Artist Resources – NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智 (Japanese, b. 1959)

Nara at Pace Gallery

In 2003, Nara embarked on *the A-Z Project* with international design team, graf, which explored the narrative relationships between individuals and their environment, art and life, through the creation of 26 "houses" that respond to exhibition spaces around the world – such as the 2008 installation at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead. The 2009 documentary, *Traveling with Nara*, captured the artistic feat.

Nara's first solo exhibition in New York, 2010's *Nobody's Fool* at the Asia Society, featured over 100 works spanning his earliest drawings from the 1980s through mature explorations in painting, sculpture, ceramics, and large-scale installations.

"The older the work is, the more it appeals to me. The power of old works might owe to their 'naturalness.' Painters must have naturally breathed in the air and the wants of their time, then breathed out the reply through their work," Nara reflected in 2013 during an in-depth conversation with author Hideo Furukawa about being an aging artist, solitude as a driving artistic force, inspiration, and the impact of the Tohoku Great Earthquake and Tsunami in 2011. "We can't tell what our time wants because of the noise surrounding us. To make matters worse, there is a system pushing artists to produce false 'wants' in our time. That's one of the factors that make more of what I call noise."



Nara in Tochigi Prefecture studio, 2020
Photograph: Tetsuya Miura

Nara's first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, in 2015, brought together paintings, mixed-media drawings, photographs, and sculptures to capture twenty years of the enigmatic artist's explorations of interior life. "Instead of capturing one moment or creating something out of temporary emotion, I think I'm trying to create something more permanent in both artistic and aesthetic aspects," Nara reflected in a video interview.



NARA in New York, 2010
Photograph: Gus Powell

In 2019, Chateau La Coste in Provence, France, brought together over 150 of NARA's drawings to explore the artist's relationship to the medium from his student days to the present. A "panoramic view" as Nara referred to it, of a lifelong pursuit as natural "as breathing itself," the show "contemplates the relationship I have with drawing, or how I've been getting along with it over time… Drawings shows what's inside, and then on the surface, there are paintings, sculptures and other works."

Phaidon published a definitive study of Nara's career, artistic practice, and life in 2020, which the artist praised as "a deep dive analysis into who I am as an individual. I think that the content may actually affect how the readers see. I am hopeful that people will come to understand the inner life of the pieces I've created through my sensibilities, blood, and sweat."

Two major surveys of Nara's work are scheduled to re-open to visitors in 2021. At Dallas Contemporary, paintings, drawings, and sculptures will trace the artist's career from 2006. At LACMA, thirty years of work explore Nara's interests in childhood, music, literature, Europe, Asia, and modern art. A monumental outdoor sculpture and an installation recreating his drawing studio complete the expansive retrospective, which will travel to the Yuz Museum in Shanghai, Guggenheim Bilbao, and Kunsthal Rotterdam. *The New York Times Style Magazine: Singapore* dropped by his Tochigi Prefecture studio for a lighthearted conversation.

NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智(Japanese, b. 1959)
Little Lisa, 2001
Acrylic on paper

Private Collection; L2026:54.1

Nara Yoshitomo was born in Japan's Aomori Prefecture in the wake of postwar American occupation. He moved to Germany in 1988 to study at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, living there for several years before returning to Japan and becoming an influential figure in the country's burgeoning Neo-Pop movement. The artist is known for his paintings of children experiencing intense emotion or caught in mischievous, rebellious, or violent situations. **Little Lisa** depicts a young girl standing calmly, her wide eyes looking upward as she contemplates her next move. The artist reflected: "When you are a kid, you are too young to know you are lonely, sad, and upset. Now I know I was."

On view September 16, 2026 – January 3, 2027





NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智 (Japanese, b. 1959)
Peace, 2022
Colored pencil on paper

Private Collection; L2024:71.1

On view November 13, 2024 – February 16, 2025

NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智(Japanese, b. 1959)
No Means No, 2006
Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2023:114.1

“They say human eyes are the mirror of the soul, and I used to draw them too carelessly. Say, to express the anger, I just drew some triangular eyes…. About ten years ago, however, I became more interested in expressing complex feelings in a more complex way. I began to stop and think, to take a breath before letting everything out.” - Nara, 2013

Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara grew up in the long-lasting aftermath of World War II, when his country was still reeling from the devastation of war and the fear of nuclear resurgence. The artist is best known for his paintings of children processing the complex emotions of post-war life. **No Means No** is one of Nara’s emotional anti-war paintings. The young girl gazes outward with shining eyes, pleading for peace.

On view December 20, 2023 – March 24, 2024





NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智 (Japanese, b. 1959)
Night Walker, 2001
Acrylic on canvas

Property of a Private Collection; L2022:132.1

Born and raised in Hirosaki, Japan, Yoshitomo Nara studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and lived in Germany until 2000. The artist is known for his Neo-Pop paintings of children experiencing intense emotion or caught in mischievous, rebellious, or violent situations. **Night Walker** is a departure from Nara's more vicious themes in the early 2000s and predates his recent interest in calm, meditative subjects. The child appears to be sleepwalking; though her arms are outstretched, she appears to be content in her dreams. In a diary entry from 2000, Nara wrote the following poem:

"The little star dwellers give thanks to everyone
They thank all the stars blinking in the Milky Way
What haven't been fulfilled are dreams
What have been seem like dreams, but aren't
They're living right in that terrifying real world
Good dreams and bad dreams take shape: the real world
Days like dreams, looking back they're all scary scary shadow."

On view February 22 – May 28, 2023

NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智(Japanese, b. 1959)
Standing Alone, 2003
Acrylic and colored pencil on paper

Private Collection; L2022:29.1

Yoshitomo Nara rose alongside Superflat and Neo-Pop artists including Takashi Murakami (b. 1962) who were interested in subcultures of manga, anime, and otaku (youth culture) in 1990s Japan. In the late 1990s, Nara began painting young girls that seem mischievous, angry, rebellious, or upset in an illustrative, comic book style. **Standing Alone** features the characteristic piercing eyes and defiant gaze of Nara's figures. His subjects comment on a rapidly globalizing society, the emotional struggles of childhood, and the oppressive world of adulthood. As Nara explains: "I was not deliberately painting any particular girl. Through painting representational features such as eyes, noses, and mouths, I wanted to express something deeper."

On view June 1 – September 4, 2022





NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智 (Japanese, b. 1959)
Mindfulness in the dark woods, 2017
Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2021:139.1

Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara is best known for paintings of children experiencing intense emotion. His characteristic subjects are often shown with piercing eyes, carrying subtle weapons such as knives or saws. **Mindfulness in the dark woods** marks a departure from this theme. The child's eyes are closed; they seem calm and comfortable in their dark surroundings. Nara shifted to depict peaceful, meditative children in response to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, the most devastating disaster in Japan's recent history. This evolution in Nara's subjects is also reflected in his practice, which has become more contemplative. When the artist's solo exhibition *Thinker* opened at Pace Gallery in 2017, he remarked: "In the past I would have an image that I wanted to create, and I would just do it. I would just get it finished. Now I take my time and work slowly and build up all these layers to find the best way."

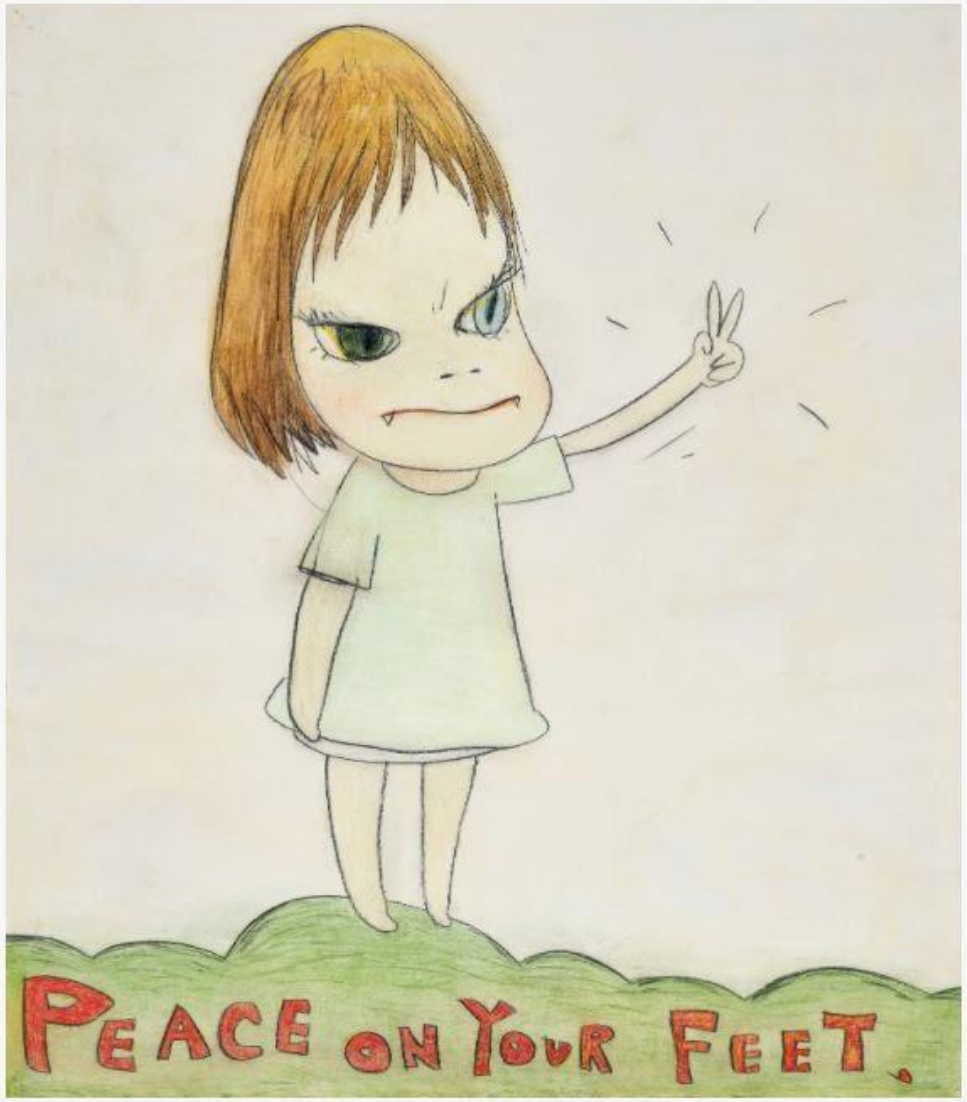
On view October 13, 2021 – January 16, 2022

NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智(Japanese, b. 1959)
Peace on Your Feet, 2004
Colored pencil and acrylic on paper

Private Collection; L2021:13.9

"To be an artist, one might need to be deprived a bit of what he or she has taken for granted: accessibility to things and people, including language and a means of communication," Nara reflected in 2013. "I needed a setting which would allow me to isolate myself from others to have a real conversation with the inner-me…I found my style only after living in solitude." Yoshitomo Nara received his creative isolation during twelve years in Germany, where he studied, taught, and began his artistic practice after college in Nagakute, Japan. Nara's celebrated aesthetic defined by mischievous, rowdy, pensive, and occasionally anarchic youth drawn with deceptive simplicity developed during these years in solitude and flourished after his return in the early 2000s. Nara also credits his aesthetic ethos to the picture books, known as E-hon, he read during his childhood in Aomori, which demanded imaginative work through simple figures and words. Album art from early record purchases also played a role, catalyzing his imagination through a visual medium isolated from a language he could not read.

On view April 14 – July 18, 2021



On view October 7, 2020 – January 10, 2021



NARA Yoshitomo奈良美智 (Japanese, b. 1959)
Knife Behand Back, 2000
Colored pencil on paper

Private Collection; L2020:30.6



NARA Yoshitomo奈良美智 (Japanese, b. 1959)
Forget it!, 2007
Colored pencil on paper

Private Collection; L2020:30.7



NARA Yoshitomo奈良美智 (Japanese, b. 1959)
Don't Waste Another Day!, 2007
Colored pencil on paper

Private Collection; L2020:30.8

Multi-media artist Yoshitomo Nara studied at the Aichi Prefectural University of the Arts in Nagakute, Japan, and the Kunstakademie (art academy) in Düsseldorf, Germany, in the 1980s and early 90s before rising to international acclaim. Private and prolific, Nara creates installations, sculptures, paintings, and drawings that merge global influences in pop culture, including Japanese *anime* and *manga,* American cartoons, punk rock, and folk music. He is best known for depictions of young children that embody an uneasy alliance between innocence and malevolence. Drawing has been a significant part of Nara's practice since his time as a student in Japan and Germany. Rather than preparatory sketches or mock-ups for finished canvases, however, they are works of art unto themselves. This collection provides a glimpse of Nara's deceptively simple and intuitively expressive, if ambiguous, range of young characters.

Consistently resistant to labels, Nara reflected in 2015: "I am just trying to express individual things… To be honest, what I'd like to tell my audience is that they don't need to have knowledge about me or my work—as long as they can look at it face to face as an individual then the interpretation is up to them."



NARA Yoshitomo 奈良美智 (Japanese, b. 1959)
Three Stars, 2019
Acrylic on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:48.1

On view August 19 – November 22, 2020