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The Warhol of Japan Pours Ritual Tea in a Zen Moment

By CAROL VOGEL

The unmistakable aroma of incense wafted through the Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue one afternoon last week. It wasn't the only hint that business was not as usual. Instead of chicly dressed gallery assistants, demure Japanese ladies in colorful kimonos greeted visitors.

In the central gallery stood the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami. In place of his usual garb -- baggy cargo pants, T-shirt and sneakers -- he was done up in a traditional hakama, his hair pulled back in a neat bun, with his signature round glasses and wispy goatee. "Welcome to this very special tea ceremony," he said.

The guests -- Nancy Spector, the chief curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Vincent Fremont, a sales agent for the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; his wife, Shelly Dunn Fremont, an art director; and Kazuhito Yoshii, owner of the Yoshii Gallery in Manhattan -- were the first to participate in a three-day series of tea ceremonies. Sitting around the low L-shaped wooden table, they listened intently as So-oku Sen, a tea master from a 400-year-old school in Kyoto, explained the ritual with the help of Linda Hoaglund, a translator.

Popularly known as the Warhol of Japan, Mr. Murakami, 45, merges fine art with popular Japanese anime films and manga cartoons. He has invented characters including DOB and Mr. Pointy, which he has used as the subjects of paintings, sculptures and giant balloons, and is also known for his smiley-faced flowers and colorful mushrooms. His work has adorned New York City landmarks like Grand Central Terminal and Rockefeller Center.

These days Mr. Murakami's tentacles reach far and wide. In Japan he is busy producing feature-length animated films, and he is already considered a media king there, with a television and a radio show on which he interviews everyone from world-famous economists to novelists. A marketing impresario, he teamed up with the fashion house Louis Vuitton in 2003 to create brightly colored versions of the classic LV monogram on Vuitton handbags. They flew off the shelves, generating millions of dollars.

Now Mr. Murakami is looking back in history. His inaugural exhibition at Gagosian, "Tranquillity of the Heart, Torment of the Flesh: Open Wide the Eye of the Heart and Nothing Is Invisible," is the first public showing of his new series of monumental paintings of Daruma, the sage, grand patriarch of Zen art and founder of Zen Buddhism. In certain Japanese Zen monasteries, Mr. Murakami said, the tea ceremony is still carried out in its original form to honor Daruma.

At Gagosian the ceremony began with a serving of neon-green spongecakes, in the center of which were two tiny egg yolks: something sweet for the palate, said Mr. Sen, 31, a descendant of the 16th-century tea master Sen no Rikyu. Then there was the elaborate preparation of the green tea, using a 400-year-old bamboo spoon to scoop the tea leaves out of an ancient wooden container. An antique iron kettle held the boiling water, while a modern bowl filled with boiling water was used to rinse out each of the 17th-century ceramic serving bowls that Mr. Murakami had brought from his home in Tokyo for the occasion.

"I wanted to bring something spiritually and culturally Japanese to a wider audience," Mr. Murakami said as a Japanese television crew filmed his every move. "This is only the second time in my whole life I've dressed up like this," he added. "The first time was when I was at the tea master's house."

Among the works in his exhibition are several three-panel paintings, nearly 8 feet wide and 9 feet tall, of a fierce-looking Daruma, each signed in the traditional Japanese manner, in Japanese characters down one side, and each with a different background, ranging from platinum and gold leaf to black glitter.

"The theme of Mr. Murakami's exhibition is to take something very classical and render it very contemporary," Ms. Hoaglund explained.

The paintings are not the only new direction Mr. Murakami has recently taken in his career; he has also changed dealers. In June he left Marianne Boesky's Chelsea gallery after about a decade for Gagosian, the international powerhouse, because, "I am always looking for new ways of making art, and everyone knows Larry," he said at the time, referring to Larry Gagosian. "When he asked me, it was good timing."

The new work was a total surprise for Mr. Gagosian. "When I went to his studio, there was not a hint that these were the kind of paintings Takashi would produce," he said. "His capacity to change the mood, direction and scale of his work is very exciting, and people went with it." Even before the show opened on Tuesday, all the work had been sold, Mr. Gagosian said. Prices ranged from about \$100,000 for the smaller paintings to \$1.6 million for the large ones.

While the ever tight-lipped Mr. Gagosian would not say who the buyers were, experts in the field said seasoned collectors like François Pinault, the luxury-good magnate who owns Christie's, and Steven A. Cohen, the hedge-fund manager, were among them.

The Daruma paintings are only part of the show, which runs through June 9. The floor below is filled with round canvases of smiling flowers, more in keeping with Mr. Murakami's old self. On one wall hang 50 of them, each 15 1/2 inches in diameter, with a group of larger variations filling the rest of the space.

"There's always a shadow of Warhol," Mr. Murakami said. And in the grand tradition of Warhol's Factory, Mr. Murakami runs the Kaikai Kiki Company (named for two characters in his imaginary universe), which includes his own factorylike studios in Tokyo and Long Island City, Queens, where artists carry out his creations. In addition to Mr. Murakami's signature, the names of all the contributing artists from his studio are also on the back of each flower paintings they worked on.

When the Gagosian show ends, Mr. Murakami will be in Basel, Switzerland, at Volta, a spinoff of Art Basel, overseeing a booth there called Geisai, from the Japanese word for art festival. And twice a year Mr. Murakami and Kaikai Kiki run a one-day event in Tokyo to showcase young Japanese artists. Each year he invites several of them to exhibit in Basel.

Mr. Murakami is also preparing for a major traveling retrospective that is to open in October at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Organized by Paul Schimmel, that museum's chief curator, it will include more than 90 works in various mediums, as well as an animated film by Mr. Murakami. A Louis Vuitton shop at the show will sell his creations.

"This is a moment when he is working at an incredible pace," Mr. Schimmel said. "Most people, when they go to a new gallery, see it as a consolidation of their past. Not Takashi. He is one of the most fearless and bold artists I know. And this latest show is a deliberate fusion of his two worlds."

Takashi Murakami's show "Tranquillity of the Heart, Torment of the Flesh: Open Wide the Eye of the Heart and Nothing Is Invisible" is on view through June 9 at Gagosian Gallery, 980 Madison Avenue, (212) 744-2313, gagosian.com.