room's bright shades and perky promises are totally alluring — for about 30 seconds. Then it's apparent these are more carnivorous plants than Todd Oldham-designed FTD bouquets. The sheer force of all of that glee hits you with the psychic equivalent of an ate-all-your-Halloween-candy stomachache. It's potentially repellent in a way that signals effective, not necessarily likable art making. As with the überfriendly, consumerist sculptures of Jeff Koons — an artist Murakami cites as an influence — viewers experience either love or hate and often neglect to note the power of the feeling.

Murakami, though, is more familiar to and apparently adored by a broad audience that doesn't ordinarily imbibe contemporary art, his popularity perhaps due to the mass production of many of his objects and images, which are available internationally in Louis Vuitton shops, knockoff stalls, and affordable, hip outlets such as Giant Robot. Nearly 16,000 people saw the show in its first week, a record that prompted MOCA to craft a

media release touting the stars of film and fashion who attended the opening festivities: Angelica Huston, Casey Affleck, Christina Ricci, Cindy Crawford, Courtney Love, Dita Von Teese, Naomi Campbell, Ellen DeGeneres, and Portia de Rossi. There were artists in the house as well — Ed Ruscha and Robert Graham are the only ones listed in the release — but the celebrity roster does much to tip Murakami's balance of high and low culture to sea level.

I experienced a second and more powerful gut reaction, a true frisson, inside the show's infamous, fully operational Louis Vuitton boutique, a project leveraging Murakami's successful multicolore collaboration with the luxury brand. Perched on a mezzanine above the cartoon mushroom sculptures and a giant metal Murakami self-portrait as a stylized Buddha, the shop is a gleaming white box with projected designs animating its exterior, an object positioned inside the show as a participatory installation. That is, you have to pay museum admission to enter the establishment. And once I did, I felt a sense of the uncanny. Bathed in the fluorescence of display case light, I found myself in an alternate universe where people happily, without a shred of irony, shelled out nearly a grand for handbags of a new Murakami LV design available exclusively at MOCA, inspiring international shoppers to make a trip to an art museum for their label fix. This brilliant gesture makes viewers complicit in the act of fervent consumption. Like it or not, we are the subject, the Duchampian readymades, in this setting, and the conceit works brilliantly.

We may view the consumer frenzy as Western, but according to reporter Dana Thomas's luxury-brand exposé, *Deluxe: How Luxury Lost Its Luster* (Penguin, 2007), nearly 40 percent of Japanese citizens own a Vuitton product, for complex reasons: "By wearing and carrying luxury goods covered with logos, the Japanese are able to identify themselves in socioeconomic terms as well as conform to social mores. It's as if they are branding themselves." The latter sentiment perfectly pegs the "©" before Murakami's name in this exhibit's title, but the former points to the superficial Nipponophilia that has stateside audiences lapping up his art's toylike qualities without always noting his references to Japan's cultural context: Murakami's work has much to do with a postwar condition of defeat and a subsequent sense of infantilism due to the United States military presence. Shopping is a component of that complicated mix, as well as a global phenomenon.

Elsewhere hipsters with various incomes and more manga-fied tastes were equally implicated in shopping as they formed a queue to enter the lower-priced former bookstore heaped with more affordable but equally coveted Murakami brand items. Many of the T-shirts, toys, etc., are also displayed in spotlighted niches in a dimly lit installation in the show, a room that plays like a mausoleum for discontinued tchotchkes. It is a solemn space at odds with the toyness of most of the objects inside.

Murakami cooked up more corporeal pop for yet another space: a screening room carpeted with a characteristic motif where the packed house of adults sat like kids ready for cartoons. Three films were shown, including the animated video for Kanye West's "Good Morning," off *Graduation* (Roc-A-Fella, 2007), and an odd clip from an in-production live-action feature about an impotent gangster. Most memorable, though, was the first in a series of animated adventures of the Murakami characters Kai Kai and Kiki in which the screeching childlike creatures zip through a narrative involving watermelons the size of planets and human shit that makes them grow. Everyone poops, Murakami duly notes, and everyone buys. Like it or not, he captures our basic instincts and biological imperatives with surprising truthfulness. Bring your wallet.

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