

Contemporary Japanese Art

By *Koyama Tomio*

WORKS by Japanese artists have become increasingly popular around the world in recent years. I opened a gallery in 1996 and have exhibited and sold works by the artists Murakami Takashi and Nara Yoshitomo. Now their works are registered at every auction held by premier auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's. Sometimes their works even adorn the cover of those houses' publications, an honor which only renews their value. Murakami was invited by Louis Vuitton as an artist, and helped to boost sales by working with the designer Marc Jacobs to participate in the greatest collaboration in fashion history. In addition to appealing to art collectors and art museums worldwide, their works are of great interest in the worlds of fashion and film. Art merchandise based on their works also appeals to average consumers. Their arts are accessible to people of all genres and classes, making them a truly rare gift. Unlike prominent predecessors such as Andy Warhol, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Murakami and Nara came from Japan, a scene far removed from the center of the art world in New York.

So how did they get to be this popular? Does their Japanese background play any part in their popularity? We can speculate about a variety of reasons for their fame.

1. Their works have the power to convey something directly to the viewer. Murakami masterfully and uninhibitedly depicts DOB, a character of his own creation, on the screen. He experiments with various representations, drawing in the viewer with his use of dynamism and detail. Nara, meanwhile, draws portraits based on his childhood memories and the circumstances he found himself in, imparting the viewer with abundant strong emotions amidst a backdrop of silence.

By using artistic methods that have

begun to be forgotten in contemporary art, both artists appeal to people who have a broader perspective of what art is.

2. They have outstanding technique. Both Murakami and Nara studied at art universities in Japan. Japanese art education is extremely academic, and unlike Western art education whose mainstream is concept-oriented, it emphasizes basic techniques such as drawings. The fact that they both practiced these techniques is probably an important factor in their success, although it is not the primary explanation. This has also been disregarded in contemporary art thus far.

3. Japan has a sophisticated cultural history. I am not simply referring here to Japanese art history, but to the fact that Japan may have a tradition of adopting things from foreign cultures. Japan has enjoyed and been heavily influenced by Western culture for nearly 60 years since the end of World War II (and even as far back as the Meiji Period from 1868 to 1912), a period which overlapped with Japan's economic success. Since the war, many Japanese contemporary art exhibits have been held in various countries, especially in the United States. Concepts of contemporary art have basically been imported from the West. Based on those ideas, Japan can be said to have "learned" contemporary art. Several contemporary Japanese art exhibits, which have been significant in terms of showing what has been achieved in Japan, have been highly scrutinized and developed with criticism.

The sense of criticism that evolved out of this environment forced artists to be conscious of the reality within them-

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Murakami Takashi, "And Then, And Then And Then And Then And Then" 1996, Acrylic on canvas mounted on board, 100x100cm

selves and to turn their attention to their own country's culture. A hybrid sensibility seems to have emerged as a result. Perhaps this has created a sophisticated culture. This has occurred over and over throughout Japanese history in the Heian (794-1192), Momoyama (1568-1600) and Edo (1603-1867) periods. It now seems that postwar "learning" is giving way to a period of fruitful production. A sense of criticism is, naturally, an important part of contemporary art. Every Western expert understands that Nara and Murakami have arrived at today's expressions through progress in the conceptual dimension.

4. They have enjoyed a network-style market. This was the method which Nara and Murakami always had in mind when they were shaping the market. Until recently, Japanese galleries focused their efforts primarily on imports. Active efforts were not made to export Japanese art. In 1996 when I opened my gallery, Japan was in an economic slump. I thought I would find it difficult to operate the gallery in the domes-

tic market only. I participated in a small art fair at a Los Angeles hotel. It was an exciting event that attracted about 40 budding galleries from around the world. I was hoping to sell works by the artists from my own gallery and not just Japanese artists. This event allowed me to experience the active approach toward art that has been cultivated in the United States. I saw people demonstrate the courage to judge with their own eyes the works of artists that they didn't know anything about. It was evident that people are willing to look at themselves, or that they are equipped with a sense of criticism. This is what is exactly needed to create an art market. When a customer engages in the economic behavior of making a purchase, his or her action is considered an honor by both the artist and myself, and from it we derive our sense of confidence. After this fair, Nara and Murakami held exhibits at galleries in Europe and the United States. All of those gallery owners were about my age and none of their galleries were particularly famous.

Photo: Koyama Tomio



Tomio Koyama Gallery at 1-31-6-1F Shinkawa, Chuo-ku, Tokyo, Japan

However, they were attractive galleries full of hope and ideas. Each gallery held exhibits to ensure their own business success, while also maintaining their networks. I don't know if the fact that Murakami and Nara are Japanese was at the forefront of the owners' minds at that time. However, regardless of their origins, they were definitely known to be invaluable artists for the gallery owners' art businesses. With their cooperation, Nara and Murakami were able to make names for themselves in Europe and the United States, were respected as artists, and solidified their market. At the time, I felt that intense local passions were more important than the light-hearted fantasies of the international market, and the individual works produced in this environment formed a line, and then formed a surface. Private networks that follow different pursuits than cultural exchanges between countries, have become more prominent in the art world in recent years.

5. The West served to assign value to Nara and Murakami. By and large, the West seems to see the world's art as necessary, and has actively incorporated the art of Japan as well as China, Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and other countries into its own art history. It might have enveloped perspectives of "exoticism," "orientalism" and "globalism." However, because of its pure desire to complete the history of art that the West has built, it collects all kinds of information, assigns value, and maintains collections of art works. This passion is something that must be respected. Art is a field where history and the market are closely intertwined. It is in the Western art scene that the art from foreign countries will be judged, marketed and assigned a place in history.

So what's happening in the art world

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Nara Yoshitomo, "Too Young To Die" 2001, acrylic on cotton, mounted on fiber reinforced plastics, diam.180xd.26cm

in Japan? Have Nara and Murakami been accepted into the Japanese art scene? More than 60% of their major works are in collections overseas. Only five art museums in Japan hold their works as part of their public collections. Their works are nowhere to be found in Tokyo. Their popularity might be soaring overseas, but they will only be appreciated in Japan after they have made their name elsewhere. In spite of Japan's national wealth, its cultural policies and cultural environment are in an incongruous state of impoverishment. Japan has a culture of reverse-importation that refuses to pass its own judgments. Perhaps the simple reason why Japanese culture is flourishing overseas may be that it is not assigned value at home. This leaves artists with no way of discovering their own value other than leaving Japan. National policies that treat culture as an industry remain seriously lacking. **JS**

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