

— SPOTLIGHT —

# Takeshi Murata

IN CONVERSATION  
WITH ALEX GARTENFELD

Cura, No.18, Fall 2014



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3AM, 2012, pigment print, 147.3 x 118.1 cm  
previous page: DeepBlue, 2012, traditional chromogenic photograph, 76.2 x 101.6 cm  
next pages: Golden Banana, 2011, pigment print, 77.3 x 106.7 cm;  
The Sisterhood, 2011, pigment print, 58.9 x 81.3 cm



— TAKESHI MURATA —

**Alex Gartenfeld** Your parents were architects, an identity that has been de-sublimated in your most recent works, including *Night Moves*, where you have deconstructed an architectural rendering of your studio. That video interested me because it demanded a shift in your own perspective – whereby many of the effects that you have used in the past enter different narrative systems. How do you describe the role of architecture in your work?

**Takeshi Murata** My father had his own practice in Denver, and designed many commercial buildings around the city. He had some quintessential '80s projects as well, including a couple of Club Meds. He and my mother met at Cornell architecture school in the '60s but only worked on a few jobs together during their careers.

One of the reasons for working with the media I do is the direct connection to architecture. But I prefer examining and exploring, and using the software to reproduce space, analyze, break apart, and rebuild it. Only recently have I started to use the tools to produce real world objects. But these still come to being from my work within a simulated space.

There were always art and architecture magazines kicking around the house. The late '70's magazine *Graphis* shaped my worldview pretty early on. Those European designers were freaks. Some of those images are still in my head.

**(A.G.)** At that time, *Graphis* and Zurich design was highly involved in perpetuating a kind of futuristic Surrealism – post-modern design. What about that field is a benchmark for you?

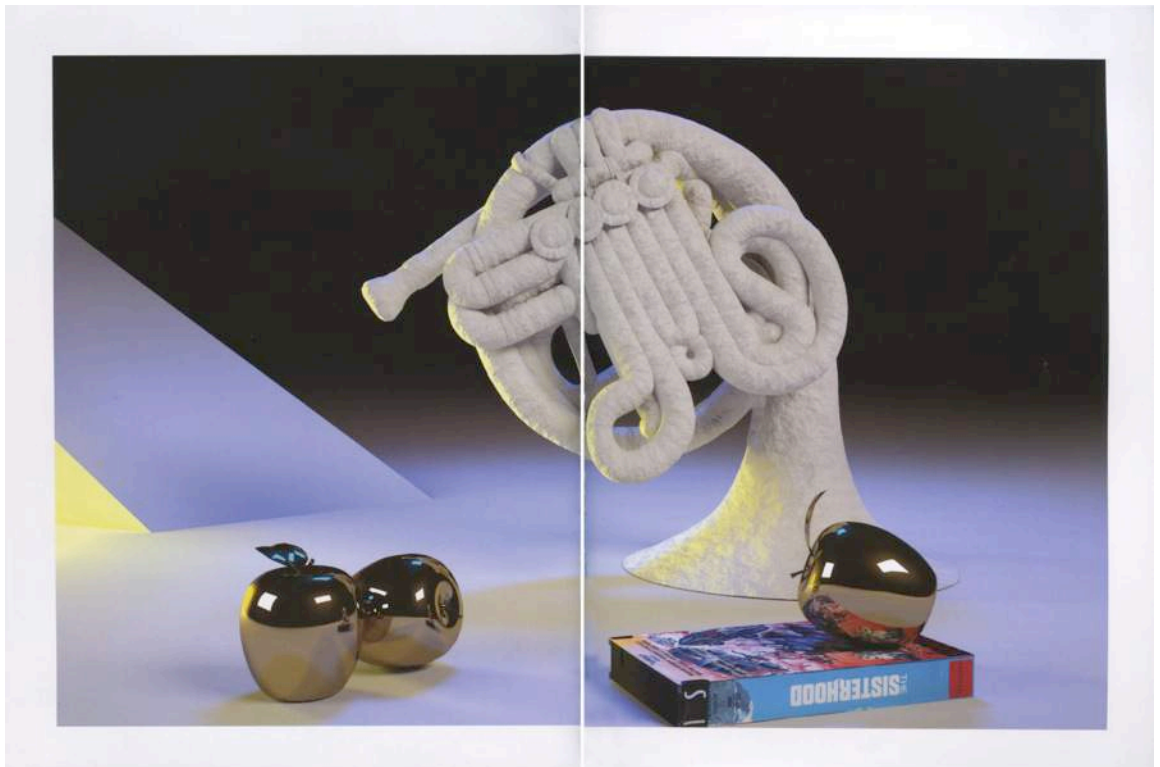
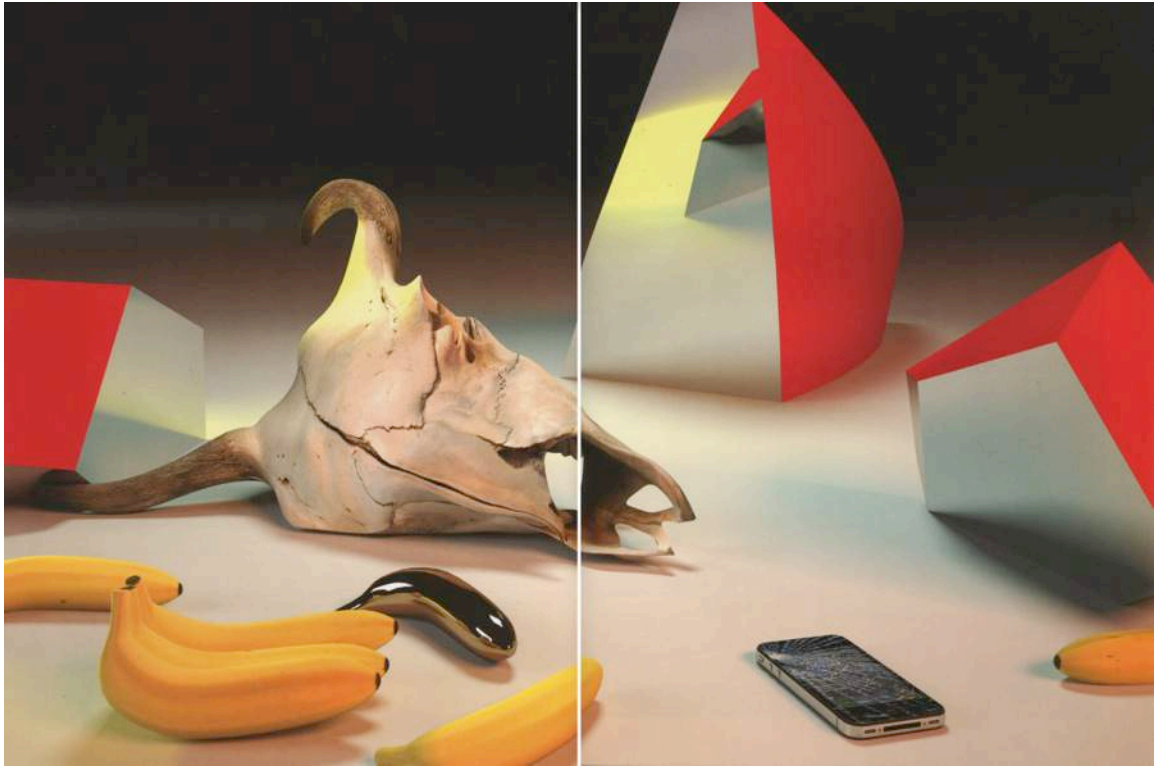
**(T.M.)** I was very young, and it left a strong impression. I didn't know what they were going for, or even why they were made, but it offered a small window into a world outside my own. As for the surrealist dystopian angle, I just assumed it was a normal occurrence somewhere else. I remember seeing a photo of a nude woman straddling a folding chair in a burned out shack with her foot in a fishbowl and her body wrapped with toilet paper, and thinking, now this is something.

**(A.G.)** Your still images, which you started work on in 2012, continue some of the technical processes that you have engaged previously while putting them more explicitly in dialogue with painting, and even photography. In terms of this conversation, I was interested in how these images seem to draw from architecture as a metaphysical space. For me their depth and classicism is allusive to De Chirico, which is an influence that has always interested me in your work. Perhaps relative to these works you could speak of the influence of the architectural ghost.

**(T.M.)** I was thinking of window displays, or catalog scenes, where everything in the image is there to support a single end. Elements fabricated to embody cleanliness, power, efficiency, desire. These spaces interest me. I wanted to start there. The objects I would make generic, almost stale, or just completely absent. And the spaces would be off, tacky, cheap. I would use CG type veneers, like marble, or stucco. And process all these things through high-end computing and state of the art production. But all had to be set against my own hand and human intent, which took the form of composition and narrative.

I wonder if the role of painting then, in a popular sense, were not dissimilar to the role of CG now. And possibly the surrounding arch-ways and piazzas now given way to H&Ms and Starbucks patios?

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(A.G.) The role of work – specifically your own – is a paradoxical one. Rather than facilitate or catalyze image production, your work is painstakingly rendered in order to attain a painterly or artisanal effect. To what extent is this a problematic you engage?

(T.M.) The benefit of a laborious working process is the meditation that can happen in the repetition. In animation, repetition is a massive part of overall production time. Especially when working independently. Drawing can also be inhibited by muscle memory. Working directly with technology, the rules are always shifting. It's an unsteady place that forces re-examination of process, and working methods. And in the end, helps me move closer to producing directly from concept.

(A.G.) Many of your works since around 2009, like *Escape Video Slime*, have interpreted the degeneration of images as a kind of painterly pixilation. Your work has long related to painting, in as much as it has foregrounded composition. But has the medium been important in other or more specific ways?

(T.M.) Illusion is one aspect that is important. Other mediums can be used in a similar illusionistic manner, but there is usually an object grounding it in reality. Video disappears and leaves no trace when the lights go on or the screen goes dark. It acts like a spirit, or a memory. And the earliest filmmakers, like Georges Méliès or Winsor McCay in animation, presented film this way. As magic. I often feel the same way about working with new technology.

(A.G.) Some of your earliest videos, like *Melter 2* (2003) or *Cone Eater* (2004), are deeply psychedelic, and use modeling software of the time to create colorful immersive effects. What kind of attention was demanded of the viewer? And what was your interest in creating this type of experience?

(T.M.) I moved to Los Angeles in 2003, after having spent the previous four years as a designer in New York. I had taught myself some basic computer skills, so I started making video with what I knew. I was working in a traditional film sense however. Both *Melter 2* and *Cone Eater* are based on frame-by-frame hand-drawn animation that was entered into the computer and then looped. I remember clearly seeing the possibilities of working with new media during these projects. I wanted to elicit a psychedelic response, and I felt there was some kind of abstract logic that existed in time-based art to make this possible. Music was proof, but I was also seeing this in artists like Jordan Belson, James Whitney, and Paul Sharits.

(A.G.) Mentioning figures like Belson and Sharits in one breath, you are reconciling dialectical poles of experimental moving image. Belson is wedded to meditative, quasi- or truly Buddhist ideals; while Sharits's work with color and film is materialist, and extremely physical. For me, visually, your work, particularly in the pacing and the frenetic energy of movement and color, related more to the effect of Sharits's flicker films, if not their method of production. What do you make of this kind of dualism?

(T.M.) Yes, it's hard to imagine Belson and Sharits hanging out at a party. But it's their use of film to produce an immediate effect that I responded to. And their departures from traditional narrative. I should add that is also based on what I was actually able to see, which were their works from the mid to late '60s.

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(A.G.) By comparison, the Whitney Brothers articulate a third dynamic of experimental film – that of technological innovation – because of their practice of revitalizing technologies with political and social histories, military-derived gunsights, for instance. Each of the artists is linked by a drive to innovate using technology – whether by material processes or modes or presentation. To what extent do you feel connected to this tradition, or feel responsibility or inspiration, to deconstruct contemporary video technologies in your work?

(T.M.) I appreciate the work of the Whitney Brothers for this reason as well. Many pioneers of film and video had to be equal part artist and engineer/programmer. Along with the huge costs, I think this is why there were so few artists making work like those guys. Today I feel very lucky to be making work in a time when there's a massive industry of hardware and software engineers. I often have to find new unintended ways of using the software, since most is still written for straight commercial applications, but it's incredible what a single artist is able to do with current accessible technology. It's a way of approaching both the image and image making. With few exceptions, experimental filmmakers have always been self-reliant outsiders, and often very influential across all mediums.

(A.G.) RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] became quite known around the time that you were there for a psychedelic style that was rooted in pop culture – particularly cartoons. Yet this style – and feel free to correct my interpretation – seems to interpret the utopian psychedelia of, say, Heinz Edelmann, becoming a less literary, more self-consciously commercial and sub-cultural style.

(T.M.) It was an exciting time. There was very little connection to the greater art world. The Internet was in its infancy, so the concept of an “underground” still existed and location was very important. It was immediate, and fun. And there were just hugely talented people hanging around. I'm not sure when this interview will be published, but there's a show of Forcefield's work opening in the RISD Museum at the end of the month that should not be missed. I played music with Ara, and he, Leif, Jim and I had been friends since the beginning of school. There was a good communal spirit that existed around Providence at that time, and a lot of good things were born out the massive post-industrial lofts around downtown. You could do just about anything. The guys all came together as Forcefield towards the end of school, and I didn't actually see many of their shows as a group because I moved to New York. It was a long time ago now – many of my views have changed, but there is a fundamental way of approaching art that was learned in those years that is still very important to me.

(A.G.) What types of animation do you admire, and from what type of spheres of visual experience/intake? Or, was your background more in experimental/materialist film?

(T.M.) My early background was in independent animation – animators working as individual artists outside of the commercial studios. Later I became more interested in the histories of experimental and structural film. There's a certain rigor I like in both, but often the form is clearer in experimental film. Though many artists' works would fall somewhere between these classifications.



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(A.G.) Many of your works suggest degeneration or deconstruction of a seductive, immersive image. This impulse might be me projecting a traditional “critical” interference into the image production, as a way of creating legibility for myself. In the case of *Melter 2* the images proliferate from an abundant center, which becomes void until halfway through the animation becomes void.

(T.M.) That’s a great observation. I was not conscious of that will making *Melter 2*, but it’s clearly there, an interest in dismantling content and form. This has also run through most of my work. It’s taken the form of the hyper clean and clear in recent years, but that break is still central.

(A.G.) Early on, sound is a distinguishing feature of your video work. For one, it is the only element that you do not produce yourself. Secondly, when it is present, it dramatically shifts the mode of experience toward the cinematic. At what stage is this implemented and how do you seek to use sound?

(T.M.) The soundtrack is definitely an important part of my videos. Not only can it help support a narrative in a traditional cinematic sense, but it can also offer another angle of expression within the work. I especially enjoy collaboration with artists in this stage of the work because of the ease in which it can happen. I will occasionally have ideas about the sound, but I always leave it open to the artist working on it. And because music and sound often provides the seed for ideas in the first place, it makes sense that it be the closing as well.

(A.G.) *No Match* (2009) and more so *Infinite Doors* (2010), both of which are sourced from game shows, stand out within your work for the prominence of the appropriated video material. The former manifests the subject’s frustration and humiliation as he fails miserably at a memory-themed contest. The latter edits together sequences of the traditional unveiling that occurs during game shows – curtains part and the host verbally whoops up enthusiasm for the commodity up for grabs. It reminded me of John Miller’s series of game show paintings, where idiomatic elements of the set are isolated in order to play out their metaphysical effects. Particularly in *Infinite Doors*, repetition is used in a visceral and almost vulgar way. Here you link the presentation of images to desire and repulsion.

(T.M.) Repetition can expose underlying structure. I think of Martin Arnold’s work, especially from the ’80s and early ’90s. And one of my favorite videos, *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* by Dara Birnbaum. Or, outside of art, repetitive actions and words. Familiar meaning falls away pretty quickly. Maybe that’s why children love repetition. It’s recovering the sound from words. And I used game shows mostly because so many human traits are on display. The contestant in *No Match* is stuck in a perpetual losing streak, but he still has hope behind every door. And *Infinite Doors* is also about what’s always right around the corner.



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