

PRESSBOOK

Mr.

Hong Kong Tatler

September 2018

Japanese Artist Mr.: "I Paint In Order To Escape The Devil"



By Oliver Giles

September 14, 2018

Before the opening of his latest exhibition in Hong Kong, we talk to Mr. about trauma, manga and Takashi Murakami

With its cast of big-eyed, childlike “kawaii” characters, Mr.’s art may appear playful and carefree—but there’s a darkness that lurks behind the 49-year-old Japanese artist’s paintings.

Mr. has titled his latest exhibition, which opens this week at [Perrotin](#) in Hong Kong, “People misunderstand me and the contents of my paintings. They just think they are nostalgic, cute, and look like Japanese anime. That may be true, but really, I paint daily in order to escape the devil that haunts my soul. The said devil also resides in my blood, and I cannot escape from it no matter how I wish. So I paint in resignation.”

Before the exhibition opened, we caught up with Mr. to talk about art as a form of therapy, what he’s learned from Takashi Murakami and how the 2011 Fukushima earthquake affected him.

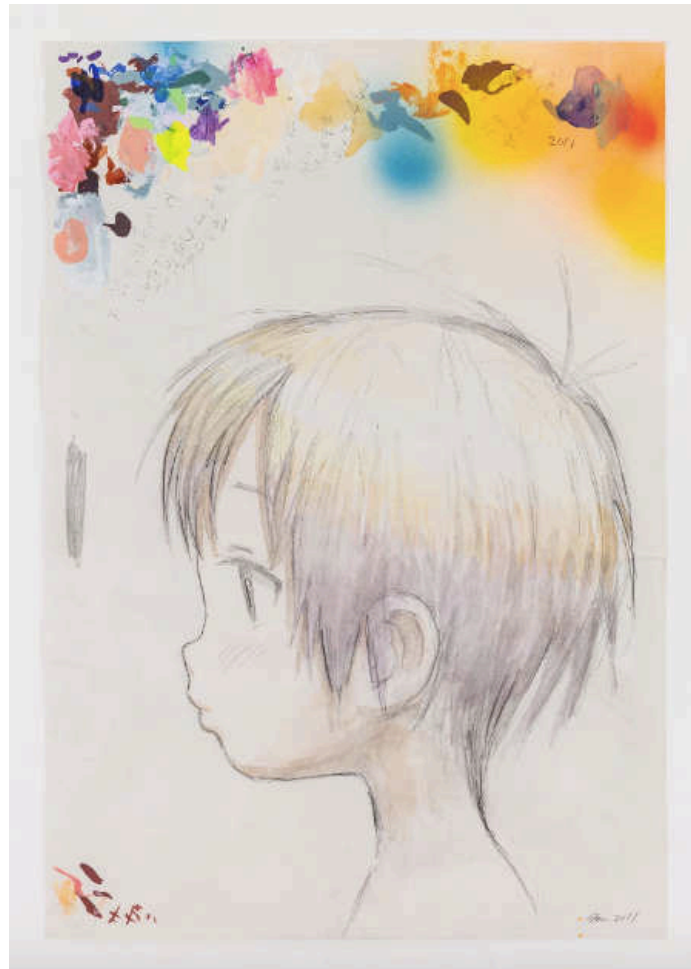


Mr., Untitled (2018). (©2018 Mr./Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy Perrotin. Photography: Ringo Cheung)

You say: “I paint daily in order to escape the devil that haunts my soul.” How old were you when making art became a form of therapy?

I think it was around when I turned 45. Until then, I was intensely focused on establishing my own style and keeping project and exhibition deadlines; but as my work started to sell regularly, and I became more confident in my standing as an artist, I started asking myself bigger questions: Where did I come from, and why am I living the way I am now, why am I doing this work? And suddenly a huge well of uncertainty and anxiety opened up around me.

I came to the realization that I had busied myself in order to escape from basic aspects of my life that made me uneasy—my parents, siblings, relatives, and other people around me. And since I reached this understanding, the main incentive behind my artistic production became the relief from this spiral of doubt.



Mr., Konatsu in Profile (2011). ©2018 Mr./Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy Perrain.
Photography: Ringo Cheung

You have previously cited the 2011 Fukushima tsunami and subsequent nuclear disaster as a turning point in your work. How has your work changed since then?

I started to depict characters who don't smile and to use duller shades of grey. In the past, almost all of my characters were smiling. After 2011, not just myself, but I think everyone in Japan became quite unstable.

Especially in these past two years, I feel that anxiety and resentment toward natural disasters and climate change has greatly increased. To me this links with how Japan developed as a culture that worships myriad gods—including those of nature—rather than becoming a monotheistic society.



Mr., Untitled (2018). ©2018 Mr./Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy Perrotin. Photography: Ringo Cheung

You were mentored by Takashi Murakami. What is the most important thing he taught you?

There are several things. Firstly, that there are two ways of living as an artist: one in which one lives a carefree and liberated existence, and the other where one is always chased by deadlines, like a manga artist.

I learned that to be an artist who sells work and lives on that income, you have to be the latter type. This also means that the artist has to accept the tedious and unromantic aspects of life such as being responsible for a business, paying taxes, and keeping up relationships out of obligation.



Mr., Good Smell (2015). (©2018 Mr./Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy Perrotin. Photography: Ringo Cheung)

Your work has been described as happy and playful, yet you are now sharing more of the personal stories behind your art. What do you hope people feel when they view your new works with this knowledge?

I live in the countryside in Saitama, Japan, where grey industrial scenes mix with rural landscape. There is really nothing particularly fun or stimulating in this area, and most new information comes from the internet, or online shopping, or convenience stores and shopping malls.

I don't really interact with the brighter side of life. But precisely because of this, imagined scenes of comfort and reassurance evolve inside of me, becoming my artistic vision. There is a darkness that exists. But in order to break out from it, I create these bright, playful works. Perhaps the viewer can find some comfort also, in the awareness of my battle and process.

People misunderstand me and the contents of my paintings ... runs from September 14 to October 20 at Perrotin, 17/F 50 Connaught Road Central; +852 3758 2180; perrotin.com