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The Brooklyn Museum of Art
200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn
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Mr. Jellyfish Eyes

When he was a child, Takashi Murakami's mother used to tell him: "Takashi, you are very lucky. If Kokura had not been cloudy, you wouldn't be here today." On August 9, 1945, she'd been a kid herself, living in the city that the U.S. had targeted for its second atomic-bomb attack on Japan. Because of bad weather, she and thousands of others were spared, and Nagasaki, with a small patch of blue in its overcast skies, was incinerated instead.

Fate doesn't get much more capricious than that. Perhaps Murakami, a globe-trotting artist, curator, and theorist, feels he's been living on borrowed time since before he was born, in 1962. This might explain his varied (at times, frenzied) output of paintings, sculptures, animation, and luxury goods, all on view in this Brooklyn Museum retrospective.

Few skies are bluer than the one in 2002's *Kawaii! Vacances d'été*, a 30-foot-wide canvas (in six panels) arrayed with colorful flowers, some of their perfectly straight stalks towering over the viewer, nearly every one sporting a gaping smile. *Kawaii* means "cute" in Japanese, and this parade of immaculately painted cartoons is just that; yet, like a famous series of flowers that preceded them, they also signal something darker. In 1964, shortly after Lyndon Johnson defeated Barry Goldwater in the presidential election, Andy Warhol exhibited his flower paintings—broad, high-contrast petals in bright hues on grainy black backgrounds. He said at the time that if Goldwater had won, he would have exhibited pictures of the conservative senator from Arizona, because "then everything would go, art would go." This seems a reference to Johnson's famous "Daisy" attack ad, in which a girl plucks flower petals before looking up to behold a mushroom cloud—after which Americans decided in landslide proportions that Goldwater couldn't be trusted with the nuclear button.

In many ways, Andy is the template that Murakami has followed: Just as the godfather of pop wallpapered gallery walls with cows and Maos, Murakami has filled entire rooms with his signature "Jellyfish" eyes—big, round, and long-lashed—and patterns of ghostly, wavering skulls that coalesce into ersatz camouflage. (He has a way to go to best Warhol's deeply strange and absurd movies; Murakami's videos are fun and well-wrought, but even with their *South Park* levels of scatology, they lack real vigor and revelation.)

Murakami's smiling flowers are everywhere, notably in a large fiberglass-and-iron sculpture that recalls Harold Edgerton's microsecond exposures of atomic blasts, which capture expanding waves of light and heat frozen into mottled spheres of horrific beauty. The exuberant blossoms of Murakami's *Flower Matango (b)* (2001–6) form a chromatic crust over a huge ball sprouting green tendrils and outrigger blooms, as if their sunny energy could not be contained. Mushrooms and their cloud brethren also colonize much of Murakami's work. Ten feet high and more than 34 feet across, the 1999 painting *Super Nova* riffs on Oasis's "Champagne Supernova" (sample lyric: "Where were you while we were getting high?"), altered states (the colorful fungi army stares out at the viewer through multiple sets of eyes), and funhouse-mirror-like shifts

in scale (one can almost hear a Warner Brothers-style "Boooooinnngg!" emanating from the spreading caps of the biggest 'shrooms). Even stranger are the skull-shaped mushroom clouds that Murakami cribbed from a popular Japanese cartoon, where each episode ends with the villain being atomized by a nuclear explosion, only to return the following week hale and hearty.

Japan's postwar obsession with all things cute (a retreat from worldly dangers?) both attracts and repulses Murakami. In the huge painting *Tan Tan Bo Puking—a.k.a. Gero Tan* (2002), he places a phalanx of his idiotically grinning flora in front of another of his cartoon creatures, DOB, a Mickey Mouse parody that first appeared in the early '90s, here grown to Godzilla-like proportions, with toxic effluvia and fecal torrents streaming from between shard-like teeth. Trust me: Murakami's immaculate "Superflat" surfaces do not read as posters or graphics. The garish dollops and swirls of contrasting color may recall the psychedelic tumescence of last year's "Summer of Love" extravaganza, but unlike that era's belief in a new, youthful movement, this work views innocence through fatalistic (if saucer-shaped) eyes, exuding a compelling world-weariness not only for this realm but for those of sci-fi and fantasy as well. The forms are often as gelatinous and crumpled as a human brain; indeed, they can feel like a personification of *otaku* culture, roughly translated

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as those obsessed with manga and anime tales. But unlike Lichtenstein's bald comic-panel rip-offs, Murakami evinces an abiding respect for his source materials (Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, Disney cartoons, the apocalyptic anime *Akira*, and myriad other pop-cult touchstones).

Having sold miniature versions of his sculptures as "snack toys," Murakami has bested even Warhol in the ancillary-merch sweepstakes—which brings us to the Louis Vuitton shop, installed as part of the show, blunt as a torpedo amidships. After taking in the chromatic amplitude and rarefied surfaces of the sculptures and paintings, the "Jellyfish Eye"—patterned bags and white-clad salesfolk feel beside the point, but these ostentatious items may actually be the heart of the show. As Scott Rothkopf's fascinating catalog essay points out, Murakami's career is a veritable case study of art-world conflicts of interest, because "his activities as a curator and critic function as a shrewd marketing device. By framing and advancing a new 'movement' of sorts, he has gained for his cohorts significant traction in both foreign intellectual and commercial markets." For example, Murakami curated the hugely successful "Little Boy" show at the Japan Society in 2005, presenting himself and the artists he represents through his company, KaiKai Kiki, as exemplars of a new Japanese avant-garde. He then convinced Yale to publish a catalog laden with his own essays. So peddling exclusive accessories becomes just another tentacle in Murakami's evolving marketing organism. Andy must be bowing his head in admiration.

As with Warhol, the best stuff here is surprising, gorgeously executed, and darkly alluring. The 11-foot-square canvas *The World of Sphere* (2003) features more chirpy flowers and the usual bulbous creatures, one with hula-hoop halos spinning like centrifuges around its pointy head. A miasma of Louis Vuitton logos rises like swamp gas in the background, a smog of luxury.

