

Play, Pray, and Sell: Murakami Takashi's <Buddhist Art> in a Post-3.11 Context  
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Around 2011, Murakami Takashi, a world-renowned contemporary artist, started *The 500 Arhats* project for the Princess of Qatar. The exhibition *Takashi Murakami: The 500 Arhats*, held at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo from October 2015 to March 2016, was highly praised by Japanese media and art lovers. With his Zen calligraphy-like “*Ensō* series,” Murakami’s works seem to have gained appreciation as new Buddhist Art as well as for being influenced by Japanese pop culture.

Murakami conceived the idea of *The 500 Arhats* through his interaction with the art historian Tsuji Nobuo in connection with the art journal *Geijutsu Shinchō*. While his notion of using Buddhist icons is filled with “play” rather than religious “pray,” many media reports after 3.11 downplayed the entertaining aspect of Murakami’s drawings, focusing instead on his spiritual development resulting from the disaster.

As for his “*Ensō* series,” Murakami’s intention was to create Zen-like pictures representing the turbulent, war-torn Japanese medieval era as an indication toward the U.S., a nation that has repeatedly engaged in war since 1950; however, his intention was neither tranquility nor simplicity, Murakami’s “Zen” was embedded in the 3.11 discourse.

Research-related work connected with the Japanese art journal *Bijutsu Techō* gave me an opportunity to interview Murakami in November 2016. Based on that experience, this paper will discuss the connections between the artist’s intention, oil money, the Western art market, and the post-3.11 national narratives of Japan.