



JULY 21, 2019 LIFESTYLE

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Artist Takashi Murakami: “To succeed, break your ego.”

The Japanese artist was in town recently to launch an exhibition at STPI – where merchandise included \$1,800 stuffed toys.

HELMY YUSOF

Fans started queueing as early as 6am on Saturday, the first day of the Takashi Murakami art exhibition at STPI, Singapore’s premier gallery. This was the first time STPI had to charge an entry fee of S\$8 to offset the exorbitant cost of bringing the artworks. But that didn’t deter the hundreds who showed up early, wearing Murakami-designed clothes as proof of allegiance.

When the doors officially opened three hours later, every piece of merchandise – including the S\$1,800 giant stuffed toys – was snapped up in under an hour. Two women openly wept when they found out the toys were sold out, the rest hastily filled up the pre-order forms to get on the waitlist. The last time Singapore art lovers got into a frenzy was at the Yayoi Kusama exhibition at the National Gallery Singapore in 2017; that also saw merchandise fly off the shelves, but there were no known incidents of tears shed.

(RELATED: [What meeting Yayoi Kusama, queen of polka dots, is like](#))

For much of the day, Murakami was hiding in the STPI offices, reluctant to be mobbed. At 57, the superstar artist has achieved just about everything that an artist could want – critical acclaim, commercial success, international renown and a diehard fanbase. Since his 2002 fashion collaboration with Louis Vuitton, he's joined the ranks of A-list global creatives, designing the cover for Kanye West's album *Graduation* in 2007, exhibiting in grand locations such as the Palace of Versailles and Guggenheim Bilbao, and creating art with Virgil Abloh in 2018.

In 2008, he founded his own Kaikai Kiki gallery in Tokyo to talent-spot mostly young Japanese artists and showcase Western artists rarely seen in his country. Some whose stars have risen since include street artist Madsaki and painter Aya Takano. In 2013, he expanded his resume to include "filmmaker", releasing his debut feature *Jellyfish Eyes* to mixed reviews.

Despite his extraordinary success, Murakami is surprisingly modest in person, peppering the interview with self-deprecating jokes and clear-eyed analyses of what he's done right or wrong.

The reception to your show here is very good.

Is it? I don't know. I didn't look. (Smiles.)

But it probably pales in comparison to what you might get in Japan.

No, I don't think so. I'm not popular in Japan. I did a big show in Japan. And more than 50 percent of the visitors were non-Japanese. My standing in Japan is very strange. My art is a reflection of Japanese people. And they don't like it. If you look at my Instagram, 60 per cent of my followers are from New York, 30 per cent are from Hong Kong, the rest are from other city centres like London... You know Andy Warhol? He's not so popular in the US. He's more popular in Japan and Germany. Japan commercials like to use Warhol images; German museums have many Warhol paintings... I used to mind (being disliked). But I understand now that it's the system. It's just like that. And I still work with the Japanese people.

Still, you've achieved great international success as a creative.

One goal I'm still far away from is my movie and animation goal. I've been struggling with this for 15 years. I love the process of making a film. I released my first film, *Jellyfish Eyes*, in 2013. I did my best with it. And I know it's a weak film – the story has not enough shocks and surprises. But that's alright. In the art world, when you make your first painting, it's going to be weak. So I accept that I have to go through a process before I become good. It's important to take the first step... But I'm losing a lot of money everyday as a filmmaker, money I've earned from making art and sculptures. I employ 150 people to work on my anime *Six Hearts Princess*. And I'm about to start filming the sequel to *Jellyfish Eyes* soon. I wish I was not losing so much money as a filmmaker. But it cannot be helped.

Why are you so set on becoming a filmmaker? Are you not satisfied with being a visual artist?

I came from a poor family. Super poor. And my parents joined a cult religion. It's a strange family. I hate them. I wanted to escape all the time. But I was bad at my studies. My high school teacher laughed at me, saying it's impossible for me to go to university. So I looked at the situation. And I thought that I could get into university through the design or art courses. My main dream was to get a job and leave home. At the same time, I loved anime and sci fi movies as a child. I love George Lucas (*Star Wars*), Katsuhiro Otomo (*Akira*) and Steven Spielberg (*E.T.*). But I assumed I could never enter the entertainment industry. So I trained hard to be an artist until I got my PhD in art. I slowly regained my self-confidence as I learnt to survive the art market... But I never forgot my dream of making films. Right now, I am losing money because I have no talent. But I'm slowly learning how to become a director. To do so, I must have guts and discipline.

The art world is in something of a crisis. Big galleries are doing better than ever, selling expensive art to rich clients. But small- and mid-size galleries – which used to be platforms for nurturing young artists – are closing in droves because of high overheads. Any thoughts on this?

Running a gallery is like any business, there are ups and downs. At my gallery Kakkai Kiki, I once calculated how much it takes to nurture an artist from the time he's unknown to the time people start to collect him. And it costs about US\$300,000. That's super expensive. But the five to six year incubation process is critical for any young artist. Take the example of Madsaki. I found him on Instagram and invited him to be part of my stable of artists. But his first two exhibitions went badly. Nothing was sold. So I bought everything – cheaply, of course. By his third exhibition, he sold three paintings... so finally, my investment partially paid off. When I was starting out, the gallerist Tomio Koyama had the guts to support Yoshitomo Nara, myself and others. He bought our paintings when no one else did. He created our careers.

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Any advice to younger artists on how to make it in the unpredictable art industry?

No. 1: Please be honest and create art from your own life. Don't be influenced by rumours and what your friends say. Close your ears and ignore your critics. They are just jealous. Talk to yourself and watch yourself. No. 2: Please think about the money situation. If you get money, don't spend it on a car, drugs or beautiful women. Please spend it on a new studio and better equipment. No. 3: If you become much more famous, please watch your ego. Please don't allow it to grow like a balloon. You must observe it and keep breaking it to make it smaller. That's how you become a successful artist.

Takashi Murakami: From Superflat To Bubblewrap runs daily at STPI Singapore from now till Sept 14, 2019. Visit www.stpi.com.sg

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This article was originally published in [The Business Times](#).

Photo: Ng Sor Luan