

TAKASHI MURAKAMI

February 14–Extended through March 20, 2024
Tarmak22, Oeystrasse 29, 3792 Saanen, Switzerland

GSTAAD, SWITZERLAND - Nahmad Contemporary and Perrotin are pleased to present *Takashi Murakami*, a collaborative exhibition at Tarmak22 in Gstaad on view from February 14 through March 20, 2024. Featuring nine large-scale sculptures, the presentation will illuminate two paramount subjects in the Japanese artist's oeuvre: Mr. DOB and Miss Ko². Conceived in the nineties during the incipient years of the artist's career, these two iconic characters form the lifeblood of Murakami's visual language and have continued to evolve in various forms and mediums over the past three decades.

On view in the exhibition are seven sculptural iterations of the legendary Mr. DOB that Murakami (b. 1962, Tokyo) created between 2019-2022 and two life-sized figurines of Miss Ko² that he made from 2004-2023. The meticulous, yet sleek industrial production of these sculptures mark Murakami's commitment to scrupulous execution and advancing modes of creation, as well as his long-standing interest in blurring the distinction between high and low materials.

Takashi Murakami marks the third collaboration between Nahmad Contemporary and Perrotin, following *Hans Hartung* in New York, 2018 and *Georges Mathieu* in New York, 2021. On the occasion of the exhibition, Matthieu Jacquet composed a text on the iconic status of Mr. DOB and Michelle Molokotos presented an overview of the evolution of Miss Ko².

ICON By Matthieu Jacquet

"Icon." Today, this ancient term is so ubiquitous that its meaning has become quite vague. Does it refer to a sacred religious image, a fashion icon, a music star, or a revered role model? With so many possible definitions, what makes someone or something an icon in the 21st century? How can an image stand out amidst the constant barrage of visual stimuli to earn this prestigious label? Several characteristics can be identified. Firstly, it must be striking, original, and memorable enough to immediately arouse attraction and even fascination in those who encounter it. The image must be legible and effective, as much signifier as signified, bringing form and content into perfect harmony. Its popularity and visibility must have become part of our collective memory and unconscious, making it instantly recognizable and familiar. To be fully effective, however, an icon must also embody an idea, a belief, a style, a movement, or a work and become so archetypal that just a few words invoke it in everyone's mind.

Thirty years after its creation, Takashi Murakami's Mr. DOB ticks all these boxes. This cute and highly singular character has funny, childlike features, a round, oversized head screwed onto a small, flashy-colored body, and enormous, teddy-bear ears. It references various figures well-known to Generations X and Y, such as Doraemon, the robot cat from the eponymous Japanese manga, and Sonic the Hedgehog, the hero of Sega's video game, an explicit source of inspiration for the artist. For three decades, the mischievous Mr. DOB has been omnipresent all over the world: in museums and galleries, on Murakami's monumental canvases and sculptures, in streetwear boutiques, on caps, mugs, and T-shirts, in YouTube videos, and as figurines for collectors in search of rare gems to add to their collections...What's more, like any successful advertising logo, Mr. DOB is perfectly self-referential: on his right ear is the letter "D", on his left is the letter "B", and in the center of his face is the letter "O".

The exhibition at Tarmak22 features seven sculptures of the famous Mr. DOB. Created over the past five years, these works, each five feet tall, with wide eyes and tender smiles, differ only in the colors: apple green, yellow, black and white, multicolored, or gold. Like a chameleon, Mr. DOB adapts to all tastes, although its seemingly cheerful appearance conceals a darker side. After its conception in 1993, Murakami exhibited the character on a large canvas titled 727 in 1996. In its transformed version, it was much more terrifying. It had four red eyes

and a huge mouth whose sharp teeth gave it a predatory grin. Like any anime character, Mr. DOB is a multifaceted icon, frequently transformed to express a variety of emotions. In some works, its bewildered gaze represents the naivety of childhood, while in others, its spiraling eyes and open mouth, which appears to be belching rainbows, resemble a monster in the grip of destructive madness.

Mr. DOB is the central character in Murakami's zany universe. But there are others, of course, like the smiling flowers, another great leitmotif, and the odd-eyed octopus the artist often wears as a headdress. There are also hypersexualized young men and women, inspired by animation and otaku culture, that the artist has been sculpting on a human scale since 1997—the first was called Miss Ko², a kind of Lolita in a mini-dress and apron. The exhibition presents two recent examples: a schoolgirl with long blue pigtails, and a she-devil wearing sexy lingerie. Two versions of the same character that you could dress up as you please, like a doll or the protagonist of a fighting video game. Like the DOBs, the Ko²s were also born in the 1990s and likewise mark the earliest sculptural iterations of Murakami.

Like Andy Warhol's Marilyn, Keith Haring's "dancing figures"—his famous colorful silhouettes in motion—and Jean-Michel Basquiat's grimacing masks, Mr. DOB has become an art-historical icon. It has conquered pop culture and been adapted over and over again, even by artists of Murakami's generation: in the manga characters created by Mr. (Murakami's former assistant and disciple of the Superflat movement founded by Murakami) or in the cartoonish creatures of street artist Kenny Scharf. But also in the figure of Annlee, a Japanese animated character whose rights were acquired by French artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno in 1999 and who has since regularly featured in their immaterial works.

Mr. DOB is also a symptom of a genuine artistic transition—if not a revolution—at the end of the 20th century when popular culture significantly expanded the boundaries of art, putting an end to the reign of the individual work. At the same time, digital technology triggered a new mass reproducibility of the image. Through the figure's extensive, multifaceted presence, Murakami has taken up the mantle from his American predecessors and succeeded in creating a powerful icon that permeates contemporary art, its market, as well as fashion, pop culture, the Internet, and the world of merchandising. Despite its popularity, the meaning of the famous character remains enigmatic. Short for "dobjite", Japanese slang for "why," the name DOB sounds like an existential question ironically addressed to everyone. The artist sees the icon as his avatar, constantly evolving to express the multiple aspects of his personality. Lest we forget: in Greek, the word "eikon" also refers to the image we see in the mirror.

The Evolution of the Enigmatic Miss Ko² By Michelle Molokotos

Takashi Murakami immersed himself in New York City's bustling international art scene in the early 1990s. At once daunting and inspiring, the experience fueled his ambition to create art that was both universal and deeply rooted in his Japanese identity. Seeking motifs with widespread appeal that would embody the aesthetics of his native country, Murakami centered on Japan's burgeoning manga (comics) and anime (animation) culture, and its subgenre otaku that was surging in popularity among Japanese youth at the end of the century. It was in this pursuit that the artist conceived two foundational characters that he would continue to develop throughout his career: Mr. DOB and Miss Ko².

Like Mr. DOB, Miss Ko² began as a two-dimensional illustrated figure whose aesthetics can be traced directly to pop cultural origins. He would dedicate six years to designing, perfecting, and sublimating the female form into his first large-scale sculpture titled *Miss Ko² Original (Project ko²)* (1997). While the Japanese word "ko" means child or woman, the figure's hyper-feminized, sexually exaggerated portrayal is specifically derived from *bishojo*—young female caricatures unique to the otaku genre and typified by wide eyes, ample busts, and slender waists. Murakami collaborated with a preeminent otaku figurine manufacturer to transform his vision for Miss Ko² into a meticulously painted three-dimensional fiberglass form. The resulting voluptuous blonde donning a scanty waitress uniform with innocent blue eyes and impossibly long limbs taps into the distinctively Japanese cultural fascination with *kawaii* (cuteness), as well as erotic fantasies prevalent in the darker corners of the otaku world. Art historian Hiroko Ikegami observed that Murakami simultaneously operated from within and from the outside of otaku culture, probing the complex nature of its aesthetic predilections. In fact, it took many years and successive sculptural achievements for Murakami to gain the respect, or at least the attention, of these niche

anime manufacturers who preferred to keep their saccharin bishojo as doll-sized figurines, where they were perhaps immune to critique due to their trivial scale.

The exquisitely detailed form and six-foot stature of *Miss Ko² Original (Project ko²)* represented a radical and disorienting aesthetic departure from the otaku sphere. By transforming a common otaku figural motif—typical in animations, comics, and miniature collectibles—into a larger-than-life sculpture, Murakami not only heightened the genre's inherently exaggerated proportions and caricatured sexuality but also propelled it into the fine art realm. In an unabashed eroticized display, *Miss Ko² Original (Project ko²)* integrated Japanese otaku culture into Western contemporary art—an ambiguous act that seems to both celebrate and critique the latent perversity.

Functioning as a catalyst, *Miss Ko² Original (Project ko²)* propelled the artist into the realm of life-sized, figurative sculptures and heralded the arrival of Murakami's legendary works *Hiropon* (1997) and *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998). As with *Miss Ko²*, Murakami worked alongside expert fabricators to create this commanding pair, ultimately producing each figure in full scale at his Hiropon Factory. The female figure of *Hiropon* towers at seven feet tall and is anything but demure as streams of milk sprout from her engorged breasts, and the masturbating male in *My Lonesome Cowboy* exhibits parallel erotic bravura. Featuring wide eyes and broad grins characteristic of anime and manga, Murakami's absurdly sexualized figures hold a mirror to the cultural lust for eroticism, likening it to the fiending for a drug. The seismic impact of these sculptures on the world of fine art is attested to by their showcase in major international museum exhibitions over the past twenty-five years since their creation, not to mention the enormous price fetched at auction in 2008.

In 1999, Murakami debuted a multi-part sculptural installation compressing two otaku fetishes, bishojo and robots, into a single work of art in *Second Mission Project Ko²*, which depicts his *Miss Ko²* character morphing into an airplane. Despite the artist's satirical intent, *Second Mission Project Ko²* was embraced by the otaku community due to its elaborate sculptural form, impeccable finish, and technical precision. Through this work, Murakami realized his ambition of making a bishojo figure into a true masterpiece of fine art.

Murakami's dedication to the sensationalized female form epitomized by *Miss Ko² (Project ko²)* endured as he evolved the character into myriad iterations, much like the metamorphoses of his iconic DOB that he developed synchronously with the bishojo sculptures. In 2004, perhaps a sign of his earned respect among the otaku scene, he commissioned esteemed manga illustrator Nishi-E-da to design three distinct costumed characters (a nurse, school girl, and devil) based on his *Miss Ko²* prototype. Playing on erotic fantasy tropes that have pervaded otaku culture and society at large, these characters have evolved through various iterations over the years to become *Devil Ko²* (2004–20) and *School Girl Ko²* (2004–23), which will be presented for the very first time in the exhibition. Styled as a dominatrix, *Devil Ko²* boasts a confident stature, side-eyed gaze, and subtle smirk that connotes a deviousness apropos to her title. Yet her presumed evilness is complicated by her enticing nudity as the softness of bare breasts and groin are punctuated by jagged devil wings. Contradictions likewise abound in *School Girl Ko²*, whose coy posture, candy-colored Mary Janes, and geeky accessories belie the inherent sex appeal of her prominent chest and exposed thighs. These glaring paradoxes are perhaps what makes these figures so captivating.

Technically and conceptually perfected over the past two-and-a-half decades, these meticulous stainless steel, fiberglass, and resin sculptures are a testament to Murakami's unrelenting artistic pursuit and commitment to his craft. And if contradiction ignites intrigue, then the incongruity between the unrivaled craftsmanship and frivolous subject matter of the *Miss Ko²* series renders some of the most captivating, thought-provoking works of contemporary art.

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