



## To Hell in a Handbag?

diameter—adorned with colossal faces featuring dozens of eyes and jagged teeth. In another gallery, an 8-foot-tall, blond, doe-eyed sculpture in a French maid uniform will gesture welcomingly, impossibly long arms outstretched. Hung nearby will be a 30-foot-wide aquamarine canvas striped with lurid flowers, grinning maniacally at passersby.

Another unusual sight in this surreal environment: price tags. Couched inside the exhibition, titled “© Murakami” and slated to open Oct. 29, will be a fully operational Louis Vuitton boutique, offering \$875 to \$920 limited-edition handbags conceived exclusively for the exhibition by the artist and designer. It’s not a gift shop. It’s a bona fide for-profit enterprise—with all proceeds going directly to Louis Vuitton—that MOCA has deemed im-

perative for representing an artist known as the “Warhol of Japan.” But critics fear that this setup, a first for an American museum, goes beyond a mere art movement, instead falling into a shift of the entire museum field toward commercialization. MOCA’s not breaking any official rules; ethical ones, some say, are another matter.

Since MOCA put out a press release—which reads more like a fashion catalogue than an exhibition catalogue—announcing the boutique in August, several art observers have skewered the museum, running headlines such as “MOCA L.A.: Sell-Outs or Suckers?” in *ArtNet* and naming the exhibition “Last & Least” in *Newsweek*’s fall art preview. While acknowledging that museums have already crossed the line between exhibition and commerce—such as with the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Chanel retrospective in 2005, which had a website

**A** trip through the Takashi Murakami retrospective at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) may seem like just that. Suspended within more than 35,000 square feet tracing the Japanese artist’s career will be helium-filled vinyl balls—nearly 10 feet in

that was hosted on Chanel.com and peppered with Chanel advertisements—art journalist Tyler Green blogged that MOCA is taking things too far. “So would it be worse if a museum decides to eliminate the dot-com and to bring the corporation’s retail outlet inside the museum?” he wrote. “Uh, yes. We’re watching, MOCA.”

For Murakami, this is all in a day’s work. The 45-year-old is credited with creating the style of Superflat, a postmodern meld representing Japanese animation and consumerism, and has made it his mission to deconstruct traditional boundaries between high and low art. Murakami first joined forces with Louis Vuitton in 2003, reinventing the designer’s monogram; more recently, he directed the album artwork for hip-hop artist Kanye West. His paintings and sculptures sell for millions, while the millions of T-shirts, key chains and other trinkets sold through his art production

company, KaiKai Kiki, can be purchased for a few dollars apiece. Expensive designer handbags fall somewhere in the middle of this extreme spectrum.

MOCA asserts that the only way to present the full experience of Murakami’s work is to incorporate this commercial side, by exhibiting the boutique. “By making [the boutique] a part of the exhibition, we’re providing a critical context and framework for visitors to interrogate that aspect of Murakami’s practice,” explains Director Jeremy Strick. The shop is located within the exhibition, “not at the entrance or exit of the museum where a typical museum shop would be, because we wanted people to experience this in 360 degrees as a discrete object in the show . . . to think of it as a kind of performance. It approaches performance art.”

Like most performance art, this instance was intended to stir things up. MOCA Chief

Curator Paul Schimmel, who organized the exhibition and invited Louis Vuitton to set up shop within it, said as much in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*: “People have touched base with the play between the commercial arena and high art, but this is a little more confrontational.” Strick maintains that the boutique is simply the latest manifestation of contemporary art. “That’s what contemporary artists do: They identify some of the touchy points, the sensitive issues in our culture and our society. One of them happens to be the area of commercial practice in art, the commercialization of museums, and we have to go where the artist leads. . . . We didn’t want to shrink away from it.”

But others in the field worry that MOCA is embracing confrontation for the sake of confrontation, with no larger benefits for

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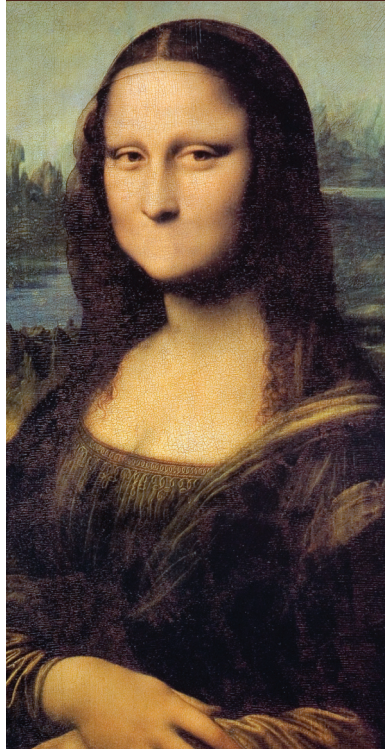
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the art or museum worlds. William Eiland, director of the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, recalls that, upon learning of the boutique, he immediately questioned the purpose behind it. "I'm all for investigations, all for curatorial inquiry into the nature of art . . . but at the same time I want some sort of result of that investigation," he says.

Monetarily, the only one seeing results is Louis Vuitton. The company has total responsibility for the store's construction, staffing and operation; as the press release emphasizes, MOCA will not receive any revenues generated from the boutique's sales. Strick notes that the museum never considered taking a cut. "We wanted to draw the line clearly about what we were doing and why we were doing it," he says. "People

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could ask, 'Has the museum compromised its artistic mission by doing something in order to make a profit?' . . . We want to make clear that that's not our purpose here."

Eiland, who is on the boards of AAM and the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) but spoke from the position of a museum director, says he is baffled by this arrangement. If the museum wants the public to experience commercial work as an act of consumerism—of purchasing—then why shouldn't MOCA participate in that transaction? "That would seem to me the ultimate act of blurring the distinction of consumerism and art," he says.

Plus, the museum's simply refusing a profit from the boutique may not settle the stomachs of its patrons. Will viewers see performance art or "\$900 tchotchkes," as Eiland describes them? He stresses that MOCA must take special pains to explain the shop's relevance: If the boutique is a part of the exhibition like any other object, the label beside it must be as investigatory and explanatory as it is confrontational.

Strick and Schimmel spoke with Gail Andrews, AAMD president, during the exhibition's planning phase to discuss ethical issues connected to the shop. She emphasized that, through the accompanying label, MOCA must "very clearly articulate why [the boutique] was an important aspect of Murakami's art practice to bring to the public and not have it in such dense curatorial or 'art speak' . . . but have it in very user-friendly language so that people participate with great clarity." As of October, the museum was still determining how to best impart this didactic information.

In October, only a month before the exhibition was scheduled to open, there also was no official word on whether the boutique would travel to other venues on the tour schedule. The exhibition will next appear on April 4 at the Brooklyn Museum. The museum will retain the show's title, which Deputy Director for Art Charles Desmarais deems a "brilliant" way to address the issues Murakami's work encompasses—but he is less certain about the shop element. The boutique is a "very good

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idea,” Desmarais says, one that puts “the spotlight on that aspect of the work, and in that sense it’s no different than painting one wall red when all the others are gray so people will pay attention to it.” But whether it will work physically, mechanically and administratively in Brooklyn, Desmarais says, is yet to be discussed.

If the boutique does not travel, it may cause more of a problem. The commercial aspect must be an essential part of the exhibition in all its iterations to justify it at all, Eiland contends. According to Strick, all the venues, which also include the Museum für Modern Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany, and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain, have expressed an interest in incorporating the shop, but so far none has confirmed.

Beyond creating controversy in four institutions, “© Murakami” could further crack the already open door between fine arts and commerce in the museum field as a whole. Both Strick and Desmarais maintain that the border between these two entities is already blurred to the point of nonexistence; Murakami is merely highlighting what has already occurred. The advantages of the boutique lie in the conversation it will provoke, says Andrews, who states she isn’t concerned about potential repercussions. “Thoughtful discussion about art in art museums is something we do want to bring to the fore. We always do want to keep people’s regard for museums high, and I think that this will work out to not be a negative.”

But Eiland worries that, if allowing one for-profit enterprise within the “sacred space” of the museum leads to more collaborations in that vein, it could heighten the ongoing debate over museums’ financial accountability. This is treacherous ground to tread in days of increased federal oversight of nonprofit organizations. “It would call into question the nonprofit nature of museums,” Eiland says. “Calling that into question right now or changing the nature of nonprofits doesn’t have any benefits that I perceive.” —*Joelle Seligson* ■