

Disturbing visit to 'toon town

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The issue of an unholy coupling between Andy Warhol, Walt Disney and Japanese popular culture, the work of Takashi Murakami, a leading Japanese artist, will, at the very least, surprise visitors to the Serpentine. For more than a decade Murakami has worked in the style of Japanese animation, creating an idiosyncratic visual universe populated by a number of cartoon characters.

Chunks of this world are made manifest in various art forms: as paintings on canvas, as wallpaper and as both inflatable and solid sculptures. Examples of all of these forms fill the gallery so that it feels like the set of a demented 3-D Japanese cartoon.

The most prominent inhabitants of Murakami's world are Mr DOB, a feline creature created in 1992, and Kaikai and Kiki, born in 2000, a pair of twins, respectively female and male, with large oval heads and tiny bodies dressed in colour co-ordinated catsuits.

Supporting roles are played by a multitude of mushrooms, a host of stylised, smiling flower heads and disembodied green "jellyfish eyes".

Though cartoonish, Murakami's world is an uneasy place in which the characters change and mutate with time.

Mr DOB, present in his original healthy form in a plastic sculpture in the central room of the gallery, is in the canvases that surround the sculpture reduced to a disintegrating, semi-abstract head, filled with crazy patterns and colours.

The mushrooms, meanwhile, both in painted and sculptural form, are blessed with an arachnid-like profusion of eyes. Even the flower heads, clustered as they are in an intense riot of inane smiles, are mildly disturbing.

More interesting than the content of the work, which could be found in numerous Japanese cartoons and works, is the method of its production and its status as fine art.

More than any artist in the West, Murakami straddles the commercial and "high art" worlds. With his army of assistants, he produces, factory-style, a range of products ranging from the unique and expensive paintings and sculptures, through to cheaper merchandise that is apparently popular with Japanese youth.

In Japan, where there never was the depth of distinction between high and low culture, Murakami's practice as an artist is not unusual.

In the West it still feels rather odd, but as commercial culture continues to merge with "high" culture it is likely to become disturbingly familiar. ■

- *Takashi Murakami is exhibiting at the Serpentine Gallery until 26 January. Information: 020 7298 1515.*