

GAGOSIAN

AD

Takashi Murakami's Iconic Flowers Are Becoming NFTs

The Japanese artist's famous motif, which has adorned paintings and pillows for decades, expands with his debut release in the metaverse and a new Gagosian exhibition

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A portrait of the artist Takashi Murakami.

Photo: Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

Takashi Murakami hardly needs an introduction, yet, these days, he feels the need to retrace his roots. Ahead of debuting new art and an NFT project called Murakami.Flowers, the Japanese artist has been taking his Instagram followers for a stroll down memory lane. From reflections on his childhood love of anime, to his studies in traditional Japanese painting, to his multi-million dollar art auctions and coveted collaborations, Murakami has been an artistic trailblazer. At the same time, he seems to be looking back in order to move forward, pondering new ways to expand his legacy.

Murakami is an artist of the people, someone whose work is firmly in the art history books and major collections while being accessibly priced as merchandise. He's collaborated with luxury fashion brands (most famously Louis Vuitton) and musicians (recently J Balvin and Billie Eilish) while exhibiting the works of other artists in his art galleries and cafés in Tokyo. No medium or outlet of expression has been off-limits, so it's unsurprising that he's already taken to NFTs, even despite their nascent arrival in the contemporary art world.

Following a blockbuster NFT collaboration with RTFKT (the company recently acquired by Nike), Murakami announced the release of Murakami.Flowers: digital, pixelated interpretations of his beloved flower motif. With its cute, cartoonish appearance, the flower unites classic Japanese nature painting with inspiration from anime and Murakami's self-described "superflat" aesthetic. After a false start in 2021, Murakami re-announced the project, and its 11,664 handmade flowers, with a spring 2022 release. Around the same time, he began hinting at a connective exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in New York City, opening on May 11, 2022.

Murakami says his team has been working on Murakami.Flowers non-stop since last fall, weaving in influences from Buddhism to gaming. Through the project's email newsletter, he's been contemplating the value shift he sees with NFTs and sharing his embrace of this new frontier. Speaking exclusively with *AD*, Takashi Murakami tells us the origin story of Murakami.Flowers and talks about his new exhibition at Gagosian.



*Murakami's team working on new paintings based on Murakami.Flowers.
Photo: Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.*

You're not one to shy away from new mediums. At the same time, you are already a successful artist who, some might say, could keep doing what you've done or even retire. Why are you so passionate about both contemporary art and NFTs?

The occasions that opened my eyes to contemporary art—the moments of epiphany—happened when I was an art university student. I remember seeing Robert Ryman's white-on-white paintings before encountering Jeff Koons' porcelain *Michael Jackson and Bubbles* sculpture at Sonnabend Gallery. In both cases, I couldn't comprehend them at first, but later, once I was able to digest the concepts, I felt a cognitive revolution take place.

These experiences helped me understand the essence of evaluating artworks. It was as if lightning had struck me. I realized that, for the evaluation of a piece of art, superficial qualities or themes are not that important (though of course, they can still get people interested). What truly matters is whether or not the work is proposing a whole new cognitive field within art history. NFT art inherently expands the cognitive field. When I heard the news about Beeple's work selling for \$75 million at an auction, I got curious about NFTs. From there, I went on to try to understand CryptoPunks and the like. The sensation I had in the process made me see yet another cognitive revolution in contemporary art. And that's why I wanted to step into the field myself.

Murakami.Flowers uses your well-known flower motif in pixelated form, with its roots in your early nihonga nature paintings. Why did you want to start your NFT journey with the flowers?

To embark on my NFT journey, I decided to start with the flowers, which are at the center of my creative expression. Since my debut, my art has focused on the relationship between the United States and Japan. Who I am today was formed by my childhood consumption and appreciation of ideas such as Godzilla and kaiju, which were born under the circumstances of a nation that surrendered after two atomic bombs were dropped on it. I have always analyzed the culture of the defeated nation.

I started painting the flower character in my attempt to combine that context with more traditional Japanese culture, focusing on the traditional theme of natural beauty in Japanese painting: “snow, moon, flower” and “flower, birds, wind, moon.”



*A baseball player flower NFT on a yellow background.
Photo: Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.*



*One of the signature smiling flowers on a blue background.
Photo: Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.*

Your flowers have already adorned sculptures, paintings, pillows, luxury bags, clothing, music videos, etc. Does their meaning transform or evolve in the context of the metaverse?

It doesn't really change. In Japanese painting, the theme of natural beauty evokes the sense of seasons for viewers. Looking at a painting, one may think, “Ah, it's summer,” or “I can feel the

spring air,” or “Snowy winter is cold, but it’s so beautiful.” My flowers are symbols that allow you to relive the images you have already experienced.

On your Instagram, you’ve explained how the pandemic and being unable to leave Japan influenced your discovery of NFTs. You’ve also been open about your company being on the verge of bankruptcy and losing your father. Though you’ve had more time, how have you found inspiration to go down this path and create such a high volume of works—11,664 flowers total?

During the early pandemic, when my children couldn’t go to school, they were playing *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* on Nintendo Switch. They were connected through the game with their friends online, while also chatting over Zoom. I overheard them make a plan to see fireworks the following day and assumed they were going to a real fireworks festival. It turned out it was one of the regular summer events held within *Animal Crossing*. I was shocked to realize that the fireworks event authentically existed in these children’s minds, and not just as a game.

When I was little, I would also watch imaginary dramas of anime and *Ultraman* on TV. Though I knew those worlds weren’t real, I desperately kept reconstructing them in my head as real. I could see how, in the children’s heads, a leap of imagination was happening. At first, I wanted to create a game to engage imaginations in the same way. I am still doing this, but first I am going into the world of NFTs.



Murakami's team at work on the project in the studio.
Photo: Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

You’ve hinted at other projects that the time at home has allowed you to realize, including forthcoming exhibitions, collaborations, another *Jellyfish Eyes* film, and a video game. What can you tell us about your May 2022 exhibition at Gagosian, including how it connects to Murakami.Flowers?

In this exhibition, I will be creating and presenting three bodies of work with different themes: Murakami.Flowers, my Clone X collaboration with RTFKT, and paintings inspired by Qinghua, which are blue-and-white ceramics from Yuan dynasty China. At first, Gagosian’s owner, Larry Gagosian, asked me to paint seven Qinghua paintings with fish motifs, so I was just working on them. The timing was such that I asked if I could also show works related to Clone X and Murakami.Flowers, and he agreed. I decided to present the three shows simultaneously and give the exhibition an overarching title, “An Arrow Through History.”

Japanese culture originally came from the Eurasian continent, and my concept has been to go beyond, from there into the metaverse, shooting through the history of art with a single arrow. I think it worked out well.

Do you see the contemporary art world and NFT world becoming one in the future?

I think the world of the metaverse will become just like the current internet world. I spend about 19 hours a day looking at my phone, and I believe an increasing number of people will become immersed in the metaverse at the same level. In that sense, I believe artworks in the metaverse will come to exist at a scale comparable to artworks in the current “real” world.

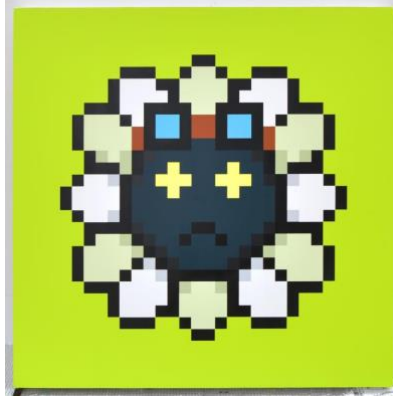
Ahead of the Murakami.Flowers release, you have been notably communicative via an email newsletter and social media posts, where you give insight into your philosophies and process. In some cases, it reads as if you’re introducing yourself for the first time, despite having an acclaimed 31-year career. With Murakami.Flowers, does it feel like you’re starting over in any way?

I think most of the NFT users are younger or in their teens, so it’s likely that no one knows about a 60-year-old like me. That’s why I’m explaining myself. It’s like Dragon Ball Z’s Kame Sennin, a.k.a. Master Roshi, introducing himself. It’s like I’m saying, “Do you know this old guy?”



A bloody flower on a magenta background.

Photo: Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.



A sad flower on a green background.

Photo: Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

You’ve said that NFTs are potentially “a first step towards future values that we don’t yet begin to understand.” Do you have any hopes for these future values?

Now that I’m 60, I’ve witnessed how computers for home use emerged and how the internet world arose from zero. Now, we can computerize everything on our mobile phones, but 20 years ago, it was impossible to even imagine. In 20 more years, I bet mobile devices themselves will be gone. I imagine that, by then, what you think in your brain will be instantaneously realized. In a world where humans are completely changed, we’ll be forced to think about what art is, and new values will be generated from that contemplation.

In the movie *Her*, the same “person” connects simultaneously with more than 10,000 users, comforting and healing them through identical or similar exchanges. The limitations of the human brain allow for such a mechanism. Once our brains evolve, however, they start to crave spontaneity; they may no longer be comforted so easily.

I believe art is about carrying out cognitive revolutions for the brain, so I think it will only get more complex and difficult as we go on.



A close-up shot of a new Murakami painting based on Murakami.Flowers.

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