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Takashi Murakami, High or Low Art?

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Tutor - Chris Harrendence

This essay will discuss the work of Takashi Murakami, a polarising figure in the art world due to his extensive range of works and commerciality. The art world cannot agree whether his work is considered to be high art or low art. I find some of his work aesthetically interesting especially the images that combine simplicity and detail such as Tan Tan Bo Puking - a.k.a. Gero Tan, (2002). I also appreciate his use of colour palettes and integration of shape language.

Takashi Murakami, a name you may not know but have undoubtedly seen work from, if unknowingly. The Japanese born and based artist debuted in 1989 with his first solo show at Tokyo's Ginza Surugadai Gallery (Indrisek, 2019). Murakami is well known for his brightly coloured anime and manga inspired works that lean heavily into the commercial side of art. Though he is generally well respected within the pop art scene, these adventures of commercial art have generated questions, particularly in the west, around whether or not the works can still be considered 'high art'.

As detailed by Plescher in his 2013 article, 'high art' is often considered to be better than 'low art' by those who use the terms. A piece of work, or series of works, considered to be high art is that which has a purely aesthetic purpose and evokes contemplation within the viewer. Whereas low art is used to refer to commercial and mass-produced works or anything with a 'functional' purpose, often categorised as craft.

Much like Andy Warhol, one of the artist's leading influences as mentioned by TRiCERA (2023), Murakami's work treads the supposed line between these labels. Countless pieces of Murakami's work lean more towards the definition of high art as their purpose is to be displayed. Yet, these same works are often recreated to have alternative versions. Such as the series of sculptures featured in the exhibition Murakami: EGO (2012). These works labelled 'Pom & Me', with the additional subtitle pertaining to their colour scheme, were displayed together during the exhibition.



Fig 1. Murakami, Pom & Me (2009)

However, in an image from Plescher's article, it is noted that a piece can still be considered high art if it sees only a limited production. So perhaps these pieces are still within the realm of high art?



Fig 2. Plescher (2013)

In the 2009 exhibition Pop Life: Art in a Material World, one of his contributed works was the 'Superflat Museum: Los Angeles Edition 2003'. These small figures feature past works such as 'Hiropon' (1997) and 'Miss Ko2' (1996), in scaled down form. Some of the figures feature differing colour palettes from the original pieces such as 'Strange Melting DOB' or 'Melting DOB' (1999) which gains the additional descriptor of 'Devil'.

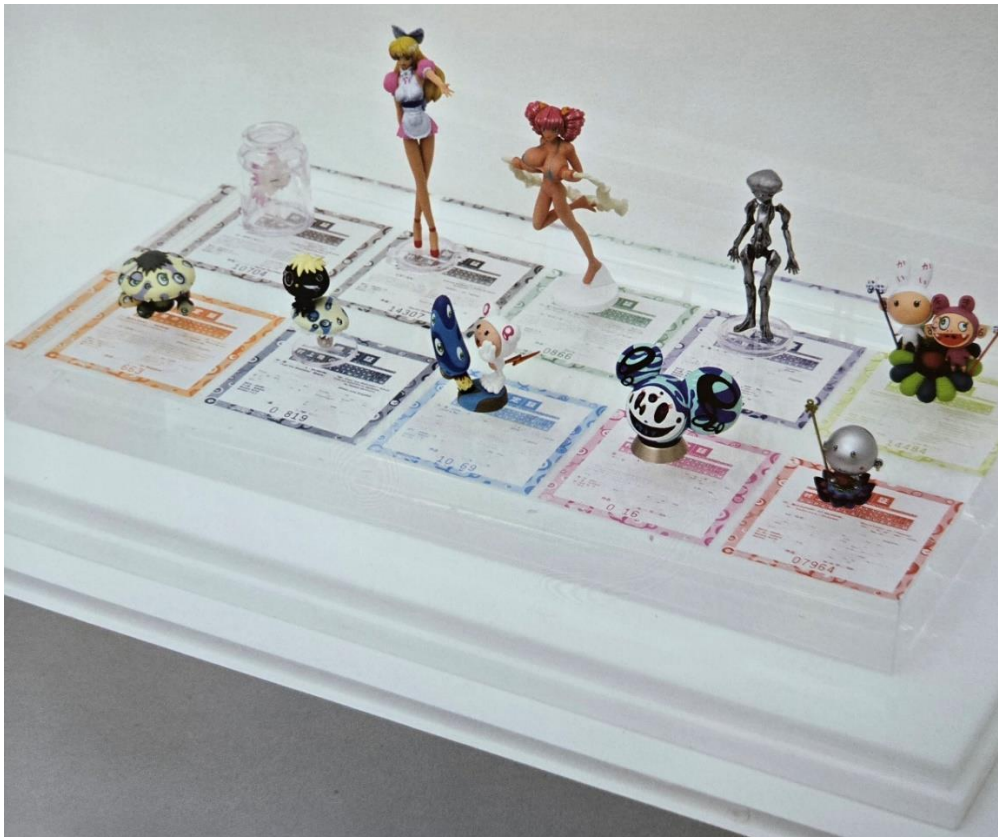


Fig 3. Murakami, Superflat museum Los Angeles 2003 edition (2009)

According to Ohkubo (2019), a future version of these toys, produced in 2004, each sold for 350 JPY (calculated to be £1.83 using xe.com). These future iterations were sold in convenience stores with snacks as a free gift. Using this run of toys as an example, it can be assumed that this aspect of Takashi Murakami's work would be considered as 'low' art due to its commercial and mass-produced nature. Though this may devalue the works to some collectors or even casual observers, the artist himself does not seem to view it that way. As mentioned in Ohkubo (2019), Murakami is quoted as saying *"I myself believe that the top of the social hierarchy is actually occupied by the masses. And I am very glad that my original artworks that I put my artistic vision into, became a toy and was able to reach their hands"*.

Stepping away from purely exhibition work, the more commercial aspects of Murakami's catalogue can be seen in full view by taking a look at the website for the artist's company, [Kaikai Kiki](#). Whilst showcasing the company's other artists, projects and exhibitions, the website also includes the authorised stores. One of these stores, known as 'Tonari no Zingaro' or the website name '[Zingaro](#)', features both an in person location as well as a web shop. Here, customers can find items decorated with Murakami's signature animated sunflowers and other works. These items include reproduced prints, clothing, figures, trading cards and even a handheld digital pet, like a Tamagotchi (BANDAI, 2024). Though many of the items may still be too pricey for many, the prices do not quite match that of auctioned and exhibited pieces. Which makes them more accessible to the average person and, in turn, commercialises the work.

A more recent example of this blur between high and low art, is the artist's dive into the world of non-fungible tokens (NFT). This chapter in Murakami's career is disappointing to many and highly criticised. As seen in the 2022 article by Castor, who humorously yet pointedly ends her report of Murakami's first jump into NFT's with *"If Murakami has learned any valuable lessons from all this, one might be that the entire crypto space is a Jenga stack of interconnected time bombs. Enter at your own risk"*. Though the first launch of an NFT project did not go so well for the artist, being launched right before the 2022 Crypto crash (Castor, 2022), Murakami remained hopeful. *"It's an artist's job and vocation to present fresh ideas,"* he added. *"Expanding NFTs into fine art is what I'm fully pursuing right now"*, Zara (2023). Since this, the artist has continued within the NFT space. The murakami.flower project was revitalized, as can be seen on the [murakami.flower2022](#) Instagram page, but with a different approach. The works this time around follow the format of trading cards, with 114 of the previous pixelated NFT works being recreated in the artists signature style to feature on the cards.



Fig 4. Murakami, Murakami.flower2022, Dressed-up Girl (2025)

And though the NFT works have been mostly absent from the artists primary account, [takashipom](#), the link for murakami.flower2022 resides within the artists bio and does appear in occasional posts. The most recent post related to this subject was from the 21st of April 2025. In which, the artist announces that NiftyKit, Web3 technology company known for the management and sale of NFT's, is now a “wholly owned subsidiary” (Murakami, 2025) of Kaikai Kiki. The Instagram post's announcement was met with mixed reactions. Positive comments see the obtainment of NiftyKit as positive, with user 'baardei' commenting “*Congrats! Looking forward to seeing what comes out of this*”. Yet a number of others see this in a negative light. Such as commenter '___jamid' who met the announcement with questions pertaining to the previous NFT launches stating, “Did you discontinue the Murakami Flowers NFT project? What happened to the people (and their money) that bought them? What utilities were they left with?” and 'hilliam_wurst' simply stating “This sucks!”. The positive comments only gained a maximum of 5likes, with the majority sitting at 0. Whilst the negative comments gained much more. Such as 'hilliam_wurst's who gained 38 likes, the highest of all the comments. From this it can be concluded that Murakami's attempt at “closing the gap between the digital and traditional art world” (Proctor, 2021) is not being received well.

However, it is, unfortunately or not, consistent with the artist's body of work over the past few decades to make such a leap as this. Throughout his career Murakami has experimented with a variety of formats. As seen earlier, he employs the use of sculpture and painting but has also made successful leaps into the world of fashion, technology and toys. In the 2012 exhibition Murakami-EGO, Murakami used his large paintings, such as *The 500 Arhats* (2012), to line the walls and his sculptures, that were now elevated by new LED pedestals, to decorate the floors of the venue. In doing so, the artist created what he described as "a pop-up village, a temporary city" (Takashi Murakami, Massimiliano Gioni and Qatar Museums Authority, 2025).



Fig 5. Murakami, *Ego Monster (Circus Tent)* (2012)

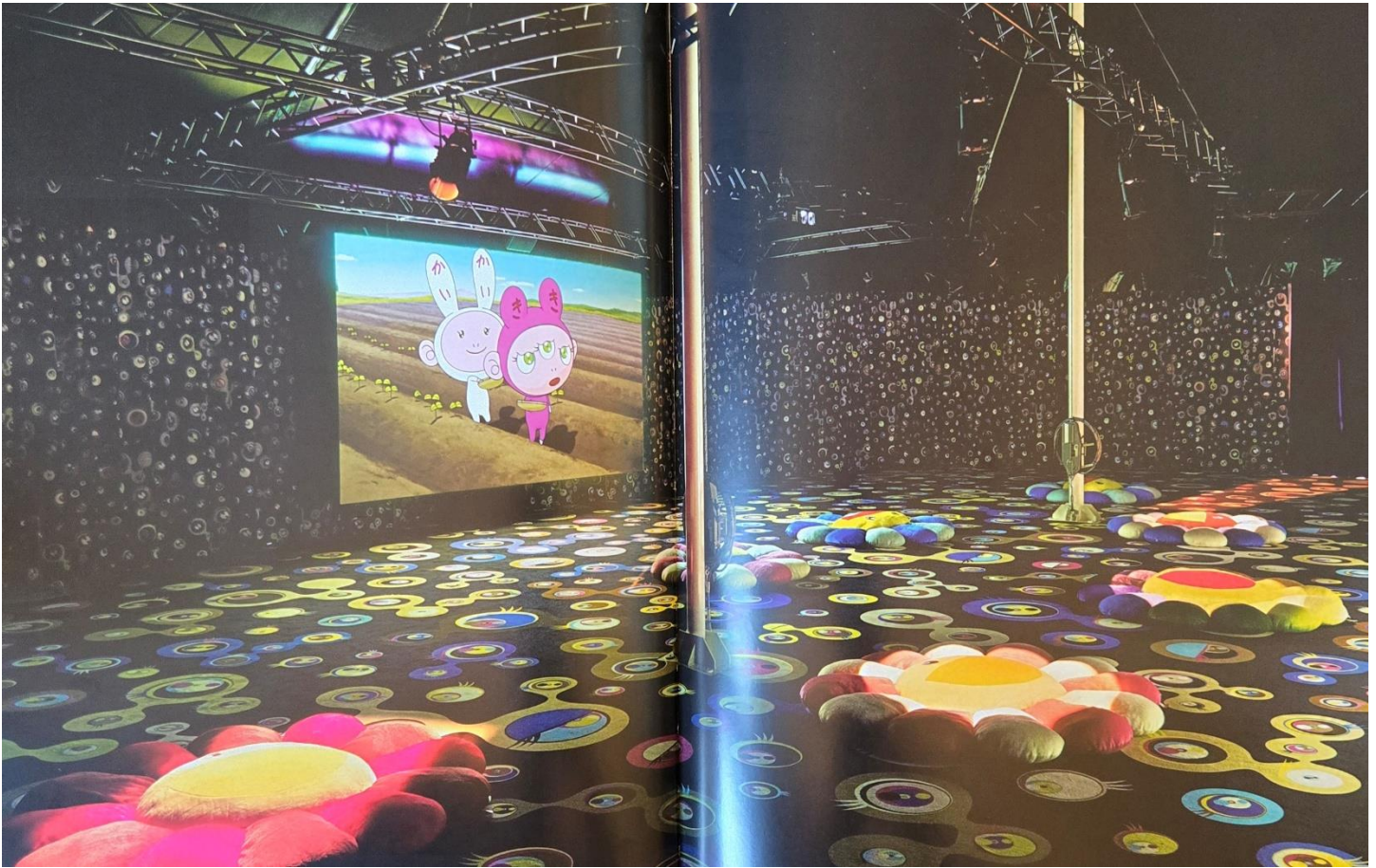


Fig 6. Murakami, Ego Monster (Circus Tent) (2012)

Though a village or city in description, the only building-like structure featured is what could be considered the main draw by some, a large circus tent. The exterior of the tent featured a large eyeball pattern and a small plaque by the entrance curtains that informed the viewer of the showings within the tent. The interior, decorated with a pattern of smaller but similarly styled eyes on the walls and floor, held a large screen that showed off yet another one of Murakami's mediums, film.



Fig 7. Murakami, *World of Lotus (Base for Oval Buddha)* (2012)

The showings, as seen in the image above, feature two full length episodes of anime named after its protagonist's, 'Kaikai And Kiki'. As well as the opening and ending title sequence for 'Six Heart Princess', a 32 second episode preview of the previous and a trailer for his film 'Jelly Fish Eyes'. The last video of the line up showcases one of the many collaborations the artist has had over the years with the music video for Kanye West's 'Good Morning'.

It is easy to understate the sheer amount of work within the catalogue of Takashi Murakami. With the help of the artists employed under Kaikai Kiki, he has created large and small scale works for the past three decades at an incredible rate. Murakami's blend of cultures, commercialism and fine art practices truly blur the line. And based on the evidence presented, one could call his work an enigma within the connotation of 'high' and 'low' art. Many exhibited works teeter on the line of becoming commercial yet retain their status as fine art. However, many other works that set out to be commercial can later earn the title of high art.

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Fig 3. Murakami, T. (2009b). *Superflat Museum Los Angeles 2003 edition. Pop life*.

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