

**PERROTIN**

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**Takashi MURAKAMI**

*GQ Qatar Special,  
Inside the mind of Takashi Murakami*

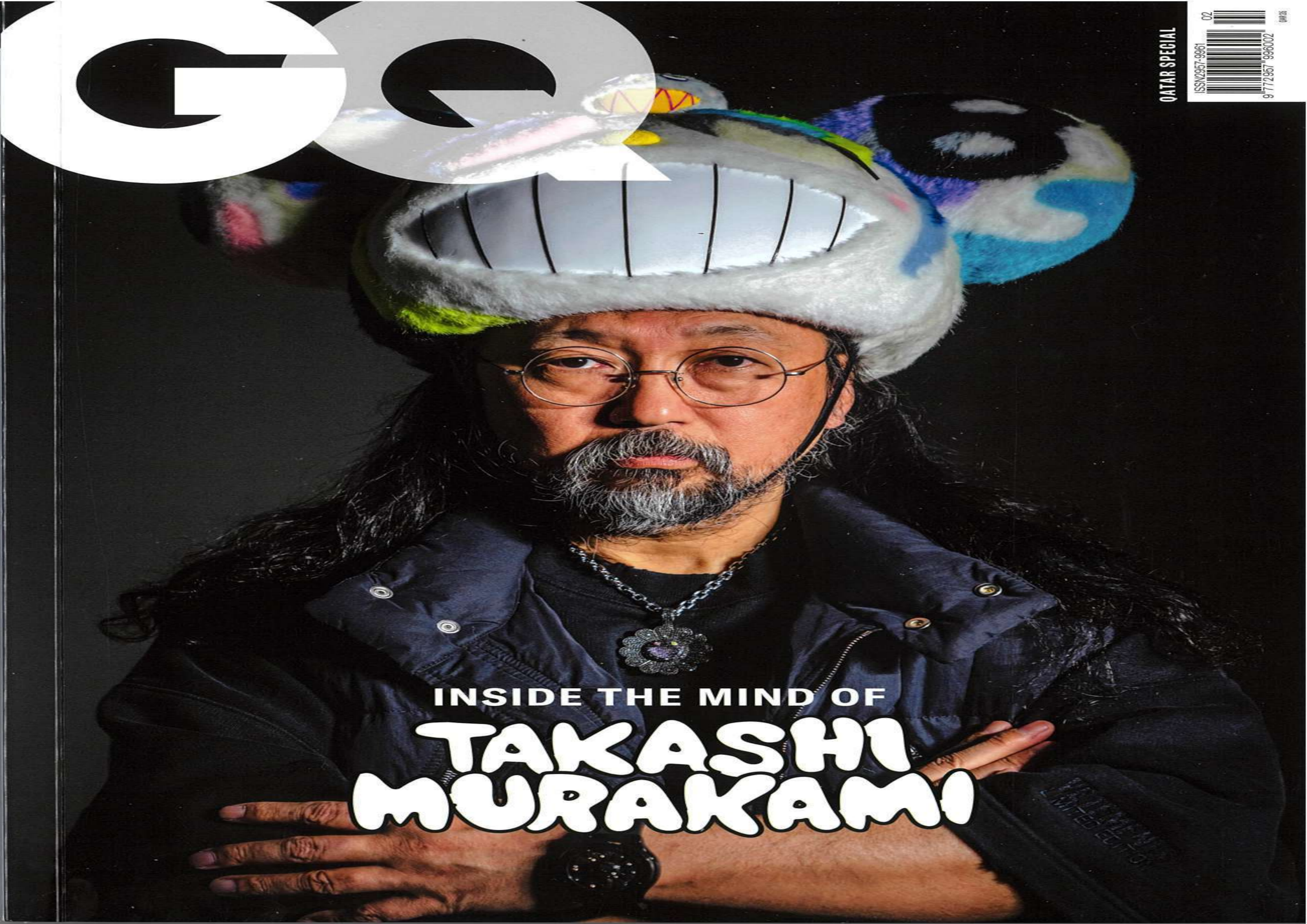
*May 2023*

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QATAR SPECIAL

ISSN 2957-9961  
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INSIDE THE MIND OF  
**TAKASHI  
MURAKAMI**



# 98

## The King of Pop

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### THE COVER

Photography: RK  
Styling: Takeshi "CHERRY" Ishida and Keanoush Zargham

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# Past, Present, Pop!

**WHAT IS POP** culture? Or rather, what is pop culture today? This is a question that, with every issue we edit at *GQ*, we find ourselves contemplating.

It should come as no surprise that we have entered an age in which pop culture – once synonymous with Americana and dominated by Western exports – has taken a more cross-cultural outlook. This notion was evident by a recent trip I took to Egypt. It was upon arrival at Cairo International Airport that I found myself surrounded by a barricade of screaming teens in full-on ‘Beatlemania’ mode. The subjects in question? K-pop idols ASTRO’s Cha Eun-woo and EXO’s Sehun, both of whom were on my flight.

The cacophony of jubilant adolescent screams in both Korean and Arabic echoed through the halls of the airport before they even reached the gate, let alone approached the exit. Phenomenon?

Think about it: Latin artists like Bad Bunny (the most streamed artist on Spotify) and Rosalia, alongside an army of K-pop and Afrobeats artists have remapped both the charts and the discourse when it comes to popular music. We also live in an age when lawmakers in the United States, Canada, and Europe are clamping down on the most popular social media tool in existence, TikTok, mostly for being Chinese-owned.

The popularity of East Asian and Global South stories dominating the world’s consciousness has always been apparent, but in recent years, what was once considered ‘niche’ is now simply mainstream. To take a page out of sports, the same can be said of Morocco’s recent victory at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. When was the last time we saw positive portrayals of Muslims on a global stage?

What makes pop culture so compelling and so comforting in large part are its pre-destined narratives, a penchant for an idealised past and hope for tomorrow. In essence, it’s made up of stories that anyone and everyone can enjoy. Pop culture is easy. It’s digestible and it’s everywhere. So when we were on an editorial-hunt-of-a-geese-chase to find someone who exemplified pop culture in all its glory – of yesterday and of tomorrow – all roads led to one man and one man only: Takashi Murakami.

The King of Pop graces his first-ever *GQ* cover for this special edition of *GQ Qatar*. Murakami, who needs no introduction, is more than just an artist – his influence on popular culture can be seen from the beginnings of Y2K (his collaboration with Louis Vuitton can be considered an artefact of that time) and his takeover of the Google Doodle to his gargantuan artwork *Murakami: Ego* (2012) in Doha’s Place Vendôme and the countless partnerships he has made along the way.

As a long-time fan of Murakami myself, his omnipresent flower motifs are an instant favourite, a pop culture character in its own right, like that of Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny. Symbolic arpeggios of pop culture’s constant pendulum swing between high and low, luxury and mass market. Consider them the commodified and yassified update of the counter-culture symbol of the 1960s ‘Smiley’ for the Instagram era.

The artist recently visited the region for the opening of his solo show at ICD Brookfield Place with Perrotin gallery in Dubai, and I recall witnessing a similar scene to that in Egypt – crowds (albeit slightly older) waited exuberantly and chased after him in similar fashion.

It’s Murakami’s world, and we are all just living in it.

**Ahmad Swaid**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Jacket, \$1290, **MM6  
Maison Margiela** at  
That Concept Store.  
Sweater, \$1400,  
**Vetements** at That  
Concept Store. Watch,  
Hublot Classic Fusion  
Takashi Murakami  
All Black 45mm. Hat,  
talent's own

Photography by RK



**INSIDE THE MIND OF**

**TAKASHI MURAKAMI**

The legendary artist on large-scale ambition, authentic expression, and reshaping the cultural landscape of tomorrow

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*“The idea is not to live forever; it is to create something that will.” — Andy Warhol*

**IF WARHOL IS** the man who recreated visual language by incorporating the humdrum ephemera of the everyday into the sphere of high art, Takashi Murakami is the man who further blurred the line between high art, streetwear, fashion, and lowbrow pop culture to such a degree as to make it entirely invisible. He has also collaborated with monolithic giants of the style sphere, such as LVMH, alongside classic sneaker brand Vans and popstars like Billie Eilish, while accepting invitations from some of the world’s most prestigious art institutions to create site-specific works. And while a hyper-saturated, eye-popping, anime-soaked heritage is apparent in all of the legendary Japanese artist’s work, it was similarly time spent studying art as a young man in the Big Apple that first inspired him to blend the motifs of his own cultural background with advanced Western capitalism and product marketing savvy, riding the crest of a self-created wave that was destined to utterly transform traditional hierarchies of supposed artistic value. In fact, in the last 30 or so years, Murakami has not only produced countless artworks across multiple media, but also highly collectable mass-produced products, such as his inimitable smiling alter ego Mr DOB.

And make no mistake, Murakami’s visionary manga-meets-pop-meets-street-style craze-wave was truly self-created phenomena, spearheaded by a veritable army of goggle-eyed, and sometimes extremely sexualised cartoons and sculptures, maniacally laughing multi-coloured flowers, and hyper-cutesy anamorphic creatures, many of whom have made previously unlikely debuts in galleries across the Middle East in recent years, a global locale witnessing its own accelerated boom in the realm of contemporary art — one not entirely dissimilar to the socio-political cultural landscape in which Murakami’s wild imagination was born. “There was a heightened art boom in Japan in the 1980s, during the bubble economy,” the legendary artist tells us, when asked if he can delineate any such historical similarities. “People then were ravenously buying Impressionists and other works,” he continues. “When that bubble economy began to collapse, contemporary art flowed in, and museums and other public institutions lost interest in acquiring art. However, our generation had grown up seeing the many works of art that were purchased and exhibited during that bubble economy, and when a large volume of art is acquired and displayed throughout a city, people who live there and appreciate art will undergo a tremendous change. The groundwork will be laid for many artists to emerge.”

It begs the question as to whether the cultural paradigm that inspired the creator of his very own artistic genre, coined as Superflat, can imagine a similarly unique amalgamation of past, present, and potential futures being born from the burgeoning art scene in the Middle East. “Art starts out as imitation of some form or other, but gradually, the uniqueness of the environment in which you were born and raised starts to reveal itself, and only then do you come to acquire the global language of art,” he explains presciently, when asked precisely this question. “I think it could take a little more time for the emergence of contemporary artists whose work we can point to and identify as the art of the Middle East. In the past few years, I have visited Doha, Qatar; Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; and Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates on business. I am invited to various parts of the world, much like a member of a circus troupe, when the economy is booming, or when there is a movement that is galvanising to propel culture forward,” he continues. “I think the current art movement in the Middle East is very similar in feel to the situation in Hong Kong and Singapore about 20 years ago. Art is born against the backdrop of strong desires to push culture forward on the part of ambitious business leaders mixed with philanthropic context. I would be happy if I could dedicate my few remaining years of life to such a movement.”

It is worth noting that Murakami is now in his early sixties and, as such, has a great deal of wisdom to impart, so it’s interesting to ask how the vantage point of age has changed both his personal outlook and art practice. “Since my father developed Alzheimer’s at around age 70, I am assuming that I am headed that way,” he says sagely. “So I need to create a new studio that will allow me to keep creating works for at least five to six years, or so, after the onset of Alzheimer’s. I would like to have a studio with a small staff to support me in my creative direction, just as Willem de Kooning did when he created some of his most wonderful works after he developed Alzheimer’s.” One might be surprised to hear such a veteran of the art world talking in terms of creating a small new studio, but Murakami’s career as an artist has taken as many twists and turns as are apparent in his huge swirling paintings, with the recent pandemic near crippling his former business. “The situation was dire,” he says, recalling a period that witnessed a staff of some 800-plus makers, animators, and managers dwindle to a mere shadow of its former self. “We were in one emergency after another where the company was going under because we could barely pay taxes, or the tax office was about to force us to close the company,” he continues candidly. “Simply put, I did not know how to manage a company. Now, I am supposedly getting a little better at thinking about balancing income and expenses, yet, I am starting to make animations again — stupidity will never be cured unless you die, right? It’s quite pathetic.”

Charming self-deprecation aside, there seems, to this writer at least, to be nothing in the slightest bit pathetic about dusting oneself off and starting again — quite the opposite. It requires devotion, dedication and drive. And given the roller-coaster ride Murakami has been on during his time on this planet, it seems pertinent to ask which of his works he is most proud of having brought into the world. The answer, it seems, is the bigger the challenge, the greater the accomplishment. “The same kind of architectural obstacles that an architect may encounter in a large conceptual project are present in the creation of large-scale paintings and sculptures, so there is a great sense of accomplishment when I manage to complete a large work of art,” he says. “The larger the piece, the more difficult it is to produce and complete, and for it to withstand viewing. It is like the difference in scale for an architect between building a house and building a city — they are completely different in nature.”

Given his clearly still-thriving propensity for large-scale ambition, one has to ask if he has any advice for a new generation of artists, who will undoubtedly be hoping to emulate such game-changing success, and make their own unique mark on the shared cultural consciousness of the species. “I think that people who become artists are quite similar to those who become athletes,” he says thoughtfully. “Of the people who go to regular schools and have to deal with a very big inferiority complex in the academic area of their lives, such as not being good at memorising things or editing things in their minds before verbally expressing themselves, those who have high physical ability become athletes, while people with low physical ability choose the path of the arts,” he continues. “In that sense, I believe that the people who become artists are a group of people who have lived with various complexes in their lives, and by expressing their negative history, they can help others who are suffering from the same problems, and I would advise all artists to hone their skills to effectively express their embarrassments and sadness without trying to be cool or chasing trends.” It is salient advice from a man who managed to spend his life creating an utterly unique inner universe, and then successfully shared it with the masses — would-be art revolutionaries, take heed. ■



Jacket, price on request, **Readymade x Takashi Murakami**. Necklace, talent's own, **Takashi Murakami x Ben Baller**. Hat, talent's own. Hoodie, shirt, prices on request, **Namesake**. Jeans, price on request, **Lost Daze**. Boots, price on request, **Readymade**

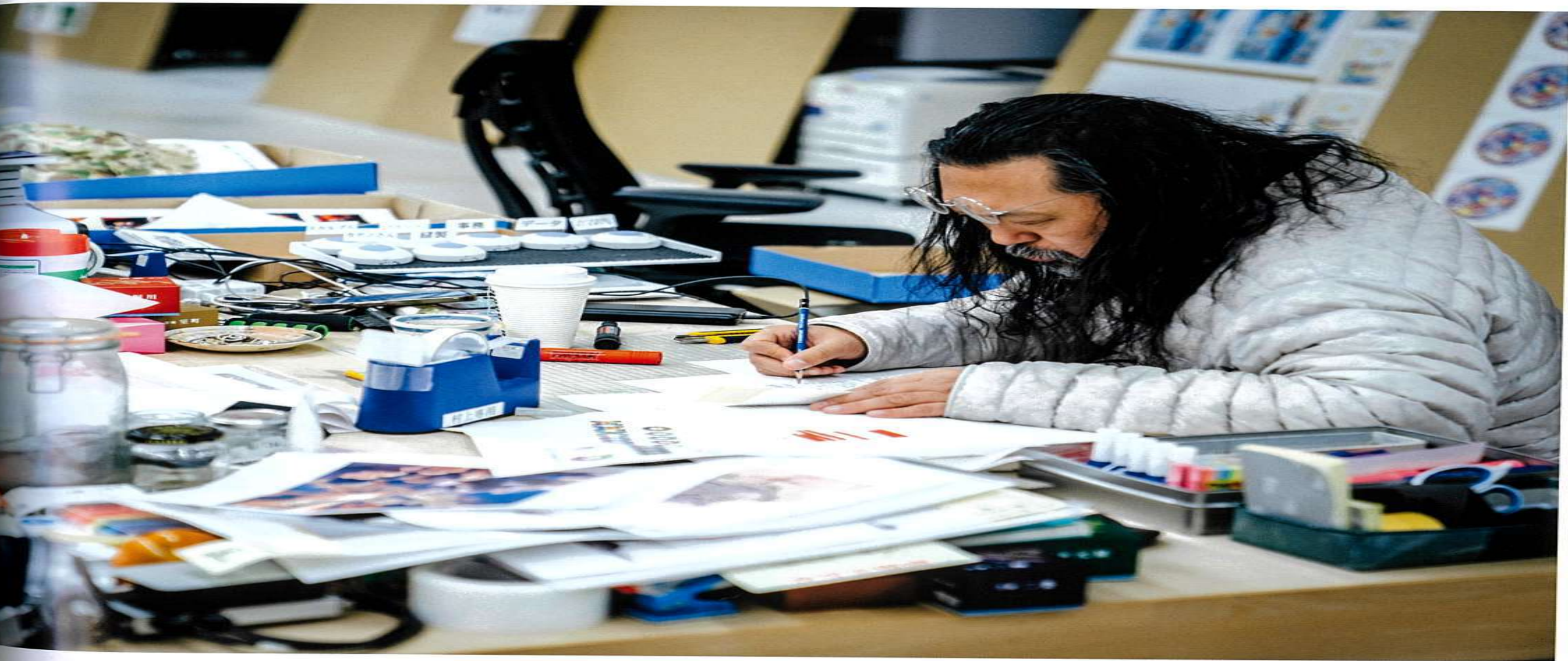
Photography by RK





Shirt, \$610, top,  
\$340, **Juun.J** at That  
Concept Store. Watch,  
Hublot Classic Fusion  
Takashi Murakami  
Sapphire Rainbow  
45mm

Photography by RK



Exhibition view of  
Takashi Murakami  
*Murakami: Ego* at  
Al Riwaq, Doha,  
Qatar, 2012

Photography by  
**Guillaume Zicarelli**





Jacket, \$1290. **MM6**  
**Maison Margiela** at  
That Concept Store.  
Sweater, \$1400.  
**Vetements** at That  
Concept Store. Watch,  
Hublot Classic Fusion  
Takashi Murakami All  
Black 45mm. Trousers,  
talent's own

Photography by RK

Jacket, price on request, **Readymade** x **Takashi Murakami**.  
Necklace, hat, talent's own. Hoodie, shirt, prices on request, **Namesake**

Photography by RK



Exhibition view of  
Takashi Murakami  
*Murakami: Ego* at  
Al Rivaq, Doha,  
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Shirt, \$610, top,  
\$340, **Juun.J** at That  
Concept Store.

Photography by RK





Exhibition view of Takashi Murakami *MurakamiZombie* at Busan Museum of Art, Busan, South Korea, 2023

Photography by **Studio Jeongbiso**, Dongseok Park



Takashi Murakami & Pharrell Williams  
*The Simple Things*, 2008-2009  
Glass fiber, steel, acrylic, wood, LED and 7 objects made of gold (white, yellow, and pink) set with rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and diamonds  
188 x 110 x 101 cm





Photography by RK

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Takashi Murakami  
ZuZaZaZaZaZa (detail), 1994  
Acrylic and silkscreen on  
canvas mounted on board  
150 x 170 cm



Jacket, \$1290, MM6  
Maison Margiela at  
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Sweater, \$1400,  
Vetements at That  
Concept Store. Watch,  
Hublot Classic Fusion  
Takashi Murakami  
All Black 45mm.  
Trousers, sneakers,  
talent's own

Photography by RK

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Hat, talent's own.  
Shirt, \$610, top,  
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Sapphire Rainbow  
45mm. Trousers,  
socks, sneakers,  
talent's own

Photography by RK





# POP QUIZ

**What was the last piece of music you listened to?** *Bocchi The Rock!*

**Where's your favourite place to eat in Tokyo/Dubai/Doha, and what do you eat?** These days, I cook for myself and eat modestly. I'm fond of going to a supermarket, and choosing and buying different ingredients to cook, so I don't go to restaurants so often.

**What's your current Netflix guilty pleasure?** My current favourite is *Bocchi The Rock!*, a Japanese animation series.

**Who tells you when you're wrong?** No one.

**What's your proudest moment?** When I complete a large-scale artwork.

**What's the best advice you were ever given, and who gave it to you?** When I explained to the Japanese art historian Nobuo Tsuji about the mode of animation and asked him to incorporate the forms of animation and manga into the discourse of Japanese art history, he advised me to write such a book myself, saying, "The one who noticed something should do it themselves." This eventually led to my editing and publishing my books such as *Superflat* and *Little Boy*.

**What's your advice for aspiring artists?** I think that people who become artists are quite similar to those who become athletes. Of the people who go to regular schools and have to deal with a very big inferiority complex in the academic area of their lives, not being good at memorising things or editing things in their minds before verbally expressing themselves, those who have high physical ability become athletes, while people with low physical ability choose the path of the arts. In that sense, I believe that the people who become artists are a group of people who have lived with various complexes in their lives, and by expressing their negative history, they can help others who are suffering from the same problems. So I would advise artists to hone their skills to effectively express their embarrassments and sadness without trying to be cool or chasing trends.

**What's next for you?** Since my father developed Alzheimer's at around age 70, I am assuming that I am headed that way at about the same age myself. So I need to create a new studio that will allow me to keep creating works for at least five to six years or so after the onset of Alzheimer's. I would like to have a studio with a small staff to support me in my creative direction, just as Willem de Kooning did when he created some of his most wonderful works after he developed Alzheimer's disease. ■



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Takashi Murakami

All Black 45mm. Hat,

necklace, trousers,

sneakers, talent's own

Photography by RK



