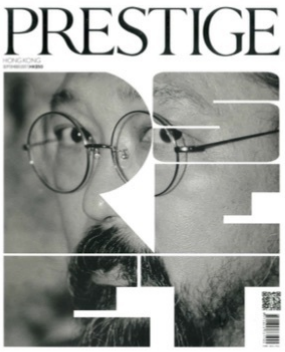
PRESSBOOK

Takashi MURAKAMI

Prestige

September 2017



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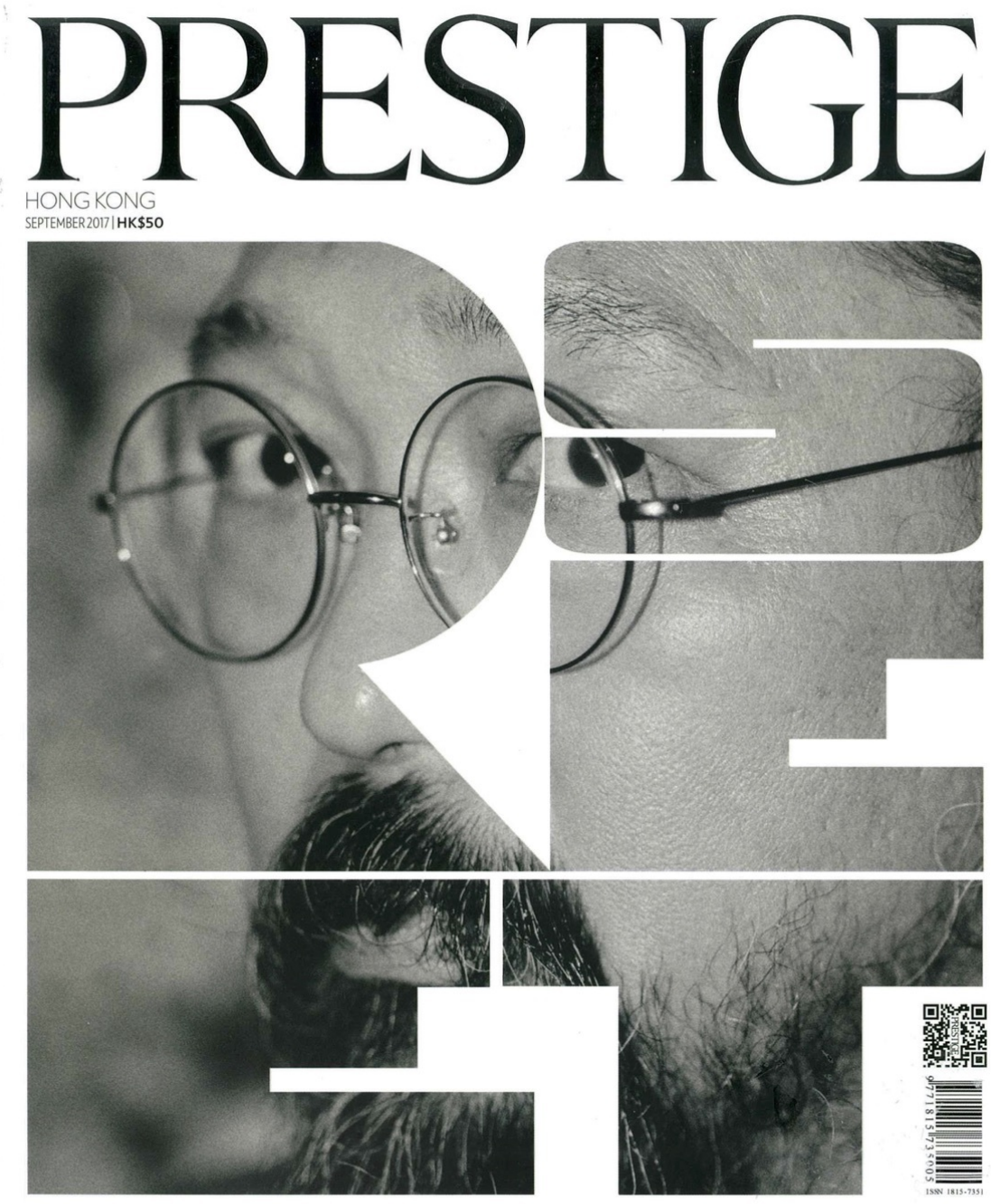

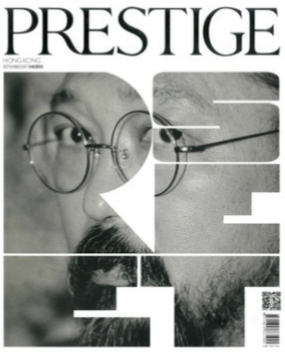

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OPERATION SMILE

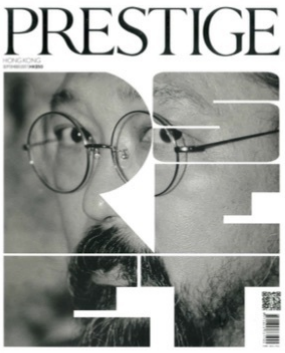
The joy of shooting Charlotte Tsuei lies in witnessing that infectious smile. But then you have a portrait artist like Olivier Yoan, who googled our fair lady and declared, "But in all her shots she's smiling – we should be different, *non*?" So this shot didn't make the final cut, but we love it for how it captures the essence of the founder of sportswear boutique Caelum Greene. See the final picture on page 24.

FAN OF JANN

When we photographed Jessica Jann early last year, we had such a fun interview and portrait session that promises were made to reunite on set soon. One year later, between irresponsible amounts of caffeine, takeaway lunches and giggles (photographer Dino Busch's reminiscences about his days as high school prom king, including his winning pose and hand wave, got us all laughing), an oh-so-chic, Parisian-influenced style spread was born. Flip to page 144 to see the results.

PARTYING SHOTS

Cover shoots typically take hours, days, weeks of planning – but our September issue cover story was conceived, pitched and executed in half a day. After attending a talk given by Takashi Murakami and the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, we approached the artist for an interview opportunity and, lo and behold, were granted access that evening. We shot and interviewed Murakami right before a shindig in his honour at Bibo, with lensman Laurent Segretier (pictured above with Murakami) working fast to get "the shot" literally as guests were walking in the door to get the party started. Turn to page 190 for the full story.



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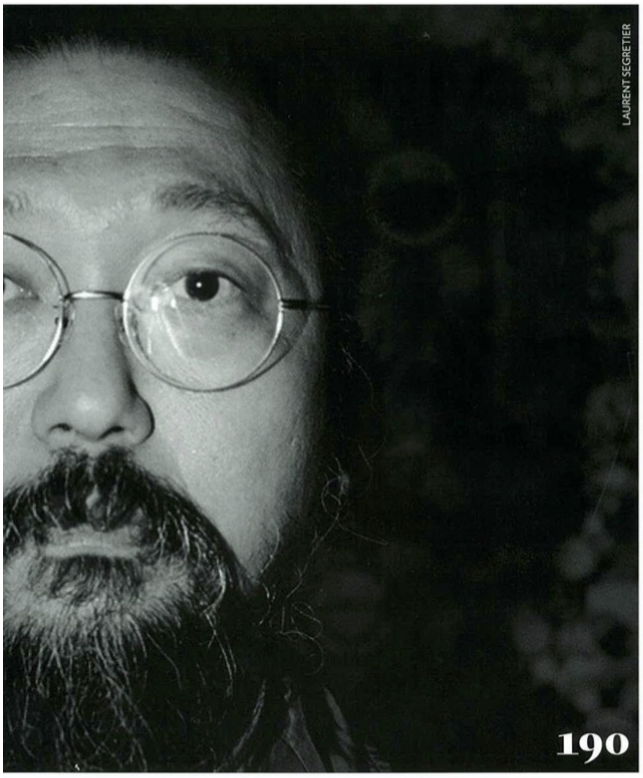

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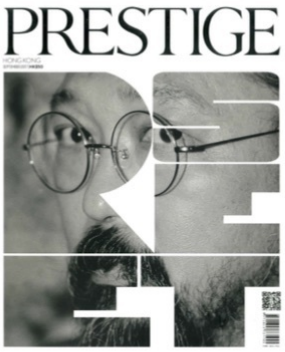

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The Reset

PHOTOGRAPHY
LAURENT SEGRETIER

I REMEMBER YEARS AGO, when coordinating concurrent cover shoots with supermodels Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss, the incredible pressure of dealing with two superegos drove me to tears. "Calm down, Christina," said one of my co-workers. "Remember, we're not curing cancer here."

No, we certainly are not. We are a fluffy luxury-lifestyle magazine filled with pretty clothes, fast cars, smiling celebrities and occasional thoughtful musings on topics relevant to the rich and famous. And yet I know that we hold a place of importance in this world. We are an escape from reality, a haven for dreamers, a place where the imagination can run wild.

But lately, we have had to be more. With the advent and proliferation of digital and social media, we – and in this case, I mean more than *Prestige*, but all lifestyle publishers – have become news providers, bloggers, models, event planners, videographers, retail salespeople ... in short, whatever the advertisers and readers want. And somewhere along the way, in the quest to achieve more pageviews and more advertising dollars, we've strayed from who we are.

We can blame the industry, of which we are undoubtedly a part, for plating up visionless drivel, pandering to clients and clickbaiting readers, and then calling the end product a magazine. Or, we can remember why we chose this line of work, and we can rally.

This isn't a revamp. The breakdown of articles remains consistent with the last issue, and visually, we have updated the look without straying too far from our original template. It is, we'd like to think, a reset. It's a return to the roots of *Prestige Hong Kong* – to why, 12 years ago, people picked up our magazine and actually read the articles. People today may be too attention-deficit or lazy to take in long-form editorials, so more than ever our content needs to be compelling and evergreen, measured yet provocative.

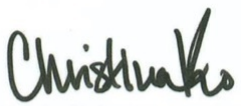
And so there is much to read, and even more to think about. Our Agenda section (page 48) has been adjusted to include more dynamic bits and pieces. Our Talk columns (page 62) will now feature a rotating list of writers; we kick off with Joanne Ooi's incisive rant against Hong Kong society, as well as Mr *Vogue* Mark Graham's fish-out-of-water anecdotes pertaining to life as the plus one to China's most important fashion editor.

Our features are, as they say, same same, but different. Every piece has a purpose, whether it's exploring the impetus behind and trajectory of the rise of the Korean fashion industry (page 220), questioning the relevance of prize nominations in the world of the written word (page 216), teaching the time-starved how to sleep better (page 184) or even eschewing the fashion glitterati to take style cues from the literati (page 274). Our cover story on Takashi Murakami (page 190) is not a broad and boring profile of a popular artist, but an interrogation of the man's polarising career and interests in the context of high and low culture.

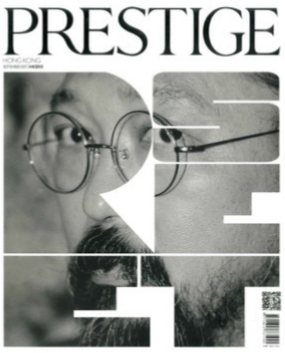
In every area possible, we have made our pages harder working, so much so that I do wonder how we will sustain this level of thinking and production. But I know the answer to that question, because the team that put together this issue is a dream team in every sense of the term. We work together harmoniously, but even better, we dream together.

Over late nights and weekends, seated in the freezing-cold conference room or brainstorming in the middle of the night on our Whatsapp group chat, we have dreamed of what this magazine could be, questioned the status quo and written from the heart. We have attempted to reset our thinking and redefine what it means to be a luxury-lifestyle magazine today. As such, this issue represents not a groundbreaking revolution, but the beginnings of an ongoing evolution that will, hopefully, remind us and you why magazines like ours are still relevant and important.

I hope that it isn't too trite to say that I hope you enjoy this labour of love. So we'll never cure cancer. But we can still dream.



Christina Ko | **EDITORIAL DIRECTOR** |



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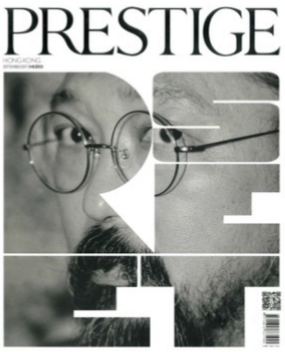
How a failed cartoonist became the world's most pervasive artist

Why is Takashi Murakami not more celebrated?

TEXT **CHRISTINA KO**
PHOTOGRAPHY **LAURENT SEGRETIER**



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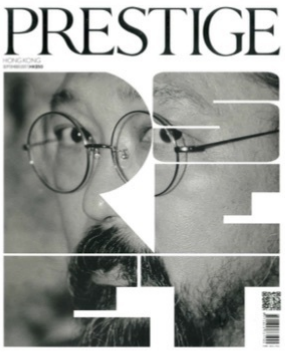

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OPPOSITE: *MEMORIES OF A PASSIONATE LIFE* (2015)

"IF HE LIKES YOU, he will talk. Just don't ask stupid questions."

This is advice that is at once both sound and silly. It's given to me by someone who has worked with Takashi Murakami, before I meet and interview the godfather of Japanese contemporary art who is as reviled as he is revered – depending on who you ask. Murakami has, in some circles, reached deification for his ability simultaneously to straddle East and West, old and new, high- and lowbrow, mainstream and subculture. In others, it is precisely this cross-contamination and universality that is so grating.

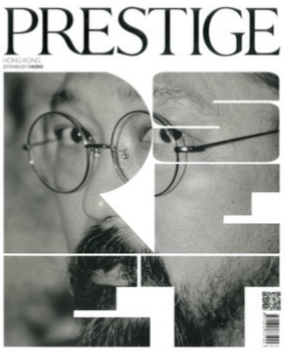
You can be a gallerist, a geek or a gas-station attendant, but one thing is certain. You know Murakami's work, even if you do not know the man. His grinning sunflowers are everywhere: on paintings that grace art fairs and museums; splashed across skateboards, sneakers or satchels in high-profile collaborations with megabrands; sketched onto magazine covers or even infiltrating the Google logo on the search-engine's homepage. And that's just one of his many characters.

His work seems simple; it is not. The man seems smiley, but there's more to it. He's not an unwilling candidate for fame, but he is, in his own words, "a very negative person, generally. When I meet people and need to speak English, I can't tell people about this feeling, so that's why I change the mood, to look like I'm happy, or laughing." This rings true with an earlier comment he had made during his public talk: "As with Hello Kitty, the prime minister [Shinzo Abe] smiling is cute – but also a little bit creepy," adding later, "I have experience. So that's why I say Prime Minister Abe is doing what he's doing."

When we meet, it's at Hong Kong's Bibo, whose street-art-filled interior has been cleared of furniture in preparation for a party, only to be filled with a cast of disparate characters. A cuddly blue beast (a Dob, an autobiographical representation from Murakami's work) bumbles – or tumbles – up and down the venue and stairs. A man with scruffy facial hair wearing a Japanese-schoolgirl outfit is examining the art – this turns out to be Murakami protégé and Japanese artist MR. A Taiwanese pop star is loitering in the library, having arrived a little too early for the soirée. Staff from Galerie Perrotin, the gallery that represents him, loiter.

There's a sprinkling of art-world aristocracy on the scene, too, including Katya Inozemtseva, curator of Moscow's Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, which is putting on a Murakami exhibition this month. Garage director Anton Belov is also present: they've just given a talk with Murakami that morning about the Moscow show. The artist looks tired, mainly, and serious, a world away from his popular image as the smiling mascot of the Japanese art world.

That image is probably the biggest misconception that surrounds one of the most misinterpreted artists of our generation, and one that is being tackled this month in the highly ambitious and exceedingly comprehensive Garage exhibition. The Moscow show covers not only Murakami's own oeuvre, but will be contextualised by hundreds of historical Japanese works personally chosen by the artist that



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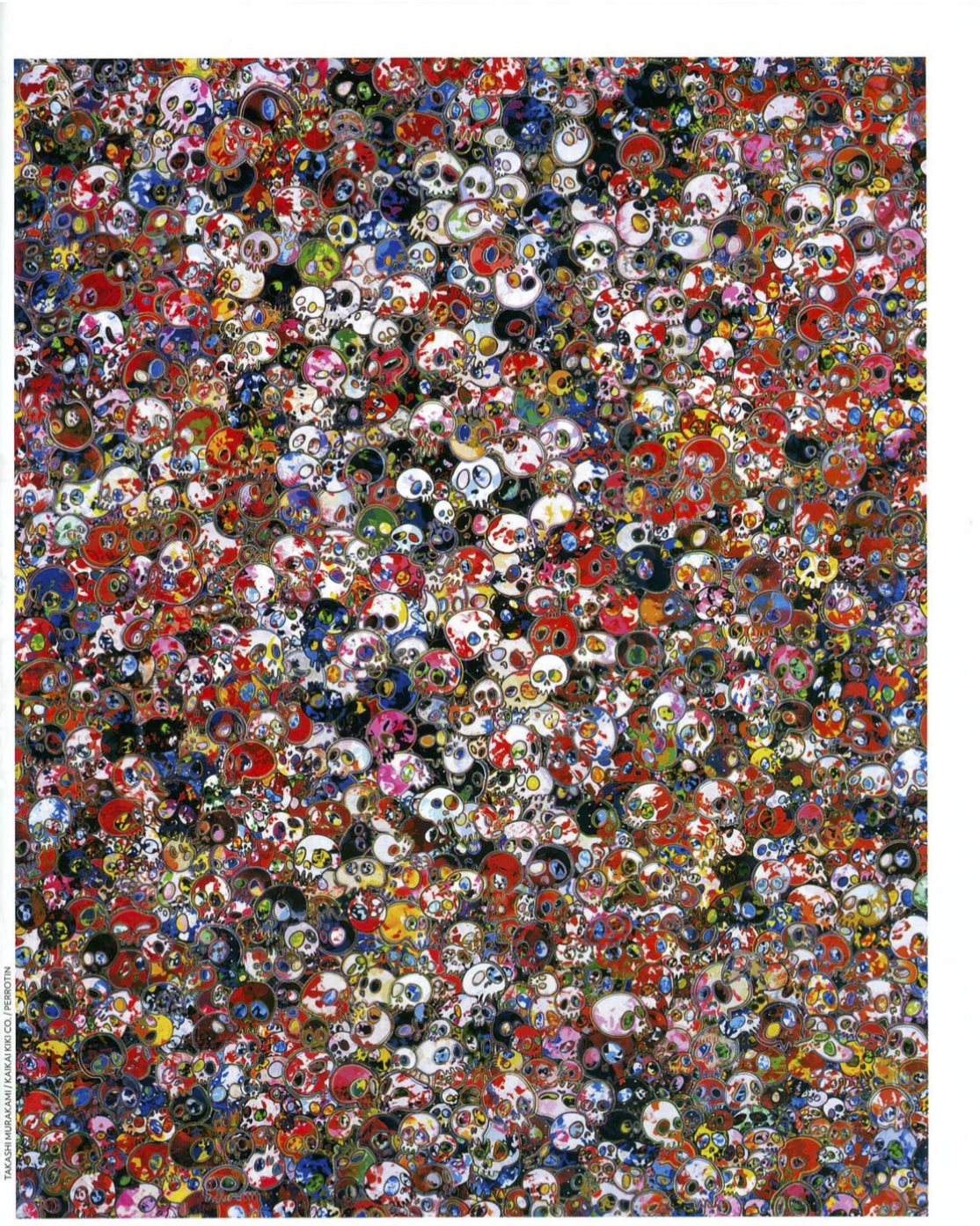
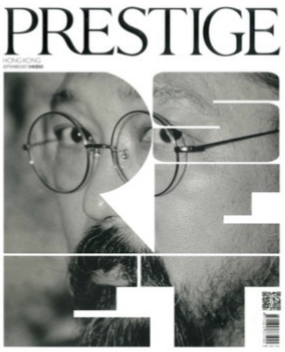


TAKASHI MURAKAMI / KAIKAI KIKI CO. / PERROTIN



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COVER

MURAKAMI STANDS BEFORE
THE 500 ARHATS

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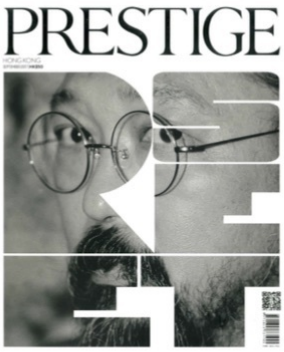

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"IN JAPAN, THERE'S NO DIFFERENCE IF YOU MAKE SUSHI OR YOU MAKE A PAINTING."

Tatya Inozemtseva

showcase the evolution of the nation's art. Part of the space will also be transformed into a working installation, with a functioning replica of Murakami's famed Kaikai Kiki studio, complete with artisans at work.

The reasons Murakami is not considered a "serious artist" are many: the ubiquity of his work, his willingness to collaborate with commercial brands, his unabashed obsession with otaku and anime culture, his conscious courting of what the art world considers lowbrow or cutesy culture. Hypebeasts may love him; the art world turns its nose up.

"For the highbrow Western community, he's a guy who's making funny pictures," explains Inozemtseva, who worked closely with Murakami on putting together the pieces for the show. "Very flat and very colourful, and they don't really know or they don't want to know or explore more."

Yet, according to Murakami himself, he's even less rated in his homeland. "I'm Japanese, I cannot escape where I'm from," Murakami tells me. "But reaction [to my work] is also big in the US and Europe, mainland China and Hong Kong. In Japan, nothing has a reaction. I don't know, I mention myself that I am a Japanese artist, but when I go home, nobody mentions that."

He echoes what Mori Art Museum director Fumio Nanjo, who staged a Murakami exhibition in 2015, told *Prestige* in an interview last month: "He criticised people. And he's always talking about his strategy – but people in Japan have an image that an artist should not be like this, he should be like Van Gogh, just making art. It's a purer idea. So people didn't really think he was that important before. But his work is really high quality. Now we realise that, because of interest outside of Japan, his work is so expensive it's impossible to buy. Actually there are not many works in Japan in museums."

Murakami studied at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, achieving a PhD in 1993 after extensive study in Nihonga painting. Some of his early works were already polarising – not for their controversial cuteness, but for their social implications. In 1994, when popular Japanese actor Kase Taishu lost the legal rights to his own name in a management dispute and a different actor was promoted under the same name, a young Murakami hired four art students to use the same moniker as well, each gaining fame and followings in a sort of installation project that was cancelled after legal inquiries, eventually resulting in the loss of some of Murakami's museum commissions.

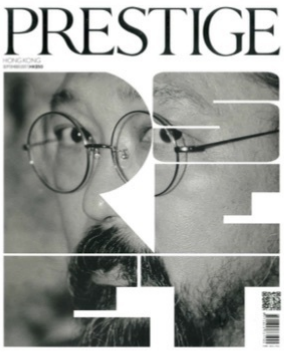
His work continues to be political in nature today. Although it was created in 2012 as a token of gratitude to the State of Qatar for its quick assistance to Japan after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, *The 500 Arhats* only showed in Japan three years later in 2015, when the Mori mounted an exhibition titled after and featuring the piece, marking the first major Murakami exhibition the country had seen in 14 years. The painting – 100 metres long, executed with the assistance of some 200 art students over a single year and quite possibly the largest art work ever created – translates the concept of arhats (enlightened Buddhist disciples who spread hope through the doctrine of giving up worldly possessions) into his unique aesthetic.

"Because there was a tsunami, many people were dead and parents gone, small kids survived. It's necessary to give these kids a story," Murakami says. "Your parents have gone to the stars, to space. That is a very primitive moment to analyse religion. Religion is a very popular thing in painting. I was educated about this thing, so I come back naturally to the things that I was educated in as a student."

Accompanying the work were sketches that showcased the work in progress, perhaps acting to silence naysayers who look upon his factory with disdain, and who question the authenticity of a work that isn't created by the hands of one man alone.

"Nothing in his paintings is done by guess[work]," notes Inozemtseva. "If you've seen *The 500 Arhats*, his new cycle of paintings that he did after Fukushima, you can explore with a microscope each centimetre of this painting. It was a push impulse for developing the concept of the whole show."

Murakami's work has also long been about more than himself. "Our [Garage] show is about something really different," Inozemtseva adds. "It really explores his identity, his status of being a Japanese artist. And the whole thing is given in a broader context of Japanese public consciousness, high culture – because in Japan, there's no difference if you



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make sushi or you make a painting. This is very important, [because] this is very far away from any vested notions of what fine art could be."

What Inozemtseva is referring to is a term coined by Murakami early in his career: Superflat, which has come to be an umbrella label for the movement encapsulating the work of Murakami, his contemporaries and disciples. On the surface, it refers specifically to the two-dimensional graphic style employed by the artist, created by overlaying multiple transparencies that are "flattened" into one image. Beyond that, it alludes to the flattening of high and low culture – with undertones condemning society's precious need to distinguish between the two.

Commercial and critical success are oft viewed in the art world as mutually exclusive, and that Murakami is so wildly and unflinchingly willing to collaborate with brands of any ilk and level basically negates the chance of critical approval. In an age where it's coolest to be uncool, Murakami is the king of cool, and is thus, paradoxically, uncool.

Yet without Murakami, would the concept of artist-brand collaborations even exist? Marc Jacobs is not credited enough for inviting the likes of Stephen Sprouse, Richard Prince and Murakami to put their stamp on the Louis Vuitton monogram bag in the early 2000s, an idea that launched a revolution of synergy, and an easily replicable business idea for brands the world over. And brands have approached Murakami time and again with, it seems, sure success. Why? It's something that begs asking – and so, hoping this is not one of the aforementioned stupid questions, I do.

"I'm not fashion people, I'm not street people, but street-culture people love my material, that's why I follow that. I'm making T-shirts, I'm making skateboards, toy stuff. Hong Kong [streetwear fans] buy everything. So I have to think: what is that? What is the reality?" Murakami shrugs.

"I'm getting old," he says. He is 55. "I have not a long time. I have a short time, so I don't want to lose [time] without creating things.

"I'm very open. One rule I have, though: [if] some coordinator emails me – this is a no, completely no. Some director emails me, no. Owner, yes. This is a truth project. But someone, "I am director of the creative something dept", [they cannot make] the final, final decision. That's why, sorry! Collaboration is very difficult. Like the Kanye West collaboration with Adidas – this is really tricky. So Vans, LV – each company, I need the top people to access."

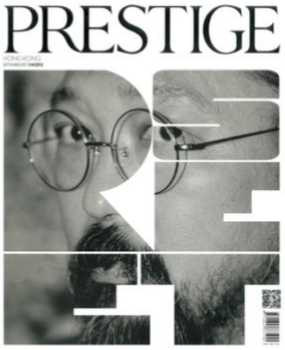
This explains the multitude of collaborations. Despite his fame, he isn't known to be unapproachable, nor is he quick to decline a selfie opportunity.

"I swear, the artists at David Zwirner [who are less recognised by the public but more critically acclaimed] are much more unavailable than Takashi," says Inozemtseva. "He's quite famous and people are around him, but it's not disturbing, he knows how to deal with it. He makes selfies and photographs. On one of our last evenings with Takashi [in Japan] when we'd travelled from Moscow to bring him the concept for the works, trying to get the whole approval, he joined us for dinner and the bars, and it was just one of the funniest parties ever, unexpectedly. We were in [Nakano Broadway], we were sitting with him in this tiny, tiny corridor, singing everything, Russian songs, and drinking. He found a guy with a guitar who was playing [on the street] and he became part of the group. I had the worst hangover of my life the day after."

Following his routine at Kaikai Kiki gives further insight into the workings of the mastermind. "He lives in the studio; he really lives there, in a cardboard box" says Belov. "In the morning, they do gymnastics. They do it all together, 'Dun-dun-dun-dun-do-do-do,'" he sings, with hand motions to match. "They have the same slippers – the director to the smallest assistant in the studio, they all wear the same slippers. It's a family style of working. Some people say it's like a Warhol factory, but actually it's not. And how he produces work – he draws and then he adds layers, they take photos. He's using transparencies, and it's like a 10-year project."

"He needs 400 screens just to get one image," adds Inozemtseva.

The trickle-down influence that Murakami has had on Japanese art, the commercial world, even the globalisation of Japan's kawaii culture, can't truly be measured. And his influence is as contrived as it is accidental. He's an avid exporter of Japanese arts and culture, as well as a collector



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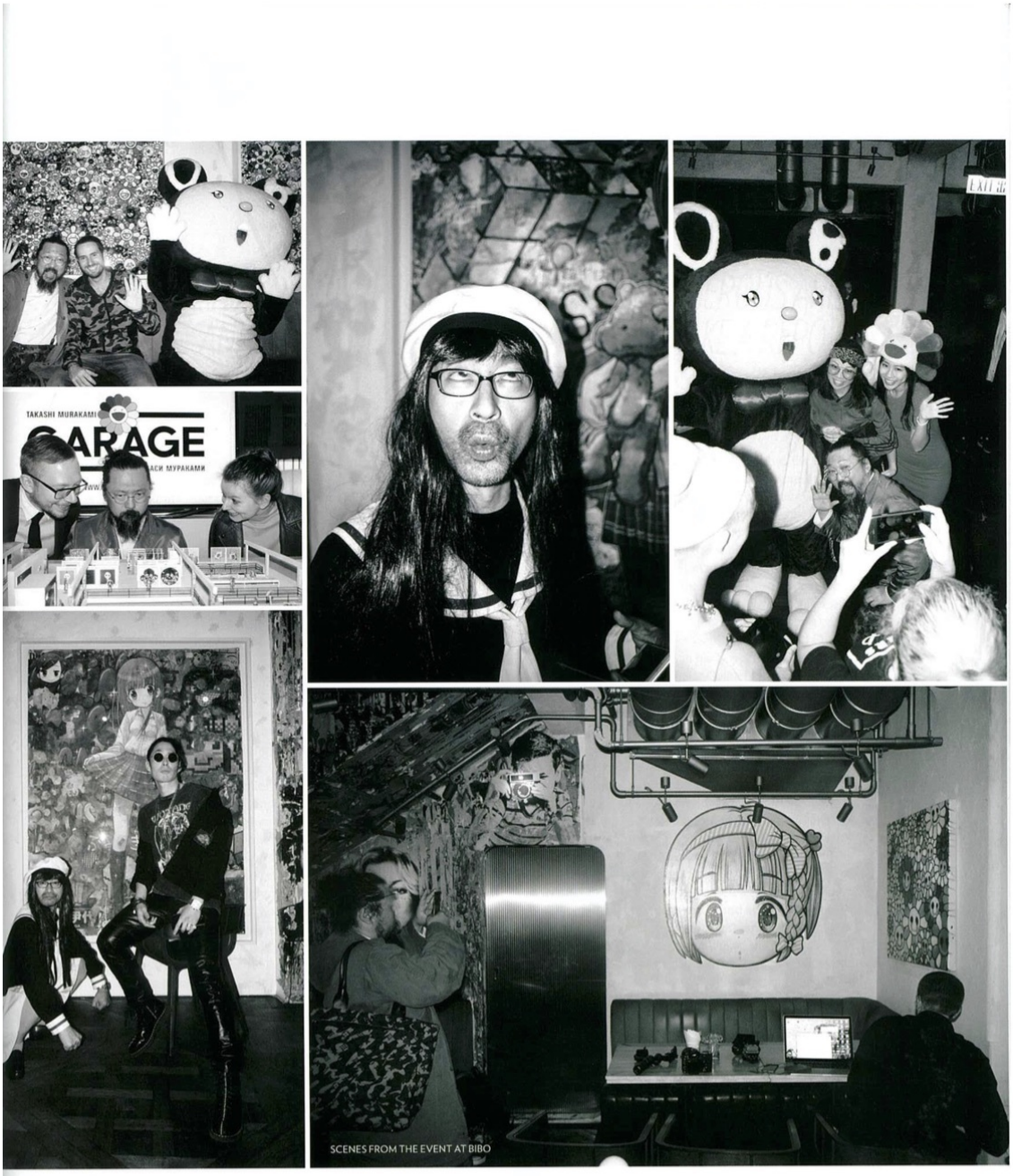

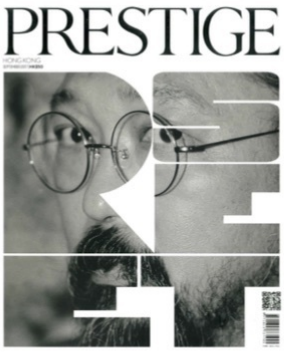

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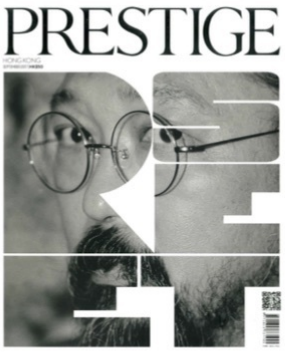

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"ART IS AN ADVENTURE TO ONE'S SELF, TO A DANGEROUS AREA. AND THEN YOU COME BACK, AND YOU MAKE A REPORT"

Takashi Murakami

with specific tastes, going so far as to launch his own art fair in 2002, allowing artists instead of galleries to participate and curate their own booths, to encourage direct interaction between creator and buyer.

The festival, Geisai, ran in Tokyo, Taipei and Miami and launched the careers of many a Japanese artist over its 12-year tenure, but ultimately languished: "This was a mistake," Murakami admits. "What is a true artist, is kind of grassroots. Grassroots artists are strong. I thought I have success, so I can help – that was a mistake. It doesn't necessarily help. Good artists come from the grassroots [and must find their own path]."

The art world, he muses, has changed since he was a fledgling artist. "Much younger-generation artists are a completely different way. When I was debuting, in Japan there was the burst-bubble economic effect, so that's why we [artists] cannot get money, cannot get chances. That's why I moved to New York City, I had to escape to the US. Younger artists keep in connection with curators to the Venice Biennale or triennials, and also in Japan [they have] a lot of art festivals. So they have many chances. Still no money – maybe a little bit of money. But I mean, [they] can survive. So that's completely different.

"Thinking about the juxtaposition of the music industry and the art industry right now. The MTV effect was in the '90s and early 2000s. That moment was an explosion, everything was going good, many artists can debut and get money. So now, the structure has completely changed. The music industry crashed for the last 10 years, so we need a new business structure. So you can say [it is] easy or difficult [for artists to make it today], but young generation people have many chances. Like music – you cannot get money, but you can create [and reach people]."

Though he supports armies of young artists via the fair and employment at Kaikai Kiki, when it comes to collecting, Murakami's personal archive is focused primarily on Japanese ceramics, and he has curated museum shows featuring his purchased pieces.

"Right now I have an obsession for Japanese young ceramicists, pottery, and I don't know why. It's very primitive, and can be used, and very sexy. When it touches the lips, super sexy," he says. Murakami can be partially credited for the rise of the legitimacy of ceramics, a medium once considered more handicraft than fine-art form, and its eventual explosion recently into a bona fide trend for the collector set. In the last year, he has mounted two exhibitions in Japan of his personal collection at the Yokohama Museum of Art and Towada Art Centre, including hundreds of pieces by established names such as Yoshitomo Nara, Gabriel Orozco and Rosemarie Trockel alongside rising stars or Kaikai Kiki-anointed artists like Chiho Aoshima and Shin Murata, framed, but naturally, in his Superflat context (the exhibitions were named *Superflat Collection* and *A Superflat Consideration* respectively).

"In Yokohama, when he exhibited his own collection, you understand how good his taste is," says Belov. "He selects very good pieces and it merges old pieces, new pieces, contemporary art pieces, modernist – everything goes together because there is no high and low. That is what we're trying to reflect in our Garage exhibition – there is no high and low culture, mass culture. It's again about handicraft, about this amazing mastery. In terms of contemporary practice, it's very crucial. Everyone has forgotten about mastery, and for him it will remain."

Is it ironic that handcrafted arts such as pottery and fabric manipulation have in recent years found approval in the art world, yet those producing work influenced by otaku subculture are still considered pandering pop artists?

That Murakami's smiling visage is so available, his auction prices so vertiginous and his work so seemingly childlike and simplistic makes it easy to apply reductionist theories to an artist who appears the opposite of the art world's enduring ideal of a starving, angst-ridden intellectual martyr. But as multifaceted as the man is, he is in fact, that, too.

"Art is an adventure to one's self, to a dangerous area," he says in measured tones. "And then you come back, and you make a report. This is an art piece. When I was young, it was easy to go back and forth. Now, it's difficult, dangerous. I cannot come back. So in that moment, I make a self-portrait. I'm here. I'm here. I'm here. I have to remind myself." P