

Exhibition: Yoshitomo Nara
Date: April 5–August 23, 2020
Location: BCAM, Level 2



Image captions page 7

(Los Angeles, CA—February 11, 2020) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Yoshitomo Nara*, the first international retrospective of artist Yoshitomo Nara (b. 1959). The exhibition surveys more than 30 years of the artist’s work—from 1984 to 2020—through the lens of his longtime passion to music. Known for his portraits, Nara’s subjects are vaguely ominous-looking characters with penetrating gazes that occasionally wield objects just as knives or cigarettes, as well as heads and figures that float in dreamy landscapes. Nara’s oeuvre reflects the artist’s raw encounters with his inner self, taking inspiration from memories of his childhood; music; literature; studying and living in Germany (1988–2000); exploring his roots in Asia; and modern art from Europe and Japan. *Yoshitomo Nara* comprises more than 100 major works, including paintings, drawings, sculpture, ceramics, an installation that recreates his drawing studio, and never-before-exhibited idea sketches that reflect the artist’s empathic eye. One of the exhibition highlights includes *Miss Forest*, a 26-foot outdoor painted bronze sculpture that will be installed on Wilshire Boulevard.

Following LACMA’s presentation, the exhibition will travel to the Yuz Museum, Shanghai (September 29, 2020–January 17, 2021), the Museo Guggenheim Bilbao (February–May 2021); and the Kunsthal Rotterdam (June–September 2021).

“Yoshitomo Nara is among the most important Japanese artists of his generation, and one of the most recognized artists working today. We are excited to be organizing this international

retrospective,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “Nara’s art reflects his interest in art and culture of both past and present. His interest in art history—ranging from 12th-century Japanese Buddhist sculptures and handscroll paintings, Italian early-Renaissance painters, and other European modern influences—mirrors LACMA’s encyclopedic nature. Referencing contemporary music and album covers, Nara possesses the unique ability to capture a complexity of emotions that reflects the cultural psyche of the current generation.”

Exhibition curator Mika Yoshitake stated, “Music has been a passion for Nara since he began to listen to folk songs at age nine, and his relationship with music, namely with album cover art, provided him with an unconventional introduction to art history and artistic genres. This passion is seen through Nara’s vast record collection, selections of which visitors will see as soon as they enter this exhibition. Through more than 100 works on view, the exhibition will bring new light to Nara’s conceptual process.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with a foreword by Michael Govan, introductory essay by Mika Yoshitake, and text by Yoshitomo Nara. A limited-edition of the catalogue features a clamshell case with 14 booklets, as well as a vinyl LP with original music and covers by American indie rock band Yo La Tengo on side A and songs from the 1960s and ’70s selected by the artist on side B.

Nara’s love of music ended up providing him with an unorthodox art education: the images on record covers not only became signifiers for music but also introduced him to a vast array of artistic genres, with covers and their corresponding music merging in his subconscious. For the young Nara, growing up in Japan among the shadows of war and economic recovery, the records and their covers served as sources of escape and eventually as a valuable form of self-empowerment, allowing him to deal with the complexities of living with the remnants of Japan’s imperial past and in close proximity to signs of ongoing conflict. Today, Nara’s studio wall displays a vast array of records he has accumulated over the past 40 years, including folk, rock, blues, soul, and punk albums. This exhibition aims to move away from some of the dominant perceptions of Nara’s work with Japan’s Neo-Pop movement (largely associated with Takashi Murakami), and also shift the focus from the harshness and intensity of his earlier practice to the self-critical introspection and individuality that have become more prevalent in the quiet, contemplative work he has made in the last decade, particularly since

the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. The artist's inspiration from the world of 1960s and '70s folk and rock music filters throughout his practice.

After taking several lengthy journeys to Europe in 1980, 1983, and 1987 while attending art school at Aichi Prefectural University of the Arts where he obtained his BA and MA, Nara was accepted into the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and lived in Germany from 1988 to 2000 (Düsseldorf from 1988 to 1993 and in Cologne until 2000). This was a period of great isolation for Nara, during which he was reminded of his adolescent years in Aomori, and the development of psychological depth and introspection in his paintings. While Nara's immense popularity within the Neo-Pop milieu has dominated the critical global reception of his practice to this day, having spent his formative years as a young artist in Germany, Nara sees his work more in dialogue with American and European subcultures.

Exhibition Highlights

Highlights from the *Yoshitomo Nara* exhibition include:

Girl with a Knife in Her Hand (1991) is one of the most iconic works in Nara's oeuvre, focusing on a single, ominous figure with eyes who floats in an empty atmosphere.

Representing a turning point in which Nara no longer illustrates the backgrounds of his artworks, but instead concentrates on the figures themselves, the artist intensifies their gazes by experimenting with sideways stances and slightly off-center placement, and bringing them into a bolder, fuller focus against monochromatic backgrounds. "These works were born not from confronting the other, but from confronting my own self," the artist has said.

No Nukes (1998) depicts a stern, pigtailed girl holding placard that reads, "No Nukes." Painted over a promotional poster for bossa nova musician Vinícius Cantuária's *Amor Brasileiro* (1998) among other printed ephemera, it became powerful symbol in July 2012 when the artist allowed protesters to download a high-resolution image of the work to use as picket signs during one of Japan's largest anti-nuclear protests. As many as 100,000 people gathered to rail against the government's decision to restart two nuclear reactors in Fukui prefecture, many with this image, dubbed "No Nukes Girl," in hand.

Fountain of Life (2001/2014) is a motorized sculptural installation of heads with closed eyelids that tower over one another inside an enormous cup with water that streams down the figures' cheeks, forming a fountain of tears. The melancholy of this work is palpable, and the

figures' clean profiles evoke the richly outlined paintings of Japanese abstract painter Morikazu Kumagai, whom Nara has long admired.

Nara began creating portable installations of his paintings, drawings, and sculptures, which ranged from the three-part installation *S.M.L.* (2003) to the epic 26-installation exhibition *A to Z* (2006). These domestic environments culminated in *My Drawing Room* (2008), a painted wooden architectural structure that recreates Nara's studio space. A hand-painted billboard with the words "Place Like Home" hangs on the exterior, and the inside features piles of drawings on the floor and a desk with figurines, mix CDs that Nara curated, vernacular paintings, drawings, ephemera, and collectibles from vintage Americana shops that the artist has accumulated over the years.

Starting in 2005, Nara's singular portraits began to take a dramatic turn, each projecting a complex expression that combines sadness, anger, and serenity. In *Missing in Action – Girl Meets Boy* (2005), fire from an atomic bomb explosion is reflected in one of the eyes of the figure, representing a memory of Hiroshima, where this work is housed. The political valence of this work on paper connects the fading memory of the previous generation who experienced the war with the younger generation of Japanese youth who can only indirectly experience this decisive moment.

Nara's work took a dramatic shift following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, which occurred only 43 miles north of his studio. Emotionally affected by the aftermath, Nara painted *In the Milky Lake/Thinking One* (2011), a portrait of a solemn girl with closed eyelids who wears a green dress and is half-submerged in a barely visible pool of water; it was the only major painting he produced in 2011. While confronting the March 11 disaster and nuclear crisis, Nara made *Miss Spring* (2012), a portrait of a wide-eyed girl with a high forehead who stands against a cherry-blossom pink background and stares straight at the viewer, with prism-like teardrops glistening in her eyes. A symbol of hope, this portrait served as the cover image for Ryuichi Sakamoto's *No Nukes 2012: Guidebook for Our Future*. *Miss Spring* was used as a powerful backdrop banner by the protest organizers during the demonstrations.

About the Artist

Born in 1959, Yoshitomo Nara grew up in Hirosaki, in Japan's rural northern prefecture of Aomori. Having graduated with an MFA from the Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music, Nagakute, Japan, in 1987, he completed his studies at the Kunstakademie,

Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1993. Nara began his career during the decade he spent in Cologne, and from the mid-1990s he exhibited widely in Europe, the United States, Japan, and all over Asia. His return to Japan in 2000 coincided with a surge of global interest in Japanese pop culture, particularly in the United States. While he is primarily a painter, his practice encompasses drawing; sculptures made of wood, FRP, ceramic, and bronze; installations that incorporate scrap materials; and photographs that document everyday landscapes and the encounters he has during his travels.

Yoshitomo Nara's numerous solo exhibitions include *Drawings—Last 31 Years*, The Bastide Gallery, Château La Coste, Provence, France (2019); *for better or worse: Works 1987–2017*, Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Toyota, Japan (2017); *Life is Only One: Yoshitomo Nara*, Asia Society Hong Kong Center, Hong Kong, China (2015); Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, CA (2014); *NARA Yoshitomo: a bit like you and me...*, Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama, Japan, traveled to Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori, Japan, and Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan (2012); *Nobody's Fool*, Asia Society, New York, NY (2010); *Yoshitomo Nara + graf*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2008); *Yoshitomo Nara + graf*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Den Haag, Netherlands (2007); *From the Depth of My Drawer*, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan (2004); *Nothing Ever Happens*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, OH (2003); and *NARA Yoshitomo: I DON'T MIND, IF YOU FORGET ME.*, Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama, Japan (2001).

About the Publication

Accompanying the LACMA exhibition is a richly illustrated 224-page hardcover catalogue co-published with DelMonico Books/Prestel that features a foreword by Michael Govan, an introductory essay by exhibition curator Mika Yoshitake and a series of reviews by Nara, previously unpublished in English, of albums from the 1960s and '70s. In addition, a limited-edition of the exhibition catalogue, packaged in a clamshell case, includes 14 booklets and a colored vinyl record featuring songs drawn from Nara's favorites from the 1960s and '70s. Side A includes one original song written and a selection of covers performed by Yo La Tengo (Georgia Hubley, Ira Kaplan, and James McNew). Side B includes original recordings by artists including Geoff & Maria Muldaur, Bobby Charles, Karen Dalton, and Donovan. The publication and limited-edition exhibition catalogue are available for purchase at the LACMA Store or lacmastore.org.

Related Programming

Artist Talk: Calls from Distant Memories

Thursday, April 2, 2020 | 6–9pm

Free, tickets required

Artist Yoshitomo Nara discusses how he gives form to sensitivity and how his works come to life. His practice encompasses portraiture in which the subjects appear to stare back at the viewer; loosely drawn works on paper; sculptures made of wood, fiberglass, ceramic, and bronze; and multi-media installations that completely redefine the gallery space. This lecture will be interpreted from Japanese to English.

Gallery Talk with Yeewan Koon— "No Longer just a Girl with a Knife"

Sunday, April 5 | 4-5pm


Focusing on Yoshitomo Nara's seminal works, this presentation by Yeewan Koon, associate professor and Chair of the Fine Arts Department at the University of Hong Kong, discusses the artist's painting practices, the stories behind the works, and the struggles Nara faced after having created his iconic big-headed girls.

Credit

This exhibition is organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Principal sponsorship is provided by United Airlines.

Major support is provided by Mr. Zoltan and Mrs. Tamara Varga, London; Andrew Xue, Singapore; Blum & Poe; and Pace Gallery.

Generous support is provided by Sally and Ralph Tawil and **JAPAN**FOUNDATION .

This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

All exhibitions at LACMA are underwritten by the LACMA Exhibition Fund. Major annual support is provided by Kitzia and Richard Goodman, Jerry and Kathleen Grundhofer, Meredith and David Kaplan, and Jeffrey Saikhon, with generous annual funding from Terry and Lionel Bell, the Judy and Bernard Briskin Family Foundation, Kevin J. Chen, Louise and Brad Edgerton, Edgerton Foundation, Emily and Teddy Greenspan, Earl and Shirley Greif Foundation, Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross, Mary and Daniel James, David Lloyd and Kimberly Steward, Kelsey Lee Offield, David Schwartz Foundation, Inc., Mr. and Mrs. Anthony and Lee Shaw, Lenore and Richard Wayne, Marietta Wu and Thomas Yamamoto, and The Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation.

About LACMA

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection

of nearly 142,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image caption: (left): Yoshitomo Nara, *The Girl with the Knife in Her Hand*, 1991, Vicki and Kent Logan, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, © Yoshitomo Nara 1991, photo by Ikuhiro Watanabe, courtesy of the artist (left center): Yoshitomo Nara, *No Nukes*, 1998, collection of Masayuki Nagase, © Yoshitomo Nara 1998, photo by Norihiro Ueno, courtesy of the artist; (center) Yoshitomo Nara, *Missing in Action—Girl Meets Boy—*, 2005, collection of Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, © Yoshitomo Nara 2005, photo by Yoshitaka Uchida, courtesy of the artist (center right): Yoshitomo Nara, *Miss Forest*, 2010 Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, © Yoshitomo Nara 2010, photo by Keizo Kioku, courtesy of the artist (right): Yoshitomo Nara, *My Drawing Room*, 2008, collection of the artist, © Yoshitomo Nara 2008, photo by Mie Morimoto, courtesy of the artist

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