

**PRESSBOOK**

Takashi MURAKAMI

*Hypebeast*

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# Playing the Part

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BACKGROUND: SHANGRI-LA BLUE, 2012  
 ACRYLIC ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON BOARD  
 2000x2000MM

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Just before the opening of his “GYATEI<sup>2</sup>” show in Los Angeles, Takashi Murakami is seated inside a hollow Gagosian gallery. Besides him is friend and personal stylist “Cherry,” casually donning a hooded sweater with Mickey Mouse-like ears. The two are laughing and chatting with each other, while their eyes are fixed on their phones, thumbs scrolling in synchronicity.

*Instagram*, Takashi tells us later, is very important to him; he spends three hours a day on it.

From the outside looking in, it would be impossible to tell Takashi is running up against the deadline of opening day for his grand solo exhibition, one that boasts 30 new works, including a 50-foot-long, 17-panel painting on canvas and a 16-foot-tall, gold-leaf statue of his signature flower character.

While a couple dozen staff are scattered around the space, it’s eerily silent inside one of Hollywood’s most prominent art galleries, the only sounds coming from Takashi’s 12-man personal production crew, who he famously flies in from Tokyo to assemble the artworks and add any finishing touches. Since landing in LA just yesterday, Takashi and his team have been stationed at the gallery around the clock, quietly racing to bring the exhibition to life on time. The surprisingly serene scene is a stark contrast to the one set to take place in the following days, where A-list celebrities and Hollywood elites will frolic, and countless selfies will be taken.

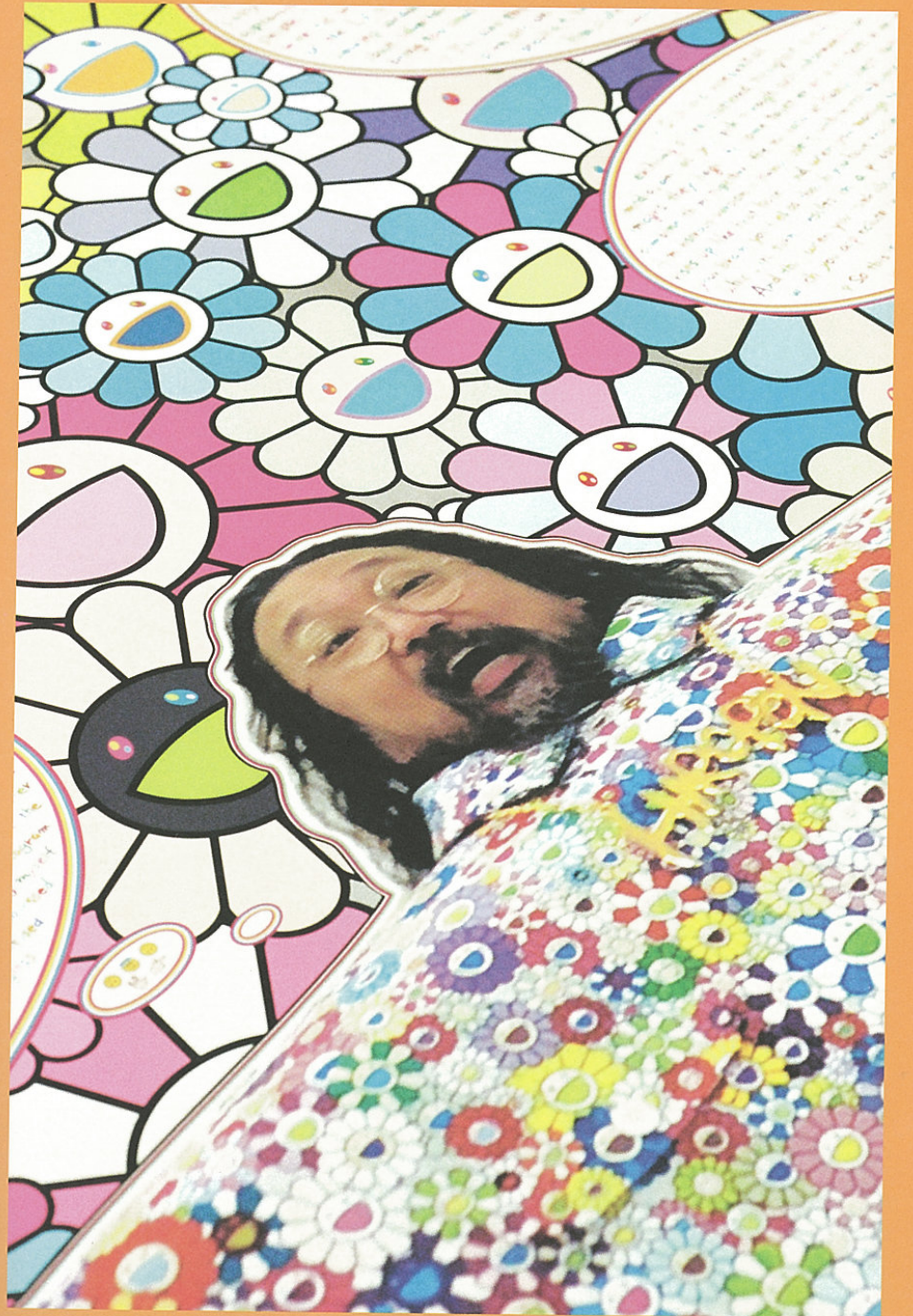
Upon our first encounter with the celebrated artist, we inquired what his plans were during his time in LA, to which he responds:

“Me? Nothing. I’m a nerd. I have nothing else to do,” he laughs.

This was hard to believe, coming from the man who is often seen posing beside arguably un-nerdy company such as Kim Kardashian and Pharrell Williams. He’s also frequently spotted outside fashion’s most distinguished runway shows in Paris – immaculately dressed in the latest designer pieces from Louis Vuitton to Sacai. Not stopping there, in the past year alone, Takashi has also stayed busy working with Kid Cudi on his album artwork, manufacturing a fashion collaboration with Drake’s OVO, and, more recently, producing a music video for budding singer Billie Eilish, not to mention a collaborative art exhibit with Virgil Abloh as well as a handful of solo shows. It’s a far cry from having “nothing to do.”

But to understand Takashi Murakami, you need a bit of background on Japanese culture – specifically, *otaku* culture. The term is defined as one who is obsessed with a particular interest such as Internet culture, anime and manga, so much so that it is a detriment to their social skills. While Takashi is not what you’d consider a typical “nerd,” he has long identified with *otaku* culture.











In fact, Takashi sees what he does now as all part of this otaku lifestyle—connecting it to his newfound fashion sense, and the seemingly curious portrayal behind his personal branding and online persona. “Before working with [stylist] Cherry-san, I used to just cosplay a lot. What I’m wearing right now is basically cosplay,” Takashi explains, while draped in a multi-layer Raf Simons jacket and a custom Porter side bag. Cosplay is a type of performance art that involves dressing up in costume to play a character, closely related to anime and manga culture.

Takashi’s resonance with otaku culture is clearly evident in his artwork. As we follow behind him, meandering through the gallery, examining his artwork piece by piece, we can see in eye-watering detail the bold, multicolored protagonists in his artwork, placed inside gleeful scenes—his works further highlighted by the “superflat” style which he famously developed early in his career. We watch as Takashi walks right up close to his works, the grave air of examination and quietness of the gallery interrupted somewhat unceremoniously, as Takashi absentmindedly whistles Post Malone and Swae Lee’s new hit single, “Sunflower,” with his face inches from the canvas.

The signature flowers and innocent characters he often depicts are quite the contrast from his trained art background, which began with a PhD in *Nihonga* painting, a traditional Japanese painting style from the 1900s. Behind the superficial bliss seen in his paintings, Takashi tells us there’s a somber underbelly to them from his own dark side, which he hides behind an omnipresent smile. When asked which of his artworks is most representative of him as an artist, he references a specific piece inside the Gagosian: “Mr. DOB’s face all mangled and puking. I think that’s the essence. Just puking – and it usually means you are blanked out and feeling sick. That’s the essence of it.”

Unbeknownst to his younger audience, whom he professes to cherish just as much as his art collectors, Takashi’s artwork has never been met with open arms, ever since he made his start at the age of 29. This is especially apparent in his hometown, where his early art was seen as controversial and even looked down upon as an unwanted representation of the country and its culture. Even today, while he reigns as arguably the most well-known living artist from Japan, he explains, “In Japan, they barely carry my artwork. I’m being ignored. I didn’t think too much of it when I was younger, but it’s pretty bad.” Granted, his earlier work did consist of

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more progressive works, such as a 1998 piece titled “My Lonesome Cowboy,” which featured a fully nude manga statue of a boy masturbating. “The darker, self-loathing side of my art doesn’t resonate with them [the Japanese], and they don’t like it.”

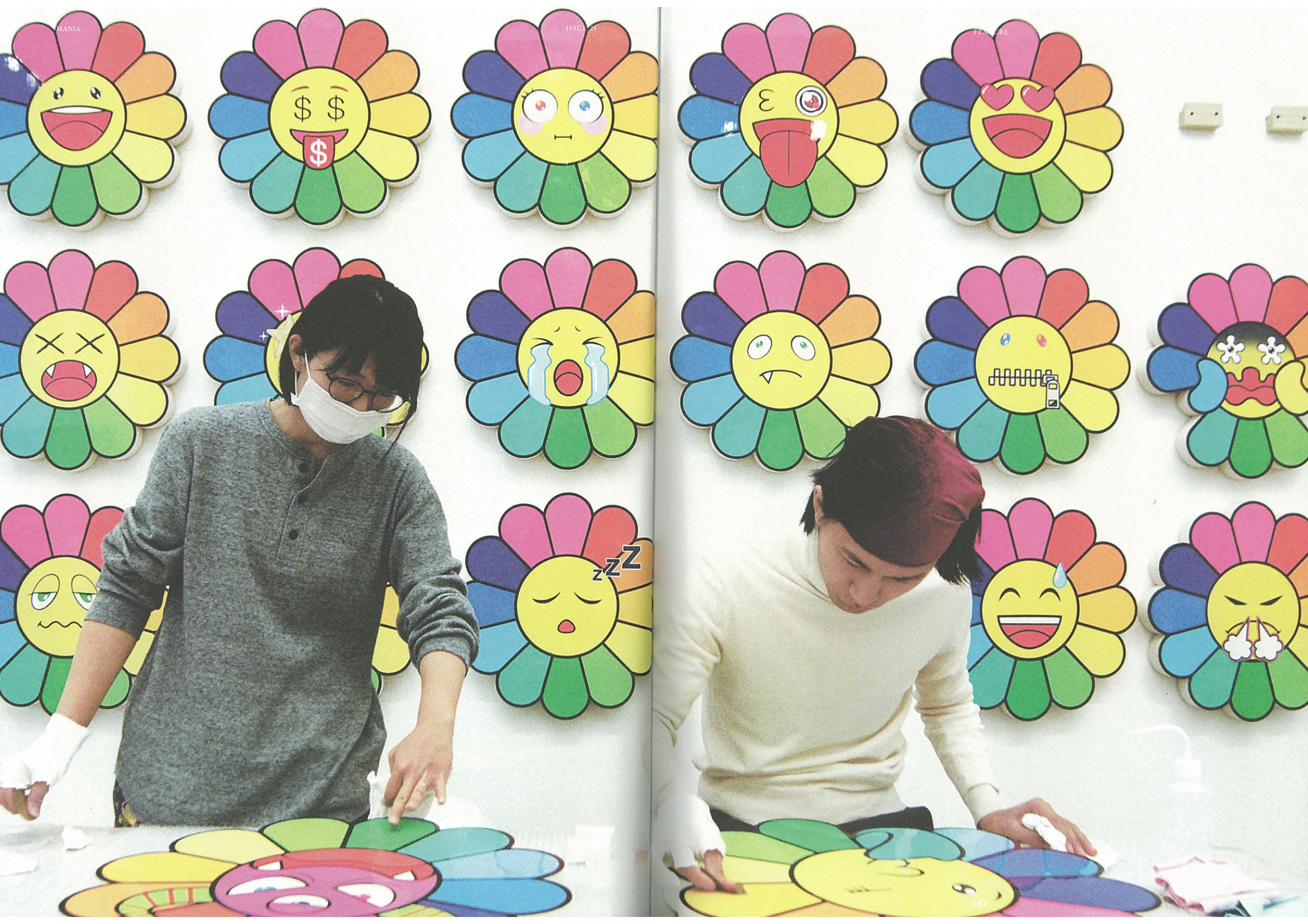
Takashi has long exhibited a provocative attitude to art as an institution, longing to explore the truth of art’s reality within modern society. A prime example is his stance towards consumerism in art. This struck a new chord within the art industry as a whole, he explains, which “blurs the boundaries between design and art... turning the operational structures and values within the art and design industries.” This came in the form of creating and selling merchandise early on, which, in the art world, has always been taboo, due to the idea that merchandise devalues the artwork through the increase in supply and subsequent lowering in demand. Now 20-some years later, dozens of collaborations with fashion brands like COMME des GARÇONS and Supreme, album iconic covers with Kanye West and Kid Cudi, along with thousands of plush pillows later, this is now accepted as the norm and used as a strategy for driving

BACKGROUND: I DO NOT RULE MY DREAMS. MY DREAMS RULE ME., 2011  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON BOARD  
1410×1200MM

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the demand for consumer and fine art alike. “I’m just doing the same as I’ve been doing since day one. Ever since my early 30s, I’m still selling small, limited art pieces and merchandise products, all the same. So, I feel like I haven’t really changed.”

Indeed, the Tokyo-born artist has remained the same through his two decades as an artist in the brightest of limelights. Misunderstood by his hometown observers on one hand, yet also not fully understood by his foreign fans on the other, the one thing that continues to evolve is his progressive process for creating and producing greater work, both in quality and quantity. Today, his painting production team alone holds 45 people at his Japan studio and 16 at his studio in Long Island City. His painting teams work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in rotation—not to mention dozens more in other departments including PR, animation, computer graphics, and sculpting. His artistic process has no shortage of technological advances and new-age techniques, from sketching to scanning and creating “paints” on Adobe Illustrator and then printing on silk screen. It has been said that Takashi took notes from Bill Gates in having staff members type reports each day of what they work on.

Alongside Takashi’s exponentially growing body of work, his personal fame has continued to skyrocket. Whether new fans are initiated through Takashi’s merch or his work with artists like Kanye, Takashi is quick to admit his work with pop and youth culture was huge for his career trajectory. “ComplexCon and collaborating with Kanye West—this was a turning point in my degree of publicity. Young hip hop fans started to recognize me.” It is clear that this is perhaps Takashi’s most remarkable achievement to date, managing to bridge the art world with mainstream or “commercial” culture in the all-encompassing, seamless way that he has. Takashi Murakami is the thread that ties together several otherwise disparate worlds—that of streetwear culture and fine art, for example, or with the luxury market, which in actuality have a lot in common.

It’s nearly impossible to plan for, or anticipate, the level of cultural omniscience that Takashi has achieved. The veteran artist’s collaborations, with the exception of Virgil’s, have all been requests sent to his studio or him directly. Takashi himself has simply stayed true to his *otaku* self and interests. It’s just that now, the world’s appreciation for his ideas has caught up with him. “There was a time when I believed that since I’m

## TAKASHI MURAKAMI IS THE THREAD THAT TIES TOGETHER SEVERAL OTHERWISE DISPARATE WORLDS.

an artist, the art is the main priority. I just wore a black suit and black tie not to stand out. This period lasted for a while. Now that I’m older and I don’t want to alienate the younger audience, I decided to go into cosplay again.”

Later in the afternoon, Takashi and his team are visiting the Broad Museum, where he has several pieces currently on display and even more merchandise on sale at the gift shop. As we arrive at the contemporary art section, throngs are gathered around his pieces, posing and taking selfies. The scene grows dramatically upon Takashi’s arrival: patrons take turns asking for selfies with the artist, the artwork itself immediately falling by the wayside. It begs the question of which holds more value: Takashi’s art or his cultural prevalence? Surely, the age of access and social media plays a big part in his celebrity status, but we wonder would Koons cause such a scene if he stood beside his Balloon Dog? Would Barbara Kruger be stopped in her tracks for a selfie?

Now, nearly three decades deep in the business, the 57-year-old artist has staged over 200 exhibitions globally and has produced over 30 collaborations in fashion, design, and music. While it’s never been a point of emphasis for the steadfast artist, Takashi Murakami and the fantasy world he’s carefully crafted have slowly but surely taken on the (real) world.

BACKGROUND: JELLYFISH EYES: NONSENSE, 2018  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON ALUMINUM FRAME  
1000×1000MM

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