

Takashi Murakami: *The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg*



Takashi Murakami, *Tan Tan Bo Puking–a.k.a. Gero Tan*, 2002
acrylic on canvas mounted on board
Private Collection, Courtesy of Galerie Perrotin
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TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE WINTER 2018

Vancouver
Artgallery

Contents

Program Information and Goals	3
Background to the Exhibition <i>Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg</i>	4
Artist's Background	5
Pre- and Post-Visit Activities	
1. About the Artist.....	6
Artist Information Sheet.....	7
Student Worksheet.....	8
2. Commercial Collaborations	9
List of Collaborators	10
Student Worksheet.....	11
3. DIY MR. DOB.....	12
Examples of Takashi Murakami's Works	13
Drawing Template	14
Examples.....	15
4. Happy Faces Happy Spaces	15
Example of Takashi Murakami's Work.....	16
Drawing/Stencil Template.....	17
Examples of Student Work.....	18
Examples of Happy Flower Products.....	19
Vocabulary	20
Resources	21

Vancouver Art Gallery

Teacher's Guide for School Programs

Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg presents more than three decades' worth of Murakami's work. The exhibition is primarily focused on Murakami's paintings, including rarely seen examples from the 1980s. It features 55 paintings and sculptures and is the first survey of Murakami's work to be shown in Canada. The exhibition highlights a dedication to craftsmanship, boundless imagination, and cultural inspirations, from Buddhist folk traditions to art history to popular culture.

DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the exhibition *Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg*. It also provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The tour of *Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg* has three main goals:

- to introduce students to Takashi Murakami's work and artistic practice,
- to consider historical and contemporary artistic traditions and disciplines,
- to examine works of art in terms of ideas, materials, techniques and inspiration.

THE EXHIBITION

TAKASHI MURAKAMI: THE OCTOPUS EATS ITS OWN LEG

Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg is a major retrospective of Takashi Murakami's paintings, presenting more than fifty works spanning three decades of the artist's career. The first survey of Murakami's work to be shown in Canada, this exhibition showcases the artist's paintings from his earliest mature work to his recent large-scale projects, including a newly created five-metre-tall sculpture and three multi-panel paintings created specially for the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition.

The exhibition chronologically traces the many aspects that have fuelled Murakami's career, with inspirations that range from Buddhist folk traditions to art history to popular culture. It opens with Murakami's early paintings from the 1980s that bring together traditional Nihonga-style painting techniques and formats with contemporary subject matter, and goes on to trace the artist's shift in the 1990s toward a distinctive, anime-influenced style known as Superflat. From his signature animated flowers to the iconic character Mr. DOB, a mouse-like figure that serves as part self-portrait, the works in the show offer an in-depth look at Murakami's unique Superflat universe.

The exhibition also features works from a recent body of paintings depicting groups of Buddhist monks (Arhats), including the ten-panel *100 Arhats* (2013), an ambitious work of impressive intricacy and craftsmanship. A departure from the commercial pop aesthetic that first garnered him popular acclaim, the Arhat works mark Murakami's return to his training in traditional Japanese painting, to respond to the suffering caused by the massive earthquake and tsunami in Fukushima, Japan, in 2011, which killed more than 15,000 people.

The subtitle of the exhibition, *The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg*, is borrowed from a Japanese saying that refers to a situation in which one survives in difficult times by feeding on or sacrificing oneself. The octopus eats its own leg to survive, but does so knowing the tentacle will regenerate. The phrase symbolizes how Murakami often recycles his own ideas and motifs and consumes history, culture and even his own work and fame to persevere as an artist.

Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and curated by Michael Darling, James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator

ARTIST'S BACKGROUND

Takashi Murakami (b. 1962)

Born on February 1, 1962, in Tokyo, Japan, the Japanese artist Takashi Murakami draws on hundreds of years of East Asian painting traditions, materials and techniques to reflect on and portray today's world in all its complexities. His work addresses wide-ranging topics both personal and political, including the history of fear, contemporary culture and the expansion of global consumerism.

Murakami studied Japanese painting at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, where he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1986 and a Ph.D. in 1993. After completing his studies, he increasingly displayed his works in solo and group exhibitions, making his European debut in 1995. His style, which emphasized two-dimensional forms and bold, striking imagery, set forth the theory of *Superflat*, which acknowledged the interaction between the commercial and art worlds and gave his art a context in contemporary art.

Murakami has embraced commerce through the founding of Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., an artist management agency and studio based just outside Tokyo, New York and Munich. With his popular collaboration with the fashion label Louis Vuitton, Murakami has established himself as a pioneer of promoting art as a brand.

Murakami's work has been the subject of numerous exhibitions around the world, including those held at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Versailles Palace. Murakami's work has achieved widespread fame well beyond the art world, and he is often invoked in the company of historic and contemporary artists working in the tradition of Pop Art, such as Andy Warhol.

Murakami is well known for blurring distinctions between fine art and commercial retail. He has made paintings and sculptures alongside T-shirts, key chains, plush toys and designer handbags. However, for more than thirty years, Murakami has studied Japanese art and ideas while remaining in tune with more contemporary art forms such as anime [animated films] and manga [comic books and graphic novels]. He also subtly balances East Asian and Euro-American artistic traditions, creating works that incorporate varied subjects and materials.

Over time, his process has expanded to include numerous studios with assistants who support his meticulous craftsmanship and the many stages of drawing, computer rendering, silkscreening and painting.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: About the Artist (all levels)

Objective:

Students explore the life of Takashi Murakami, his art practice, influences, interests and processes.

Materials:

- access to the Internet
- access to library for books on the artist
- Artist Information Sheet and Student Worksheet (pp. 7 and 8)
- writing materials

Process:

1. Divide the class into small groups. Give each group one of the categories from the Information Sheet (p. 7).
2. Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 8) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section. Have them conduct research using the Internet, either at home or at school.
3. Ask each group to find and describe a piece of work by the artist and add it to the space provided on the Worksheet.
4. Have each group present their information while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

Conclusion:

Points for class discussion and/or individual writing assignments:

- What makes Takashi Murakami a significant or important artist?
- What is interesting about his work and life?
- In what ways does his work connect to or resonate with students' lives?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

Artist Information Sheet

Takashi Murakami

His Life

- Born in Tokyo, lives and works just outside Tokyo today
- Started to work as a visual artist in the early 1980s
- Has been recognized internationally for his artwork

His Art

- Creates work using drawing, painting, silkscreen, digital technology, sculpture, animation and live-action films.
- Best known for his commercial art collaborations, e.g., Louis Vuitton handbags
- Studied *Nihonga*, a nineteenth-century style of Japanese painting that combines Japanese subject matter with European painting techniques
- Founder of the art movement *Superflat*, which combines the graphic practices of contemporary Japanese culture with the flattening print and painting traditions of its past
- Uses flowers, Mr. DOB character and mushrooms as a persistent motif in his work
- In 2013, he produced a work called *100 Arhats* inspired historical and contemporary Buddhist and Japanese culture

Major Achievements

- Has had his work exhibited throughout the world in galleries, museums and institutions
- Has had numerous successful collaborations with various commercial companies and high-profile individuals
- Created Kaikai Kiki Co., Ltd., an artist management agency and studio based in Tokyo, New York and Munich

Student Worksheet: TAKASHI MURAKAMI

His Life	
Type of Art	
His Works	
Important Achievements	
An Artwork: Title & Description	

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Commercial Collaborations (intermediate grades)

Objective:

Students learn about Takashi Murakami's commercial pursuits and collaborations.

Background:

Murakami's success can be attributed to both the accessibility of his imagery and his openness to interdisciplinary collaboration. Murakami frequently collaborates with companies and individuals outside of the art world as a way to challenge expectations of exclusivity and to circulate his work in broader commercial channels. For example, in the context of his relationship to pop culture, he designed an album cover and video animations for the rapper Kanye West. Since 2002, Murakami has been involved in joint creative endeavours with fashion brands, musicians and toy manufacturers. His collaborations have brought him wide renown for blurring the line between "high art" and commercialism, elevating him to celebrity status.

Materials:

- Student Worksheet, p. 11
- pencils
- access to the Internet
- printer

Process:

1. Discuss commercial products with the students. What is commercial product? What are some possible reasons an artist might choose to collaborate with a company or individual that produces commercial products? What are some products that incorporate a famous artist's artwork, such as coffee mugs, mouse pads or handbags?
2. Discuss Takashi Murakami. He is an example of an artist with numerous commercial collaborations. Many students may already have seen his work, knowingly or unknowingly.
3. Have students work in pairs or groups. Assign each group one company or individual from the List of Collaborators, p. 10.
4. Have the groups conduct research on the Internet to find the Takashi Murakami work connected to their company or individual.
5. Have each group fill in their worksheet and print an image of the work.
6. Have the groups present their research to the class and share their findings.

Conclusion:

- Ask students how their understanding of commercial art products has changed after doing this activity.
- If they had the opportunity, which artist would they collaborate with and what product would they create?
- How does art transform a product?

****Optional activity extension: Have students design a commercial product incorporating a famous artist's artwork or motifs.*

List of Collaborators

1. Beats by Dre
2. Louis Vuitton
3. Vans
4. Issey Miyake
5. Kanye West
6. Pharrell Williams
7. Virgil Abloh
8. ComplexCon

Student Worksheet: Murakami Collaborations

Company or Individual	
Example of product using Murakami's artwork What artwork was used, and how?	
An image of the product	

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: DIY Mr. DOB (all grades)

Objective:

Students create a character inspired by Takashi Murakami's Mr. DOB.

Background:

In the early 1990s, combining his interests in branding and Japanese comics, Murakami created a cartoonish alter ego, Mr. DOB. Over the course of his career, he has tested the limits of DOB's representation, depicting him in a variety of ways but always preserving his recognizable features. With Mr. DOB, Murakami wanted to create an icon that would have universal appeal to become both a brand image and a reflection of the artist's creative ambitions. Mr. DOB is one of several symbols Murakami has created to enact aspects of his artistic and personal identity.

"I set out to investigate the secret of market survivability—the universality of characters such as Mickey Mouse, Sonic the Hedgehog, Doraemon, Miffy, Hello Kitty, and their knock-offs, produced in Hong Kong." —Takashi Murakami

Materials:

- ❑ template sheet (p. 14)
- ❑ drawing materials: markers, sharpies, coloured pencils
- ❑ scissors
- ❑ black standard-size construction paper

Process:

1. Discuss Takashi Murakami's Mr. DOB character. See examples on p. 13. Does Mr. DOB remind the students of other cartoon characters? Which ones? Explain to the students how Mr. DOB represents aspects of Murakami's personal identity but is also inspired by cartoon characters in popular culture.
2. Provide each student with the template provided on p. 14.
3. Have each student create their own Mr. DOB-like character. Encourage them to name and personalize their characters, but incorporate elements of popular culture. See examples on p. 15.
4. Have students cut out their work once completed.
5. Have each student glue down their work on a larger piece of black background paper.
6. Display the finished works in the classroom.

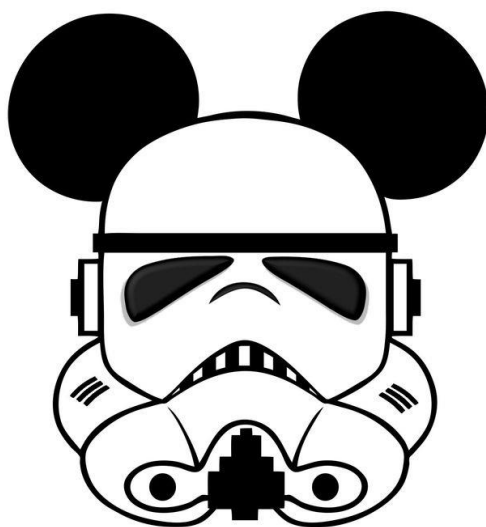
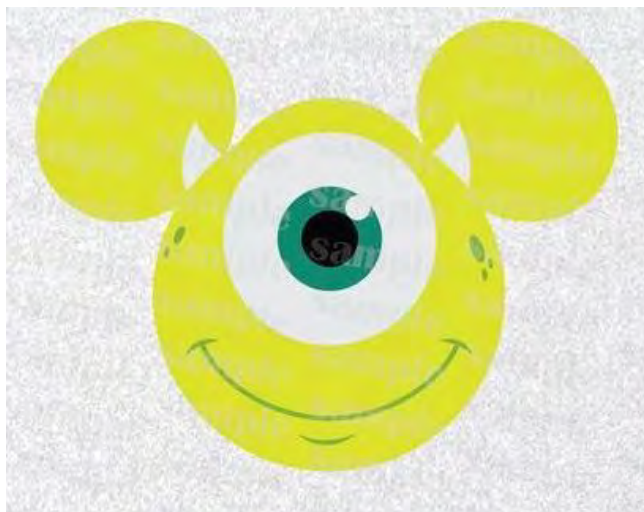
Conclusion:

- Have students discuss how the completed works are similar, and different.
- Did students refer to recognizable characters or create an original one? Why or why not?
- How do the characters reflect aspects of their own personalities?
- Discuss the process. How challenging or easy was it to create their own "Mr. DOB"?

Examples of Murakami's Mr. DOB works



Examples



PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Happy Faces Happy Spaces (elementary grades)

Objective:

Students create a paper flower installation and commercial product inspired by Murakami's flower works.

Background:

Murakami is all about bright colours, as a legacy of the cartoons he watched in the 1970s in Japan—that long-standing Japanese anime tradition and colour palette. He's also about making the art object a commodity, so it should be as bright and exciting as possible. Murakami's vibrant images burst with colourfully animated flowers, which often signify peace and happiness. Among his most famous recurring motifs are smiling flowers, iconic characters, mushrooms and skulls.

Materials:

- bright-coloured construction paper
- scissors
- glue sticks
- markers, sharpies or other drawing materials

Process:

1. Have students look at the example of Takashi Murakami's work on p. 17. Discuss how the flowers are stylized to look happy using simple forms, shapes and bright colours. Discuss Murakami's commercial products using the flower motifs.
2. Tell students that they will create a collaborative wall of happy flowers inspired by Murakami's work.
3. Have students cut out flowers using the template on p. 18 and various colours of construction paper.
4. Have students cut out a circle to be used for the face of the flower. This should be a different colour than the petals and be placed in the centre of the flower.
5. Have students use markers or sharpies to draw features on the face.
6. Display the flowers side by side on a wall in the classroom or school. See example on p. 19.

As an extension to this activity, have students create a commercial product using the happy flower motif. See examples on p. 20.

Conclusion:

- Discuss the following questions:
 - What difference does it make when numerous works, such as flowers, are placed close together vs. just a single flower alone?
 - How does the variety of bright colours affect the presentation?
 - What if all the flowers had different expressions? How would this affect the viewer's experience?

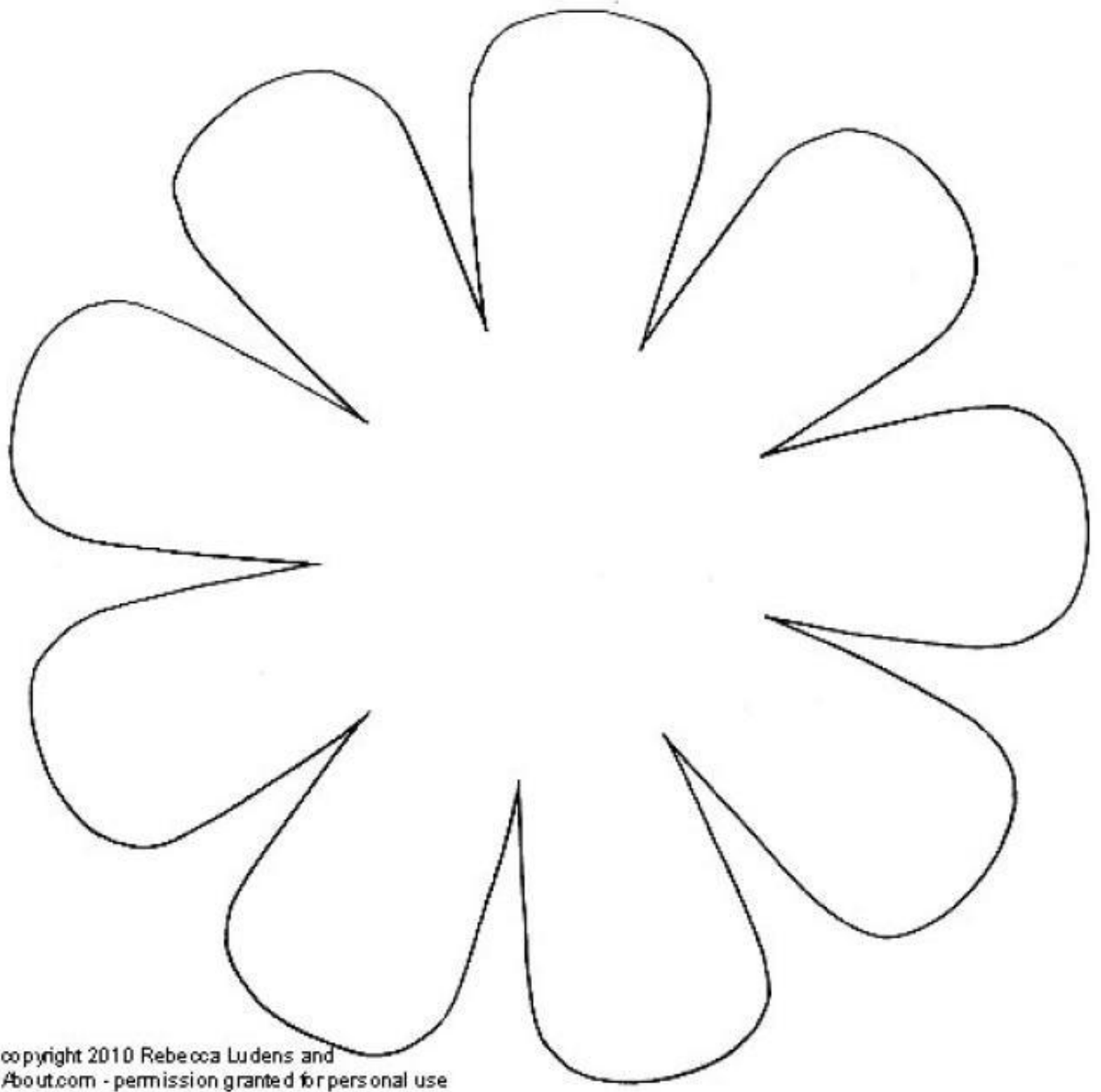
Works by Takashi Murakami



Flowers, Flowers, Flowers (2010)



Flower Ball Plush (2008)



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Examples of Student Work



Examples of Happy Flower Products



Bookmarks



Happy Flower Greeting Cards



Fabric Happy Flower pins



Decorative Happy Flowers

VOCABULARY

Arhat: according to Theravada Buddhism means "one who is worthy" or as a "perfected person" having attained enlightenment. Murakami's research into Buddhist iconography led to his monumental representation of the Arhats (Buddhist monks) who roamed the land in an attempt to console and enlighten others. This fuelled an ongoing body of paintings depicting an eccentric and highly individualized group of Arhats with elements of both historical and contemporary Japanese and Buddhist culture. In 2013, Takashi Murakami produced a work included in this retrospective at the Vancouver Art Gallery called *100 Arhats*. Like most of Murakami's characters and artwork, we see an example of mixing traditional arts and popular culture.

anime: a style of Japanese film and television animation, typically aimed at adults as well as children. It is characterized by stark, colourful graphics, depicting vibrant characters in action-filled plots, often with fantastic or futuristic themes.

contemporary art: created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists. Challenging traditional boundaries, many contemporary artists use a limitless range of materials and ideas to reflect, explore and comment on today's world. Contemporary art defies easy categorization in its rejection of historical definitions of what constitutes art.

manga: a style of Japanese comic books and graphic novels created in Japan or by creators in the Japanese language, conforming to a style developed in Japan in the late nineteenth century.

Nihonga-style: Japanese paintings dating from about 1900 onward that have been made in accordance with traditional Japanese artistic conventions, techniques and materials.

Pop art: The term *Pop* was first used in the late 1950s to refer to the work of artists who took both their art forms and their subjects from popular consumer culture. Using photography, printmaking and found objects, Pop artists brought the techniques and aesthetics of advertising, comic strips, movie stardom and product packaging to fine art, generating new modes of music, architecture, visual art, design, film and literature, and taking art out of the museum and into everyday life. It also refers to art based on modern popular culture and the mass media, especially as a critical or ironic comment on traditional fine art values.

retrospective: an exhibition or compilation showing the development of a body of work by a particular artist over a period of time.

silkscreen: a printing technique in which the artist uses glue to make an image on a screen made of silk, then pushes coloured inks through the silk onto a piece of paper or fabric, so that the ink reaches only the areas without glue.

Superflat: a postmodern art movement, founded by the artist Takashi Murakami, which is influenced by manga and anime. "Superflat" is used by Murakami to refer to various flattened forms in Japanese traditional art, graphic art, animation, pop culture and fine arts, as well as the "shallow emptiness of Japanese consumer culture" after World War II. The theory addresses the culture of post-World War II Japan and its stereotype as a producer of saccharine consumer products such as Hello Kitty. "Superflat" describes a world that blurs distinctions between high art and low culture, a world that is metaphorically flattened by the advent of the atomic bomb.

RESOURCES

Books:

Grynsztein, Madeleine, et al. *Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg*. New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2017.

Videos:

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Profile (2017) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPOWBQAd1M>

Process of making The 100 Arhats (2017)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q05zWt1G0PM>

CNN's profile on Murakami (2017)
<http://www.cnn.com/videos/arts/2017/09/07/japanese-artist-takashi-murakami.cnn>

Tour of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's similar show (2017)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRPXuWshbLY>

Articles:

The Psychedelic World of Takashi Murakami (2013)
https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/close_look/the_psychedelic_world_of_takashi_murakami-5204

Takashi Murakami's 15 Best Collaborative Projects (2015)
<https://www.highsnobiety.com/2015/06/17/takashi-murakamis-15-collaborations/>

5 Things to Know about Takashi Murakami on his 55th Birthday (2017)
<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/takashi-murakami-55-841349>

Artist Biography (2003) <http://www.notablebiographies.com/news/Li-Ou/Murakami-Takashi.html>

Vancouver Art Gallery
https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/the_exhibitions/exhibit_murakami.html

Online:

www.artcyclopedia.com

www.instagram.com/takashipom/?hl=en

www.theartstory.org

<https://theculturetrip.com>

www.wikipedia.com

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