

PRESSBOOK

Takashi MURAKAMI

Chicago Sun Time

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MCA exhibit explores
lesser-known side
of superstar pop artist
Takashi Murakami

Mr. Serious



Takashi Murakami created
an octopus-inspired
character to celebrate the
opening of the exhibit.
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By KYLE MACMILLAN
FOR THE SUN-TIMES

When the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago decided to organize a major exhibition devoted to superstar Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, it could easily have concentrated on sunny works featuring his trademark smiley-face flowers or cartoon-like character, Mr. DOB.

But chief curator Michael Darling wanted to do something different. He sought to go beyond the familiar and reveal a lesser-known, more wide-ranging and ultimately more profound side of this creative dynamo, whose pop and kitsch are sometimes too easily dismissed.

"There is so much more to him as an artist than people give him credit for," said Darling, who first worked with Murakami in 2001 when he was a research assistant at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

The result is "Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg," the artist's first major retrospective in the United States in 10 years. It opens June 6 and runs through Sept. 24 at the MCA.

Certainly, Murakami, 52, is a neo-pop artist who draws inspiration from Japanese animation and comic books and likes to blur the boundaries between so-called high and low art with his mass-market product lines and collaborations with rapper Kanye West and fashion house Louis Vuitton.

"For sure, there was a moment when he was playing to that, and that was the defining aspect of his work," Darling said.

The exhibition, which spans three decades and encompasses more than 50 works, does not ignore this popular face of the artist.

For example, "Flowerball 2" (2002) and "Flowerball 3D" (2008), round paintings brimming with his bright, smiley-face flowers, will be mounted on wallpaper with similar motifs for what the curator calls "maximum optical overload." "This is the Murakami that people will know and recognize," he said.

But such work is just one facet of this show. To highlight aspects of Murakami's artistry that Darling believes

have been overlooked, he decided to focus the exhibition on the evolution of the artist's paintings, emphasizing his seriousness and commitment to history and tradition.

"I want, of course, people to luxuriate



"Flower Ball 2" (2002), by
Takashi Murakami. Acrylic
on canvas, wood. Private
Collection.

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in the eye candy of the flowers and things like that, but I also wanted to tell this other story," Darling said. "And he was willing to go down that road with us."

The exhibition opens with virtually unknown works from the beginnings of Murakami's career, including some never shown previously in the United States. They show him trying out artistic styles and approaches from both the East and West that he would ultimately merge in his own distinctive voice.

These include a set of three somber figura-

tive works like "Picture of a Turtle 'I Spin'" (1986), which draw on the traditional Nihonga style of Japanese painting, and a trio of small monochromatic pieces that look toward Western conceptual ideas.

Around 2007-08, as Murakami's career was surging, Darling said, the artist began questioning the future of his work and his legacy.

From this soul-searching emerged a new commitment to Japanese history and fresh directions in his work that took on a darker dimension after a 2011 earthquake and tsunami that devastated parts of Japan.

A sweeping ex-late work is a 33-ft-titled "100 Arhat," an assortment of colorful figures. It is rendered with hundreds of silk threads. Murakami has his trademark intricacy of detail.

"There is just nothing like this the scale, the detail, just incredible thing that goes into

sample of less widely seen foot-long, 10-panel painting "s" (2013), which features an cartoonish Buddhist-figures. With an intricate layering of screens, a technique that oned to obtain the minute he seeks.

to one in the world making s," Darling said, "especially tail and the technique. It's the amount of labor and plan-to something like this."

Hanging across from it is "Dragon in Clouds — Indigo Blue" (2010), an equally spectacular but more free-flowing painting measuring 59 feet in length. It is based on a historical Japanese work but reimagined on a vastly larger scale.

The final gallery includes two works created specifically for this exhibition. The first is the exhibition's namesake, "The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg," a 35-panel, 114-foot-long painting that wraps entirely around the space. The second is a 15-foot-tall, graffiti-splashed sculpture that suggests a water spout. "So, this room is going to be pretty over-the-top," Darling said.

Kyle MacMillan is a local freelance writer.

"Dragon In Clouds — Indigo Blue" (2010), by Takashi Murakami. Acrylic on canvas mounted on board. Collection of Larry Gagosian.

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