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ARTFORUM

Amassed Ornaments

MEREDITH MARTIN ON CONTEMPORARY ART AT VERSAILLES



Takashi Murakami, *Superflat Flowers*, 2010, fiberglass-reinforced plastic, carbon fiber, steel, acrylic. Installation view, Chateau de Versailles, France.
Photo: Cédric Delsaux. All works by Takashi Murakami: © Takashi Murakami/Kaikai Kiki Co. Ltd. All rights reserved.

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DISPLAYING CONTEMPORARY ART at historic sites has become a widespread trend, one that reached a new high (or low) last November, when Damien Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull began its five-month run at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Yet despite Hirst's talent for grabbing headlines, his installation has been eclipsed by debates surrounding the recent exhibition of twenty-two works by Takashi Murakami at the Château de Versailles. Shortly after the September opening of the show, members of the former French royal family, backed by a right-wing organization called the Coordination Défense de Versailles (CDV), filed an injunction to block Murakami from exhibiting at the palace. The plaintiffs explained that they were acting to protect "the respect due to the work of Louis XIV," whom they named the legal "author" of Versailles and its contents. Many readers will recall that the Sun King's descendants brought a similar suit in 2008, in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent Jeff Koons from installing his work in the royal precincts. Undaunted by that failure, the coalition launched a vigorous campaign to protest "Murakami Versailles" (which was largely funded by the Qatar Museums Authority, a fact that may have contributed to the hysterical tenor of the CDV's statements), collecting several thousand signatures and issuing a press release condemning it as "the veritable 'murder' of our heritage, our artistic identity, and our most sacred culture."

Responding to such attacks in an online interview for *Libération*, Versailles president Jean-Jacques Aillagon suggested that the CDV was motivated by monarchist nostalgia and by xenophobia, acknowledging that a 2009 exhibition at Versailles devoted to the French

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artist Xavier Veilhan had been far less controversial. (Though he did grant that the disparity might have been due, in part, to a difference of location: Most of Veilhan's sculptures were displayed outside in the gardens, not in the hallowed state apartments like Murakami's and Koons's.) Elsewhere Aillagon defended the palace's contemporary art program on the grounds that Versailles had always been a center of artistic innovation and a haven for the art stars of its day.

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In contrast to these heated disputes surrounding the exhibition's opening, the response to "Murakami Versailles" was lukewarm at best, with many critics pointing out the failure of its *otaku*-inspired creations to engage with their historic surroundings. I must confess I felt the same way when I first saw the show. The installation seemed, well, flat, especially when compared with the witty pairings offered up by Koons—most memorably, the ingenious stacking of his vacuum cleaners in a gallery hung with portraits of royal women, Marie Antoinette among them, trying to look domestic. On reflection, however, I am struck by how surface disparities of form and content belie strong structural affinities between Murakami's sculptures and the interiors of Versailles. These correspondences suggest that Murakami may, after all, be a fitting heir to and interlocutor of the Sun King. Far from "denaturing" Louis XIV's cultural productions, the installation added layers of nuance to our understanding of them, revealing that the king was as invested as Murakami is in fabrication, market forces, cultural identity, and the use of aesthetic exuberance to deflect desire or repress national trauma.

To begin, an obsession with branding marks the respective oeuvres of Louis XIV and Murakami and was

everywhere in evidence at the Versailles exhibition. In the 1660s, after surviving a civil uprising and acceding to the throne, Louis XIV set out to create a dominant cultural and political identity for France, whose artistic output was inferior to Italy's and whose economy lagged behind those of the English and the Dutch. He established art academies and royal manufactories for tapestries, furniture, and other luxury goods that would articulate this identity at home and abroad. Versailles became the principal showroom for these magnificent wares and the noble lifestyle they reflected.

The king's furnishings were loosely classical in proportion and shape, and many were made with exotic materials, such as Caribbean tortoiseshell and South American silver, that indicated his access to global trading networks. Once assimilated into the aesthetic and ideological machine of Versailles, however, these objects were repurposed as "modern" and "French," an identity conveyed through the royal logos that covered their surfaces and the palace walls. Monogrammed *L*'s, fleurs-de-lis, and the ubiquitous sun are only a few of the distinctive ornamental motifs that proliferate at Versailles and provide perhaps the most obvious link to Murakami's work, though the artist's signature

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Clockwise from top left: Jeff Koons, *Large Vase of Flowers*, 1991, polychromed wood. Installation view, Château de Versailles, France, 2008. Takashi Murakami, *Kaikai & Kiki (detail)*, 2000–2005, fiberglass, iron, synthetic resin, oil, acrylic. Installation view, Château de Versailles, Paris, 2010. Xavier Veilhan, *Le Carrosse (The Large Carriage)*, 2009, welded sheet steel, acrylic paint. Installation view, courtyard, Château de Versailles, France. © Xavier Veilhan/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Florian Kleinfenn.

“jellyfish” eyes and cherry blossoms derive from less lofty climes—specifically, Japanese mass culture and the worlds of manga and anime. In the show’s catalogue, Murakami maintains that he based his installation on a “formal resemblance between my flowers and the King’s sun,” but the connection seems to be more about adopting a graphic identity to boost one’s product.

Louis XIV further promoted his brand through countless fetes and audiences that he obliged his courtiers to attend, just as he compelled them to live at Versailles and join him in conspicuous consumption. To impress foreign emissaries from Siam, the Ottoman Empire, and other powers with which he hoped to do business, he staged lavish receptions at which he gave away “Sun King” carpets and other gifts. At the same time, he meticulously regulated the production and dissemination of artworks associated with his reign, prohibiting nonroyal manufacturers from using gilt or gold thread, for instance, and ensuring that only his own cadre of artists could make engravings of Versailles’s splendors—depictions that, as he well knew, were imitated throughout Europe.

As highlighted in an exhibition of Louis XIV’s silver furniture at Versailles two years ago, the king kept a close watch on the fabrication of royal tables, tapestries, and other objets d’art. Typically, these objects would originate with a sketch made by Charles Le Brun or another of the crown’s master artists. The sketch would then be realized by a team of studio assistants and craftsmen, each responsible for a specific component such as background figures or gilding. The production method was more or less the same for paintings, mirrors, and tapestries: The art-craft hierarchy, though the subject of intellectual debate in this period, had not yet crystallized in practice. One royal tapestry made from a Le Brun sketch depicts artisans at the Gobelins workshop presenting their finished wares to the king, who is shown giving his approval. Both prime mover and final arbiter, Louis XIV played a role similar to that of the modern couturier or luxury-goods designer, as well as to that of “company artists” like Koons and Murakami, either of

whom one could imagine filling the Sun King’s red-heeled shoes.

Similarities abound between Louis XIV’s creations and those of Koons, Murakami, and Veilhan, among them an obsessive attention to detail and an insistence on high production values that are engineered to appear light and effortless. Tellingly, Veilhan remarked in a 2009 interview in *Art Press* that he had been inspired by the “impression of lightness” given off by the palace gardens, even though its “conception was really pharaonic, its dimensions violent and radical.” Versailles’s exquisite elegance and culture of hedonistic diversion were, in fact, part of Louis XIV’s hard-fought campaign to suppress the memory of civil war and social and economic dissent, to forget the past altogether and live in an eternal, shining present. The sentiment registers powerfully with Murakami’s body of work, itself the product of Japan’s massive collective repression of its defeat in World War II. Considered in this context, the artist’s Versailles sculptures, notably his *Superflat Flowers*, 2010, became apt substitutes for the deflated but decked-out nobles of

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Louis XIV's reign, who would line up for royal ceremonies in these same rooms week after week, with their frozen smiles and perfect hairdos firmly in place.

Installed in a room next to the Hall of Mirrors, where they obstructed the choreographed view out the window to the gardens, *Superflat Flowers* may indeed have looked like the alien invaders the show's protesters purported them to be. Certainly they appeared misplaced when compared with Koons's *Large Vase of Flowers*, 1991, as installed in 2008 in Marie Antoinette's bedroom. Gesturing ever so nimbly toward the dialectic of nature and artifice at the heart of this queen's patronage, the artist's carved wooden posies had never looked so good. Murakami's plastic blossoms, on the other hand, were far more aggressive. They bluntly denied Louis XIV's effort to use nature (i.e., his gardens) to legitimate his political ideology by making it appear organic and inevitable. Instead, they invited us to notice the palace's strained artificiality and its foundational premise of buying and selling: not just luxury goods but image, lifestyle, and even nobility itself, which Louis XIV sold in the form of titles to raise funds during his lean years.

Whereas the king, through his administrators, tried to neutralize the taint of commerce, for example by forbidding academy artists from fraternizing openly with dealers, his eighteenth-century successors hardly bothered. Indeed, Louis XV and Louis XVI organized annual palace sales of Sèvres porcelain cups, statuettes, and other trinkets, anticipating the multinational culture industry Versailles has become. The château's contemporary art program, while arguably helping maintain its prestige, is a part of this industry, one of an endless range of products that include Hollywood films, Christian Louboutin red-heeled shoes, and *The Rose of Versailles*, a popular manga from the 1970s that Murakami cites as one of multiple inspirations for his show.

By injecting its viral brand of *otaku* kitsch into the sacred halls of Versailles, Murakami's installation brought to the surface latent aspects of the palace's history that its right-wing "defenders" would probably prefer to forget. Like it or not, the installation also suggested the potential for contemporary art to enliven or even alter our view of the past, and in this case to knock it off its pedestal. One can only wonder what fresh juxtapositions and revelations will come this summer, when French sculptor and conceptual artist Bernar Venet shows his work in the Versailles gardens, and in 2012, when Joana Vasconcelos, who rose to fame after exhibiting a giant chandelier made out of tampons at the 2005 Venice Biennale, becomes the latest contemporary artist to invade the Sun King's domain. □

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