

## Cover Essay

# Fungal Foray

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Takashi Murakami's "Army of Mushrooms" highlights one of his now-classic subjects: the manga mushroom, appearing at once in myriad forms. Murakami, a world-renowned contemporary Japanese artist, developed his strangely attractive and cartoonish style after attempting to study animation and turning instead to *nihonga*, or traditional Japanese art. Murakami allegedly became disillusioned with the politics and culture of the *nihonga* community, and he began experimenting with contemporary styles. The genre he launched from this experimentation became known as "superflat"—his own word—which has been described as both a theory of technique and a commentary on the fusion of high art with pop culture.

Like the genre superflat, Murakami's obsession with mushrooms contains a dual interpretation. During World War II, Murakami's mother lived in Kokura, the city that was famously spared from the atomic bomb by cloudy conditions. The bomb intended for Kokura was dropped on Nagasaki instead, and Murakami's mother lived on to raise a family, while countless others did not. For this reason, some western art critics have linked Murakami's mushrooms with the ominous cloud of the atomic bomb.

At first glance, this link seems logically sound, but Murakami is no stranger to blunt imagery. In "Time Bokan," a series of paintings that change in color but not composition, a skull extends up from an elongated and smoke-like spinal cord. "Time Bokan" mores explicitly

evokes the sinister vision of a mushroom cloud than does his amusing army of mushrooms.

The nuclear issue in Japan morphed dramatically with the failure of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. Like so many natural and unnatural disasters of recent times, it was watched in real-time by the rest of the world, bringing the hidden cost of an otherwise perfect alternative energy source into sharp focus. Nuclear power has long been on the rise, endorsed even by Lovelock (2004), the originator of the "Gaia" hypothesis, as a key way to halt global warming. Perhaps western art critics' obsession with the origins of Murakami's mushroom imagery reflect a lack of understanding of Japanese culture, or lingering questions of the impact and ethics of both nuclear bombs and nuclear power.

Mushrooms hold a deep cultural significance for Japan. Crucial ingredients in Japanese cuisine and culture, they are revered for their diversity, their ephemerality, their texture, and their taste. They appear repeatedly in traditional Japanese art. Eighteenth century painter Ito Jakuchu included mushrooms in his paneled screen "Vibrant Vegetables" and in his impressive six-foot scroll "Compendium of Vegetables and Insects." Later, Yumeji Takehisa designed mushroom print fabrics, which Murakami alludes to in his own work and describes as "very cute, but [...] poisonous mushrooms" (Murakami et al. 2007).

Murakami gives us few clues as to whether this imagery is a fungal foray or a darker reflection. When talking to journalists, Murakami insists that he "just enjoys looking at

mushrooms in the grocery store” (Hopkins 2001). Perhaps this is simple honesty. “Army of Mushrooms” is less organized army than hovering crowd, less historical allegory than fairytale forest. While the “Time Bokan” series includes reds, blacks, and greens, “Army of Mushrooms” uses a lighter and softer pallet. The mushrooms are anthropomorphized with eyes and teeth, leading some critics to describe them as slightly sinister. On the contrary, even the largest monster mushroom, boasting a row of sharp teeth, does not quite intimidate. It gazes languidly at everything and nothing all at once.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Murakami (1962—) is a Japanese artist best known for his blurring of the line between popular culture and high art. Murakami’s mother studied needlepoint and textile design. His father, who as a young man had to give up university due to his family’s economic situation, served as a tank operator in the post-war Japanese Self Defense forces. The Murakami marriage was arranged according to Japanese tradition, and they moved to Tokyo to seek work and raise a family.

Murakami was raised in a household that held high regard for art. His childhood activities included calligraphy classes and museum visits, and at times his parents had him write essays on the art exhibits he had seen (Murakami et al. 2007). In university, Murakami initially sought to study animation; after a period of artistic frustration, he turned first to the traditional Japanese *nihonga* style of painting and composition and then to the development of his own superflat style.

Murakami’s current body of work goes beyond large paintings to include a wide range of mediums: sculptures, wallpapers, animations, balloons, merchandise, and more. With his vast success in world of art and merchandise, Murakami has also established Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd, a company that produces and promotes both his own work and the work of young Japanese artists.

## ON THE COVER

“Army of Mushrooms,” by Murakami 2003. Acrylic on canvas, mounted on board, 17 × 17 cm<sup>2</sup>. Sponsored by EcoHealth Alliance and reproduced with the generous permission of the Frank Cohen Collection.



## REFERENCES

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