

# NEW YORK

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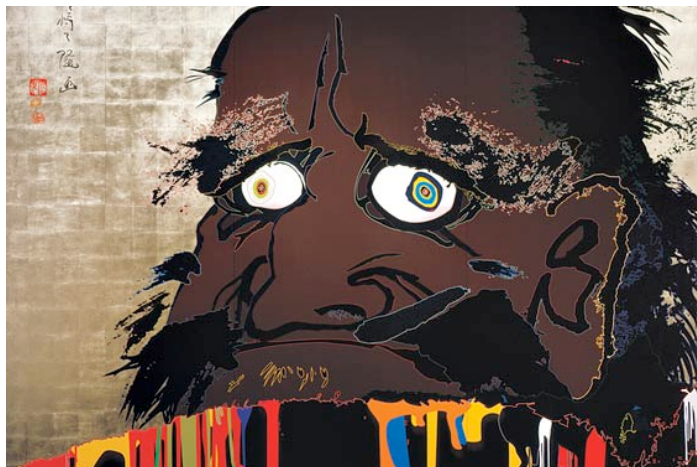
## Deal or No Deal

**Takashi Murakami's show is nakedly commercial; "Underdog" strikes an opposite pose, to much the same effect.**

By **Jerry Saltz**

The New York gallery scene being as incredibly overpopulated and overmoneyed as it is, deep conflicts and contradictions aren't hard to find. Still, it's a little strange to find two shows side by side in a single gallery on Madison Avenue, throwing those contradictions into high relief. But that's happening at the artplex known as Gagosian, often called the most powerful gallery in the world.

On the one hand there are the superslick, super-flat, superexpensive, and to me superficial paintings of the Japanese entrepreneur–Energizer Bunny–artist Takashi Murakami. On the other, there's the seemingly insurrectionary but clubby group show of what could be called the "boys and girls in black and silver," organized by two leading downtown artists, Adam McEwen and Nate Lowman. The two shows, the first flashy, the second self-consciously disheveled, couldn't be more different. Their juxtaposition at Gagosian, however, points up disconcerting similarities; under its combative surface, the group show is as buddy-buddy as the Murakami is self-satisfied. Still, seeing the two exhibitions back-to-back suggests that a shift in aesthetic sensibilities is under way.



*That I may time transcend, that a universe my heart may unfold* (2007), at Gagosian. Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All rights reserved (courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, New York)

The Murakami show is the latest twist from an artist who in the nineties excelled at ultrathin surfaces and magically vapid images of sex and consumerism. Drawing from the realms of manga—the radically distorted creatures that populate Japanese comics—and anime, Murakami painted Mickey Mouse–like characters, sunny mushrooms, and abstract splashes that were part Pop Surrealism, part Hokusai's Great Wave, and part porn. Murakami is a craft-master whiz of cuteness, razzmatazz, and adolescent male fantasy; he once made a life-size sculpture of a big-eyed girl with shaved pudenda who squeezed her phallic nipples and jump-roped over a money shot of milk spurting from her gigantic breasts. He also curated several crackerjack exhibitions that elucidated the Japanese penchant for mirroring the West back to itself, and shed light on how Japan is insular and xenophobic yet simultaneously open and adaptable. If Japan is like the android that finds life (a common anime theme), Murakami is one who breathed life into contemporary Japanese art.

Unfortunately, since around 2001 Murakami has been so set on merging fine art with commercial product that by now all he's doing is moving merch. The best that can be said about Murakami's new work is that he's making pretty money. Or pretty empty money. The main attractions of this exhibition are 50 little happy-faced flower paintings and six large portraits of a haggard-looking Zen patriarch. The flowers are insipid. So are the portraits, although at least with them Murakami is up to his old extreme stylization. But the real content of Murakami's art is money and marketability. Hence, each of the 50 silly flowers reportedly goes for \$90,000; the portraits, about \$1.5 mil per unit. Four better larger flower paintings run about \$450,000; two boring pictures of severed hands, about \$400,000. Needless to say, the gallery reports everything is sold.

Not bad for paintings that have the visual oomph of screensavers and are only placeholders for gullible collectors, who buy them hoping today's feeding frenzy lasts long enough to fob them off on subsequent happy patsies. Or they'll keep them as trophies. Either way, it's a foul feedback loop. While we're laughing at them for being servile and cynical enough to make, sell, or buy these gewgaws, they'll laugh at us for missing out on this payday.

It's wonderful that more artists are making more money from their work. Without the market, the art world would be a pretty boring place. But this is a complete acquiescence to a world where gamesmanship, money, and hype are measures of success; where advisers sell art over the phone from JPEGs to collectors who imagine they'll enter art history by spending exorbitantly. Meanwhile, auction houses cheer them on. Tobias Meyer, worldwide head of contemporary art at Sotheby's, says of the mad prices, "It's a new world." Actually, it's just the old one of cash, carry, and entitlement, speeded up.

Murakami's supporters call him "the Japanese Warhol." They say he's enacting Warhol's deal-making dictums that "good business is the best art" and "business art is the step that comes after Art." He has his own "factory" where assistants make his paintings, his Kaikai Kiki company represents a brood of Murakami clones, and he's engaged in product design. To his credit, Murakami's eagerness to outmarket everyone makes artists like Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons seem decorous by comparison. But Murakami has fallen into his own trap. He didn't heed one other Warhol bon mot, "Commercial things really do stink. As soon as it becomes commercial for a mass market, it really stinks." Murakami is no longer playing the market; the market is playing him—and so many others.



One Edge, Two Corners; On Center Shattered (Variation 13, Within the Series of Layered Pattern Acts) (1968, re-created 2007); on the ceiling, Michael Joaquin Grey's Orange Gravity (California) (1992). Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, New York)

Which brings us to the gritty, intergenerational group show at Gagosian. "Beneath the Underdog" features 53 artists who seem to be railing against the type of hype Murakami represents. Of course, a number of "Underdog" participants are very hot, overtouted artists themselves. The curators claim the show is about "the individual's relationship to the towering vertical landscape of late capitalism." Perhaps. But it's disingenuous not to address the fact that this show's being at Gagosian means "Underdog" is about as deep in this landscape as it's possible to get.

There are a number of excellent pieces in the show, among them Jessica Diamond's hand-painted buy a condo or die sign (in re-creation, originally from 1987), Michael Joaquin Grey's orange 1992 rendition of Rodin's Balzac hanging upside down from the ceiling, and Barry Le Va's 1968 shattered-glass sculpture (also re-created). Best of all, in this context, is Monica Bonvicini's smashed-to-smithereens Sheetrock floor. This piece runs throughout the entire show, and infuses everything with a subtext of raucous anger, destruction, and vulnerability. It also saves the show from itself, offsetting the irksome impression that too much work in "Underdog" is either beholden to a predictable list of au courant males (e.g., Warhol, Richter, Smithson, Matta-Clark, and Kippenberger) or just trying to signify radicalism and resistance. By now the messiness, appropriation, and abstraction of "Underdog" are so common and system-approved that they're beginning to signal emptiness and cliquishness instead.

In some ways, "Underdog" is simply what frustration and ambition look like now. The show is so up-front about its in-groupness and back-scratching, however, that you begin to understand that these conditions are effective ways to draw polemical lines in the curatorial sand, to circle the wagons against dubious tendencies. "Underdog" will seem dated in a year, but right here, right now, its polemics, tribalism, and gang tactics—as cynical and annoying as they threaten to become—are what it may take to move beyond the pranksterism of artists like Murakami.