



doodle more freely?”<sup>29</sup> Then in the sixth installment, Tsuji submitted *Dragon and Clouds* by Soga Shōhaku. For both men the thirty-five-foot *fusuma* (sliding door) paintings in ink with a ferocious, yet comical dragon had a special hold. Tsuji remembered his own reaction upon seeing the work for the first time: “The word ‘sublime’ did not do it justice; it was mind-boggling stupendous!”<sup>30</sup> Murakami responded: “It was in fact the image of this very *Dragon and Clouds* that made me give myself over entirely to the world of Professor Tsuji’s *Lineage of Eccentrics* at the time when I first picked up the book.”<sup>31</sup>

Although Murakami, like many postmodern artists, has disclaimed any historical study before producing his pieces, the essays and resulting artworks clearly indicate otherwise (unlike many of his Western counterparts, however, Murakami has insisted the reasons for his appropriation of motifs are purely ones of visual interest). Murakami has long identified with the bohemian Shōhaku, who embarked on bravura painting performances using highly unconventional techniques (sometimes after bouts of drinking). Like Murakami’s, Shōhaku’s figures are humorous and sometimes even grotesque, and his brushwork can be wildly expressionistic. On the other hand Shōhaku was well versed in classical Chinese literature and painting styles as well as Japan’s ink painting traditions. Murakami has always admired Shōhaku’s bravado; the son of a Kyoto dyer, Shōhaku claimed himself variously to be the descendant of the Soga school, which had been founded in the fifteenth century, and of the Chinese Ming emperor.

**8**  
Takashi Murakami, *Crucified Upside Down*, 2010

**9**  
Battle pennant of Ochiai Saheiji Michitsugu, Momoyama period, 16th century

Responding to a sixteenth-century banner with an image of the captured warrior Torii Sune’emon bound to a cross, Murakami donned makeup and costuming in one of the *Battle Royale!* challenges. Trying to resolve the question of the original orientation of the image, the artist had himself suspended upside down.



**10**  
Takashi Murakami painting *Dragon in Clouds—Red Mutation: The version I painted myself in annoyance after Professor Tsuji told me, “Why don’t you paint something yourself for once?”* in 2010

The *Battle Royale!* exchanges reveal, however, that although Shōhaku’s painting in the MFA collection provided the primary inspiration for Murakami’s rendition, the Tokyo artist also drew upon diverse premodern and contemporary sources, some Japanese and some Western, including paintings by Katsushika Hokusai and Kawanabe Kyōsai, as well as a drawing by William Blake that had figured in a novel in the series including *Silence of the Lambs* and a record jacket by the British rock group King Crimson. The resulting sixty-foot composition reflects Murakami’s internalization of the Shōhaku work, an unprecedented investment of his actual physical being in the canvas, and a confidence of scale that would influence later projects (fig. 10). It is this internalization of the art historical past that separates this undertaking from what had preceded it and contributes to the framework of two later projects—the *500 Arhats* (2012), a commission for the exhibition *Murakami-Ego* in Doha, Qatar, and *In the Land of the Dead, Stepping on the Tail of a Rainbow* (2014) now in The Broad in Los Angeles.

Murakami claims to put no narrative content into his paintings, yet the complex arrangement of figures with long-established iconographies in both the *500 Arhats* and *In the Land of the Dead* demand a narrative reading. Created as the ultimate response to Tsuji’s *Battle Royale!* challenges, *500 Arhats* draws upon some of the earlier compositions that Murakami developed for the contest, including the Miho Museum’s *Elephant and Whale* and the Boston *Dragon and Clouds*. Studies were also made of