

**Takashi MURAKAMI**

*Vogue India,  
Marvelous Mr Murakami*

*June 2020*

# VOGUE

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#inthistgether

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## EDITOR'S LETTER



Kaiiki Kiki,  
DOB, Self-  
portrait, and  
My Various  
Complaints  
(2019)

**T**his time last year, I was at Disneyland Paris, living in the moment with my eight-year-old as he took his first roller-coaster ride and chased cartoon characters for selfies. This June has been its antithesis. Unable to live in the moment as I juggle homeschooling with #WFH, I'm actively seeking the future to see what it holds.

But what will be the way forward? For journalists, will it be conducting interviews from home? For photographers, chasing light through computer screens? For fashion designers, looking homewards in the face of uncertainty? This 'new normal' upended our editorial calendar, rejigged our line-up, and forced us to put together a no-production, no-human-touch issue. Under our #WFH mandate, my team became a testament to the #InThisTogether philosophy that runs across this issue. They found creative solutions in trying times and worked with the same fervour as they did at shoots and in the office.

In a first for *Vogue* India, we approached Japanese artist Takashi Murakami to bring to life our vision for the future with his cover art that symbolises the spirit of unity through a cornucopia of smiling flowers. Inside the magazine, you will find some of the world's biggest influencers, from Lilly Singh to Tan France, as part of our DIY 'selfies in isolation' project.

Next, we used the video-sharing platform Zoom to moderate a conversation between India's brightest young designers on the future of fashion. In *Vogue Loves*, as well as in our inaugural Home-grown pages, we put together an exhaustive list of local labels that need your support now more than ever.

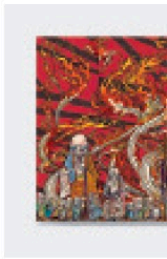
But before we look to the future, we need to acknowledge the present. COVID-19, which has brought the world to a standstill, has also unleashed a new set of heroes. We started *Vogue Warriors* online in response, to spotlight the women who are working tirelessly through this pandemic. You will find a vignette of this tribute within these pages. And speaking of applauding the real heroes of COVID-19 in India, don't miss Priya Ramani's homage to our nurses, the underdogs of the medical world who work double shifts and risk their lives with one thought motivating them—that we are all #InThisTogether.

Priya Tanna

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# MARVELLOUS MR MURAKAMI



Far from reclusive, Takashi Murakami is the flamboyant star uniting the worlds of high and low art. Amidst the lockdown, the Japanese artist speaks to **Megha Mahindru** about creating *Vogue* India's first-ever illustrated cover

**E**very country in lockdown has had a unique response to COVID-19. Italians serenaded their neighbours across balconies, Indians clanged pots and pans, Canadians applauded medical staff through the night and the Lebanese drone-delivered roses to mark Mother's Day. In Japan, a curious creature became a social media sensation to fight the virus as artists started sharing their illustrations of the Amabie.

A benevolent spirit from Japanese folklore, the Amabie looks like a cross between a long-haired mermaid and an owl in a parakeet costume. The legend goes that seeing and sharing its photo can ward off infectious disease. It didn't take long for the savvy Takashi Murakami to join this viral #amabiechallenge with his own interpretation of the mythic creature. "Amabie has become a popular *yōkai* [spirit] in Japan, and I am glad I could spread it to people abroad through my posts," shares the artist over email.

## CUTE YET CURRENT

Like Japan, where inanimate characters take on life as mascots for different cities, Murakami's wildly eclectic work delights in colour as manga characters and anime cartoons are stripped of insouciance and injected with feeling and, at times, spirituality. "In Japan, given how we experience one natural disaster after another, the belief in multitudinous gods, and in being humble towards nature, remains mainstream. The characters of fantastical lands in my work inherit this metaphor of the belief in multitudinous gods." When *Vogue* India asked the Japanese artist to conceive a cover for the June issue amidst the lockdown, he offered his interpretation of the post-pandemic world by playing with his signature flowers to create a 'Flowerball' against a blue backdrop. Each flower, comprising 12 rounded petals, is first sketched in a note-



book, then scanned and painted on Adobe Illustrator. Murakami, adds, "I went through the process of changing the colours and made a new background." An explosion of candy-hued smiling flowers, the cover offers a jubilant spin on his recurring motif. "Under the current circumstance, where people are sensitive to whatever you do, I made this cover hoping it will become a trigger for them to exert their great tolerance. For the background, I pictured a blue sky," he notes.

Flowers are so emblematic of Murakami that when the popular artist made his India debut earlier this year, via a trip organised by Geek Picture India's Arjun Aggarwal, art patron Isha Ambani Piramal showered over 10,000 orange and pink flowers for his welcome at Antilia.



**LIFE IN TECHNICOLOR**  
 Clockwise from top:  
 The 500 Arhats  
 [White Tiger] (2012);  
 '2 Arhats Meditating  
 Amid The Hellfire  
 Of The Mound Of  
 The Dead' (2013);  
 Amabie illustration  
 shared on the  
 artist's social media.  
 Opposite page:  
 Takashi Murakami at  
 a show at Tai Kwun  
 Contemporary in  
 Hong Kong



## CREATIVITY IN A CRISIS

But Murakami's work is as multifarious as his medium, spanning larger-than-life phantasmagorical sculptures to swirling designs on shoes and bags. His 'superflat' aesthetic combines the finesse of traditional Japanese block prints with the slickness of pop art (inspired by the trio of manga, anime and video games) to such an effect that even overfamiliar emoticons like the smiling flower find a new lease of life in his hands.

He may not have the heft of classical art's mighty masters, but he offers a delightful interpretation of the zeitgeist through work that is simple yet complex. Peel back the veneer of cuteness (*kawaii* in Japanese), and beneath his army of jolly characters and trippy colours, you'll find a panoply of art that often responds to the world around him. His show, *Little Boy* (2005), directly references the Hiroshima bombing. The 2011 tsunami and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster too have inspired works like 'The 500 Arhats' (2015), featuring contorted, ageing figures as well as his first feature film, *Jellyfish Eyes* (2013), which marks a departure from his usual style by putting the focus on darker subjects.

Has the pandemic affected his artistic universe in any way? "Living in the suburbs of Tokyo, we are always at the risk of encountering the next Great Kantō Earthquake. This means we always have to be conscious of the possibility of dying from a catastrophic earthquake that will take away many lives. Our feeling of awe towards death therefore originates in acknowledging our proximity to it," he explains. "I believe that the experience of the current pandemic has made more people familiar with death, and in that sense, more people could have a deeper discovery concerning the idea of death that is hidden in my work."

In his 2012 exhibit, *Flowers And Skulls*, which features a dizzying selection of his iconic flowers alongside skulls, he captures this dual theme of life and death. But, as an artist, how does he convert the fear of a pandemic into hope for the future? Murakami says that the answer lies "through the activation of a new philosophy regarding the boundary of life and death." He adds, "Then, I believe ours could become a more comfortable society to live in."

For now, as the global lockdown shakes economies the world over, the art world is feeling the repercussions too. It's even more evident when an artist who has been celebrated and criticised in equal measure for his unabashed commercialism, and has collaborated with bigwigs like Louis Vuitton, and more recently, Billie Eilish, talks about his plans for 2020 thus: "I will simply try my best so that my company does not go bankrupt. All my shops are closed and it is not certain when they can reopen." While critics may see art as non-essential in a pandemic, the way creators like Murakami have responded to a crisis time and again shows us that art might just be our only solace. ■