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Curriculum Guide for
Educators

Guggenheim BILBAO

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Guggenheim Museum Bilbao
February 17–May 31, 2009

Exhibition organized by The
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Los Angeles

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Introduction to the exhibition

©*MURAKAMI* is the most comprehensive retrospective to date of the artist Takashi Murakami. It features more than ninety artworks in various media including painting, sculpture, installation, and film that track the ongoing evolution of Murakami's anime alter ego DOB, otaku-inspired figure projects of the late '90s, and an archive of licensed Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. merchandise that span Murakami's entire career.

Forging a new reciprocal relationship between high art and mass culture, Murakami's artistic practice is predicated on seeing art as a part of the economy. The artist is significant for carving out a new entrepreneurial model based on a transformation of applied market strategies. This model can be attributed to the global shift from a consumer-based society to a service-oriented economy, which differentiates Murakami from Andy Warhol and his contemporaries Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. In addition to creating artwork, Murakami has made a constellation of ancillary activities integral to his practice by taking on the roles of curator, lecturer, event organizer, radio host, newspaper columnist, and producer of emerging artists. His international corporation Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., with its multi-faceted operations in mass-produced merchandising, animated film production, and corporate design commissions reveals his aim to widen creative art's distributive capacities.

The artist

Takashi Murakami was born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1962, and he currently lives and works in both Tokyo and Long Island City, New York. He belongs to a generation of artists whose pictorial language brings together motifs linked to popular culture and the formal qualities of traditional Japanese art, such as flatness, pattern and lavish ornamentation.

He studied at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts & Music, where he received a degree in *Nihonga* (traditional Japanese painting). In 1990 he made his debut in contemporary art under the guidance of his friend and colleague, the artist Masato Nakamura. In 1993 he created his self-portrait, Mr. DOB and began to make a name for himself in Japan and around the world thanks to his unique synthesis of traditional Japanese art, the contemporary trends of his homeland like *anime* and *manga* and American culture (especially Pop Art).

In 1996 he created the Hiropon Factory in Tokyo, a fusion of Japan's traditional workshops and modern corporations. Two years later he opened a new branch of the factory in Brooklyn, New York. From then, he began to curate exhibitions and participate in various projects and individual exhibitions in America, and in 1999 he published "Hello, You Are Alive: Tokyo Pop Manifesto," his first declaration of ideas on a uniquely Japanese approach to contemporary art.

In the year 2000, Murakami curated an exhibition entitled *Superflat* at the Parco Gallery in Tokyo, which later enjoyed great success at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) of Los Angeles. In 2001, LAMOCA featured his work in the exhibition *Public Offerings*, and the corporation Kaikai Kiki Co. Ltd. opened its doors in Tokyo and New York, absorbing his previously created Hiropon Factory.

In 2002, the exhibition *Takashi Murakami: Kaikai Kiki* was shown at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris and at the Serpentine Gallery in London. A year later he installed *Reversed Double Helix*, his largest public sculpture at the Rockefeller Center in New York and began his collaboration with the French firm Louis Vuitton.

In 2005, Murakami completed his "Superflat trilogy" show with the presentation of *Little Boy* at Japan Society in New York. Over the course of 2008 and 2009, the artist has been honored with a major retrospective shown at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), the Brooklyn Museum in New York, the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, where it will be on display until the month of May, 2009.

VOCABULARY

Nihonga: Literally "Japanese-style paintings" is a term used to describe paintings that have been made in accordance with traditional Japanese artistic conventions, techniques, and materials. The term was coined to distinguish traditional Japanese approaches from Western-style paintings.

RESOURCES

Japanese history and culture:

<http://web-japan.org/nipponia/archives/es/index.html>

<http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2126.html>

<http://www.jp.f.go.jp/sp/index.htm>

Japan for kids:

<http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/index.html>

<http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/explore/spanish/index.html>



727-727, 2006 (detail). Acrylic on canvas mounted on wood. Three panels: 300 x 450 x 7 cm overall. The Steven A. Cohen Collection

UNITS

20.1 **COMMERCE AND ART**

20.2 **CHARACTERS AND MOTIFS**

20.3 **JAPANESE HISTORY AND TRADITION**



“In the West, contemporary art is treated either as the plaything of hyper-rich people or as an intricate jigsaw puzzle for super-intellectuals. But postwar Japan never had a solid hierarchy of taste to give contemporary art an influential position... The division between subculture and fine art seemed to be irrelevant. And that’s exactly what I was aiming for.”

Interview with MURAKAMI, *Index* magazine, 1998

The World of Sphere, 2003. Acrylic on canvas mounted on board. Two panels: 350 x 350 cm overall. Private collection, New York

UNIT 20.1 COMMERCE AND ART

“Only those artists who have an ability in marketing can survive in the art world.”—Interview with Murakami, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, 2000

From very early on his art career, Takashi Murakami’s work addressed the interplay between art and commerce, high and low culture. In one of his first pieces, he **appropriated** the **logo** for a famous Japanese plastic model company called Tamiya and replaced the company’s name with his own first name. Only a few years later, Murakami had established an art studio for the production of his artwork. Eventually named Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., his factory began with little money and several volunteer staff. Today the factory has grown in scale to include offices in the city and a studio in Saitama, just outside of Tokyo, and its various activities include producing merchandise, running an art fair called GEISAI, managing the careers of 7 selected artists, hosting a radio show, pursuing commercial collaborations (with fashion brands and musicians for collaborative merchandise production), corporate branding and developing animated films, as well as creating “high art”—sculptures and paintings. These paintings and sculptures are conceived entirely by Murakami, beginning with his handmade sketches, which highly-trained assistants digitally render, scale up, and paint, and ending with his stamp of approval.

Most famously, Murakami collaborated with the luxury brand company Louis Vuitton on fashion accessories such as handbags. In 2002, through the invitation of Marc Jacobs, Takashi Murakami provided him with new artwork to go with the Vuitton **monogram**. The result was a combination of the Vuitton logo (a stylized “LV”) and Murakami’s own signature “Jellyfish Eyes,” as well as smiling cherry

VOCABULARY

Appropriate: To take possession of, usually without permission or consent. In art, appropriation occurs when an artist uses images or text from other sources in his/her artwork.

Logo: A graphic representation or symbol of a company name, trademark, or abbreviation, often uniquely designed for easy recognition.

Monogram: A design consisting of two or more alphabetic letters combined or interlaced, commonly one’s initials, and often printed on stationery or embroidered on clothing.

blossoms, and cherries, among other original designs. They were so popular that their sale grossed over two-hundred million euros in the first year of production alone. Murakami then went on to use this pattern in his own paintings. *The World of Sphere* incorporates it into the busy, colorful background, which includes the multi-color monogram designed by Murakami.

In late 2003, Murakami released the **Superflat** Museum. Sold at Japanese convenience stores, it consisted of a cardboard box decorated with his signature motifs and containing snacks, along with a miniature version of one of his characters inside. Murakami described the project as an art collection starter kit for an affordable price—less than 3 euros.

Some have compared Murakami to pop artist Andy Warhol (1928–1987), who ran a studio he called “the Factory” for the production of art and films. But others say that while Murakami and Warhol both have appropriated images and themes from **popular culture**, Murakami has said that there is less of a distinction between high and low art in Japan, and he would like to achieve this same leveling in the West as well.

“Japanese people accept that art and commerce will be blended; and in fact, they are surprised by the rigid and pretentious Western hierarchy of ‘high art.’ In the West, it certainly is dangerous to blend the two because people will throw all sorts of stones. But that’s okay—I’m ready with my hard hat.”, THE AI INTERVIEW: Takashi Murakami, ARTINFO, <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/17056/takashi-murakami/>, retrieved on 24 April 2008

VOCABULARY

Popular culture: Contemporary lifestyle and items that are well known; generally accepted, cultural patterns that are widespread within a population.

Superflat: Term Murakami has coined to describe his flat picture plane, his merging of high and low art, among other things.



“My aesthetic sense was formed at a young age by what surrounded me: the narrow residential spaces of Japan and the mental escapes from those spaces that took the forms of manga and anime.” “George Lucas and Walt Disney. From them I learned the importance of completely submersing myself in a surrealist world.”

MURAKAMI interview, *Esquire* magazine, September 2008

Miss ko?, 1997. Oil, acrylic, synthetic resin, fiberglass, and iron, 254 x 116.8 x 91.4 cm. Collection of Marianne Boesky, New York

UNIT 20.2 CHARACTERS AND MOTIFS

Takashi Murakami never gave up his childhood dream of becoming an animator. As a contemporary artist, he has set out to elevate **Otaku**—a Japanese term referring to an obsessive interest in anime, manga, and video games—so that it receives the critical consideration and respect given more traditional “high” art.

His work has reinvented some of the animated characters and motifs of his youth. In one of Murakami’s first pieces, he created his self-portrait, Mr. DOB. A combination of Doraemon (a cat-like robot character from an anime series) and Sonic the Hedgehog (the Sega video game system mascot), Mr. DOB was born after a night of wordplay with friends in 1993. Murakami took a phrase said by the main character of the manga *Inakappe Taisho*: “dobozite, dobozite” (a mispronunciation of the Japanese for “why, why”) and combined it with “oshamanbe”, a signature phrase used by Japanese comedian Toru Yuri. The result was then made into a slogan for his upcoming show. Murakami thought it should be shortened, but “dob” alone was too simple. The result was a character whose head spells out DOB—the D on the right ear, the O as the round face, and the B on the left ear. He showed several inflatable DOBs in his first exhibition in New York in 1995 and eventually DOB became a kind of stand-in for the artist and is now the single most represented subject in his work. Unlike Mickey Mouse (to whom he has been compared), DOB constantly evolves—from humorous and benign to dark and even monstrous—changing in form from one work to the next and adding depth to his role as a self-portrait.

VOCABULARY

Otaku: A Japanese term used to refer to people with obsessive interests, particularly anime, manga, and video games



Miss ko², 1997. Oil, acrylic, synthetic resin, fiberglass, and iron, 254 x 116.8 x 91.4 cm. Collection of Marianne Boesky, New York

Today, Murakami's roster of characters has expanded. It includes *Miss ko²*, a long-legged waitress aspiring to be a pop star, Kaikai and Kiki, among others. *Miss ko²* is inspired by culturally diverse otaku fantasies—that is, fantasies of *anime* and *manga* fans. One is a character from the all-female fighting game series, *Variable Geo*. The character wears a uniform similar to *Miss ko²*'s. The second inspiration for this character came from waitresses of the Japanese restaurant chain Anna Miller's. Anna Miller's waitresses wear a white blouse, a short orange or pink jumper-style dress, an apron and a heart-shaped name-tag. Kaikai and Kiki are the namesake of his company and demonstrate the **duality** found in many of his characters. They are friends with opposite personalities—one cheery and juvenile, one multi-eyed and saw-toothed. Many of the characters have been the subjects of the artist's paintings, life-size sculptures, and even a miniature "museum" sold at Japanese convenience stores complete with collectible, toy-sized versions.

Many of the motifs Murakami uses also come from animation. His skull-shaped mushroom clouds in the *Time Bokan* series may have been inspired by a popular anime series of the same name, in which each episode ended with the death of a villain, followed by the appearance of the mushroom cloud as a symbol of the villain's demise. Other motifs include the cartoon cherries and "Jellyfish Eyes" of his Louis Vuitton bags.

VOCABULARY

Duality: Being two fold, having two opposed parts

RESOURCES

Manga fair in Barcelona:

<http://www.ficomica.com/original/salonmanga2005/index.html>



“[American collectors and gallerists] think that my art provides them with knowledge about Japan that they lack. They listen to me because they want to understand Japan.”

Interview with MURAKAMI, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, 2000

DOB in the Strange Forest, 1999. FRP, resin, fiberglass, acrylic, and iron, 304.8 x 304.8 x 127 cm. Collections of Peter Norton and Eileen Harris Norton, Santa Monica. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

UNIT 20.3 JAPANESE HISTORY AND TRADITION

Takashi Murakami’s work may look like it was influenced solely by popular culture imagery; but in fact, Murakami also draws from an extensive knowledge of Japanese history for his paintings and sculptures. Everything from World War II to botany to wordplay to art history enters into his work.

World War II had a tremendous impact on Japanese culture; Murakami’s work is no exception. Murakami has often spoken about the effect of a statement the American general Douglas MacArthur made after the war when he said Japan was “like a boy of twelve.” For Murakami, the infantilization and humiliation of the Japanese after the war went beyond MacArthur’s words; it was supported by Western checks on Japanese aggression and the West’s influence on Japanese culture. His interest in this relationship can be seen in his cartoon-like creatures that become monsters under the influence of a “foreign” culture and because of the atomic bombs. In *DOB in the Strange Forest*, DOB is no longer innocent in the new world populated by mushrooms with several eyes—references to both drug culture, traditional Japanese botany, and the mushroom clouds created by the atomic bombs.

The “Superflat” is another area in which Japanese history seeps into his work. It is a concept developed by Murakami that drives his work and that borrows from the military, cultural, and aesthetic histories of Japan. Among the many possible meanings of the word Superflat

are: 1) the flat picture plane of modernism that was anticipated by traditional Japanese art, 2) the flattening of high and low art in Japanese culture, and 3) the decimation, or literal flattening of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the nuclear strikes of 1945.

While Murakami draws his most recognizable references from the history of anime and manga, he also refers to more traditional Japanese art history. He has a PhD in *Nihonga*, a Japanese late nineteenth-century style of painting, and his work often uses traditional Japanese art techniques such as painting on panels and decorative paper.

Several motifs such as mushrooms and waves allude to traditional Japanese art. In *DOB in the Strange Forest*, the mushrooms refer in part to Takehisa Yumeji, a famous illustrator from the early twentieth century who used images of the mushroom to appeal to popular tastes, and, like Murakami, tried to find a balance between fine and decorative arts. In Murakami's *727-727*, the wave (made famous by the nineteenth-century woodblock print *The Great Wave at Kanagawa* by Katsushika Hokusai) takes on a twenty-first century character as a monstrous version of DOB rides on a wave of snow through a mottled background.

The title was inspired by a Japanese cosmetic company—727. It was a name that struck the artist as odd, given the association with the American airline industry. The painting extends over three panels. In the centre, Murakami's signature character, Mr. DOB, rides—or is swept away on—a curling, stylised wave of snow. Here, DOB is in his non-cute form: vicious, grotesque and fierce, baring sharp fangs in a grin.

The unusual surface of the painting was created by applying and then sanding away layer upon layer of paint to produce a rich patina. It reveals the painstaking processes Murakami is prepared to go through to create his artworks.

The mottled background to the canvases, which look as if they have been stained with water, suggest another artistic reference: the *Oxidation Paintings* of American Pop artist Andy Warhol. Murakami has often been compared to Warhol. Like Warhol, he blurs the boundaries between high and low art, and explores the relationship between art and commercial mass production.