

YOSHITOMO NARA

ALL MY LITTLE
WORDS

10.5. TO 1.11.2023



ALBERTINA modern

Exhibition Facts

Duration	10 May – 1 November 2023
Venue	ALBERTINA MODERN Level -1 Karlsplatz 5, 1010 Vienna
Curator	Elsy Lahner
Catalogue	Available for EUR 36,90 (English & German) onsite at the Museum Shops as well as via https://shop.albertina.at/en/
Opening Hours	Daily 10 am – 6 pm
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Yoshitomo Nara

All My Little Words

10.5. 2023 – 1.11. 2023

Yoshitomo Nara (b. 1959) is one of the best-known artists of his generation worldwide. Since the 1990s, he has attracted international attention with his so-called “Angry Girls,” heavily stylized images of girls with grim expressions, vampire fangs, and knives in their hands. With their childlike cuteness, the figures recall the aesthetics of comics and cartoons, ranging from snotty brats to naïve, sweet-looking characters. Behind what seems to be innocent or even cutesy creatures at first glance hides a punk attitude—in a critical rather than in a destructive sense: these are strong little personalities who question things, rebel, and do not put up with anything; who defy the adult world and, somehow, their own growing up; who reveal their opinions and feelings with an honesty and authenticity that is unique to children, and who are allowed to have such opinions and feelings.

All My Little Words at the ALBERTINA MODERN focuses on Nara’s multifaceted oeuvre of drawings, which developed over a period of some forty years and is presented here in a hanging arranged by the artist himself. The exhibition ranges from early experimental works on paper and a number of paintings and sculptures to an expansive installation. The drawings, which he sometimes scribbles almost casually on slips of paper, envelopes, flyers, or corrugated cardboard, show the direct influence of music, literature, sub and pop culture and express the artist’s sociopolitical concerns: they negotiate social values, norms, and ideals in a diaristic manner. Nara’s mastery of drawing manifests itself in the richness of an emotional spectrum, ranging from vulnerability to existential depth to rebellion and unruliness.

IT STARTS WITH MUSIC

Nara grew up in Aomori Prefecture in northern Japan. His parents both worked, and his much older brothers were often away from home. A classic latchkey kid, Nara spent a lot of time alone, with Chako, a stray cat, as his playmate and companion. At some point, he stumbled upon a radio station of a nearby American airbase and was introduced to country and rock music. This was the beginning of his great passion for music. At the age of eight he bought his first LP, an album by the Japanese band Takeshi Terauchi and The Bunnys. He continued spending his money on records rather than school lunches or textbooks. Without understanding a single word of the English-language songs, he tried to make sense of their content by looking at the record covers, and he began to imagine what the texts were about through intonation, sound, and rhythm. This love of music, the intense feelings it arouses in him, is still part of Nara's life and his working practice. When he arrives at his studio in the evening, he first turns his songs up loud and then begins to work without a preconceived plan. His works, especially his drawings, are essentially visualizations of what goes through his mind when he listens to music, arising from the emotion of the moment. Song titles or individual lines of the lyrics can therefore frequently be found in his work, having become questions, statements, or worldly wisdoms uttered by his protagonists.

FROM LONELINESS

In addition to music, the early experience of loneliness plays an essential role in Nara's work—an experience that was repeated in young adulthood, when he went to the Düsseldorf Art Academy in 1988 to study with A. R. Penck and spent the next twelve years in Germany, a foreign land. He often felt reminded of the loneliness of his childhood days, soliloquizing with his eight-year-old self in Aomori. It was during this time in Germany, in the seclusion of the studio, that Nara gradually arrived at his individual expression and own artistic concerns. The little girl with the large head began to take shape. She demanded more and more space and increasingly displaced what was in the background. Nara finally felt he had created something that was completely his own, that came out of his innermost being. The figure of the girl became his main motif, a universal template he could realize in various forms and with different attributes.

VISUAL LANGUAGE

Nara makes unconventional use of the most diverse types of paper—lined notepaper, scraps of paper, envelopes, invitation cards, calendars, posters, or corrugated cardboard—appreciating any material whatsoever, working with whatever is at hand. The paper also serves as a formal starting point that inspires the artist, although he never references it in

terms of content. In the same way he begins with a black- or red-primed canvas for his paintings and paints over it again and again, layer by layer, he also reworks the printed stationary and the stamped and addressed envelopes he uses for his drawings, resonating with what already exists. Certain motifs recur in Nara's drawings over the years and can even be found in his earliest works. Apart from the two-leafed sprout, the puddle of water, the knife, and the flame, it is the house, the house of his childhood, to which Nara repeatedly refers: as a place of his childhood, a place where he experienced the feeling of loneliness for the first time, a place of memory and a refuge.

INTERACTION

Nara's figures largely stand isolated, exposed and therefore vulnerable, but at the same time they have an incredible presence. They are out for interaction. The children in Nara's paintings mostly look at us directly, thus making contact with us. They give us an annoyed look, smile at us maliciously, or look up at us with an expression of innocence. In the drawings, on the other hand, it is as if we are watching them unnoticed or catching them in the act: concocting some plan or having committed a misdeed, indulging in heavy thoughts or letting off steam on the drums or guitar. With their pronounced cuteness, they embody something worth protecting while irritating us with their aggressive behavior and impressing us with their determination. They thus arouse contrary reactions and feelings in us, in much the same way that music can make us laugh and feel sad at the same time. And just as a song or a melody touches something in us, agitates us, or strikes a chord within us even if we do not understand the language, Nara's children also personify something we can empathize or identify with or which reminds us of what it was like to have experienced injustice or our own impotence as children.

UNDER THE SURFACE

Nara's figures are often associated with the imagery of comics, due to their super-deformed proportions characteristic of Japanese manga and anime. From 2000 on, Nara thus also earned international acclaim as an exponent of Japanese Superflat, an art movement that references precisely this type of aesthetic and its role in Japan's consumer society. Similar to American Pop Art, it is an anti-hierarchical fusion of high culture, subculture, and everyday culture. While other Superflat artists employ the eponymous flatness as a stylistic device, Nara's art, however, begs for a more nuanced reading. For him, the superficial *kawaii* (Japanese for cute, small, innocent, pitiful, insignificant) serves mainly the purpose of establishing contact and interaction. His drawings in particular are anything but "superflat" and are used by Nara as means of communication in an equally anti-hierarchical way. It is less about perfection and more about reacting intuitively and spontaneously to express something that can be understood by everyone: not elitist, but rather informal.

AFTER THE CATASTROPHE OF 2011

In March 2011, the powerful Tōhoku earthquake hit the Pacific coast of Japan and led to the nuclear disaster of Fukushima. The tsunami caused by the earthquake devastated vast stretches of land. Nara, who lived near Fukushima at the time and passed through the regions affected by the damage on his way to visit his mother in Aomori, was, like so many others, overwhelmed by grief and helplessness. He felt incapable of creating work, nor did he see how he could make a meaningful contribution with his art to coming to terms with all this. Gradually, however, Nara began to work again, realizing projects with children. For the first time he created large clay sculptures, for which he worked the material roughly with his hands, as if to process his emotions, inscribe fears, sorrow, and hopelessness in the material, and, through the visible imprints of his fingers, capture traces of life in the figures, which were then cast in bronze.

MY DRAWING ROOM

Since 2004, when the demand for his works on the art market reached its first peak, Nara has created installations in the form of small houses or cabins, inside of which he recreates a studio situation. *My Drawing Room* is one of these installations. The title, which is ambiguous (the original sense of the word is “withdrawing room”), reveals that in addition to being a room where the artist evidently draws, it is also a place of retreat where he withdraws to work, where he can escape the daily hustle and bustle. There he contemplates the solitude necessary for his work: a “Place Like Home,” as the signboard attached to the side wall announces, but still only *like* home. For the situation inside is fictitious, a setting Nara has imagined that does not quite correspond to reality and in which he himself is not present. Yet music can be heard, the kind the artist usually listens to while working. Drawings lie scattered on the table and floor, interspersed with such objects as toys and small figurines, a snow globe, calendars, maps, framed pictures, hand-lettered CDs, and a multitude of pens. Here, Nara displays a cosmos of things that influence his work while also providing a (constructed) glimpse into his inner self.

STATEMENTS

Nara’s works have pursued a critical stance from the very beginning. The songs reflected in his pictures—anti-war songs like “Universal Soldier” or protest songs like “Eve of Destruction”—evoke the feelings Nara felt himself in postwar Japan, after the trauma of losing the war and the devastating destruction caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, a short time later, in the face of the absurdity of the Vietnam War. Such slogans as “Peace” and “No Nukes” first appeared in his drawings as early as the

1980s and run through his entire oeuvre. They find their continuation in his recent paintings on cardboard, which echo the aesthetics of protest signs. Conversely, images of his works regularly appear in demonstrations and mass rallies, which is supported by Nara as he makes them available for download free of charge. It is in line with Nara's way of thinking that his works are used in this fashion. He has always sought to make a difference with his work and accept his responsibility as an artist in society.

Press images

The following images are available free of charge in the Press section of www.albertina.at.
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Yoshitomo Nara
Ships in Girl, 1992
Acrylic and colored pencil on paper
28 × 34 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



Yoshitomo Nara
Drawing for "Hardboiled / Hard Luck", 1999
Acrylic and colored pencil on paper
25 × 23 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



Yoshitomo Nara
Work for Picture Book "Lonesome Puppy", 1999
Acrylic and colored pencil on paper
26 × 52 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: The Albertina Museum, Vienna



Yoshitomo Nara
Cup Kid, 2000
Acrylic and collage on paper
13 × 10 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
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Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



Yoshitomo Nara
Work for "Dream to Dream", 2001
Acrylic and colored pencil on paper
40 × 30 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
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Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



Yoshitomo Nara
Untitled, 2005
Colored pencil on paper
34 × 24 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
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Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



Yoshitomo Nara
Untitled, 2005
Colored pencil on paper
40 × 30 cm
Gallery MEYER KAINER, Vienna
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Photo: The Albertina Museum, Vienna



Yoshitomo Nara
Fuck U, 2015
Colored pencil on paper
30 × 21 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



Yoshitomo Nara
Miss Margaret, 2016
Acrylic on canvas
194 × 162 cm
Private Collection, United States of America
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



Yoshitomo Nara
With the Knife, 2018
Colored pencil on paper
34 × 24 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Keizo Kioku



Yoshitomo Nara
Hi, 2019
Acrylic and colored pencil on corrugated board
77 × 56 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



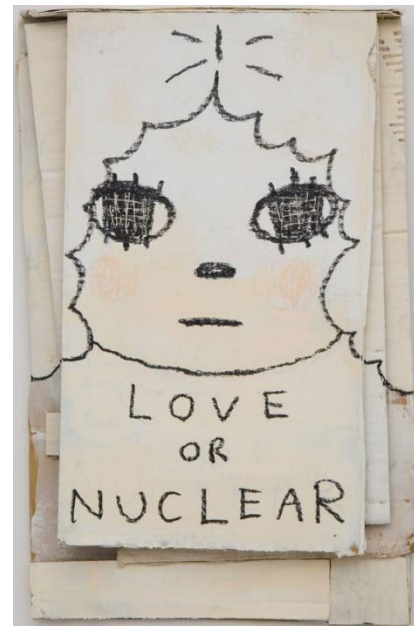
Yoshitomo Nara
Midnight Pilgrim, 2012/2021
Bronze with black patina
158 x 58 x 64 cm
ProWinko ProArt
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Keizo Kioku



Yoshitomo Nara
Moonage..., 2022
Ceramic
79 x diam. 39 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Keizo Kioku



Yoshitomo Nara
Burn, 2022
Colored pencil on paper
24 x 33 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Keizo Kioku



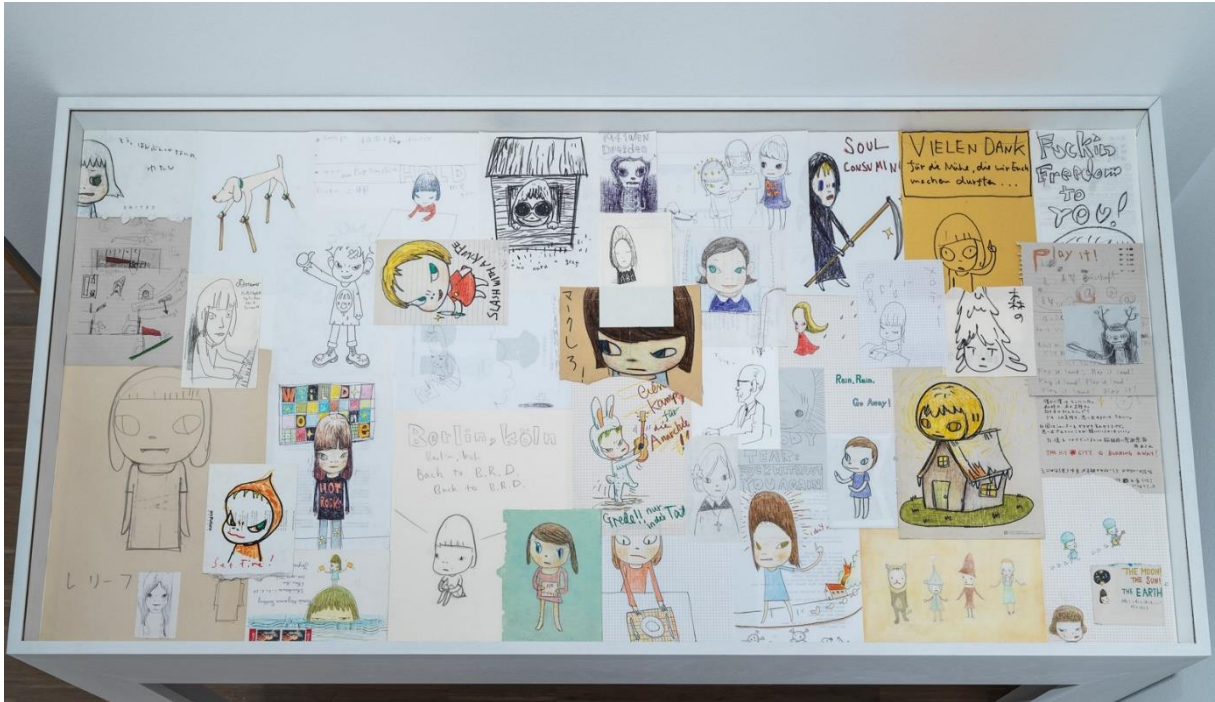
Yoshitomo Nara
Love or nuclear, 2022
Acrylic and grease pencil and colored pencil on layered corrugated board
52 x 33 cm
Collection of the artist
Courtesy Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: Yoshitomo Nara



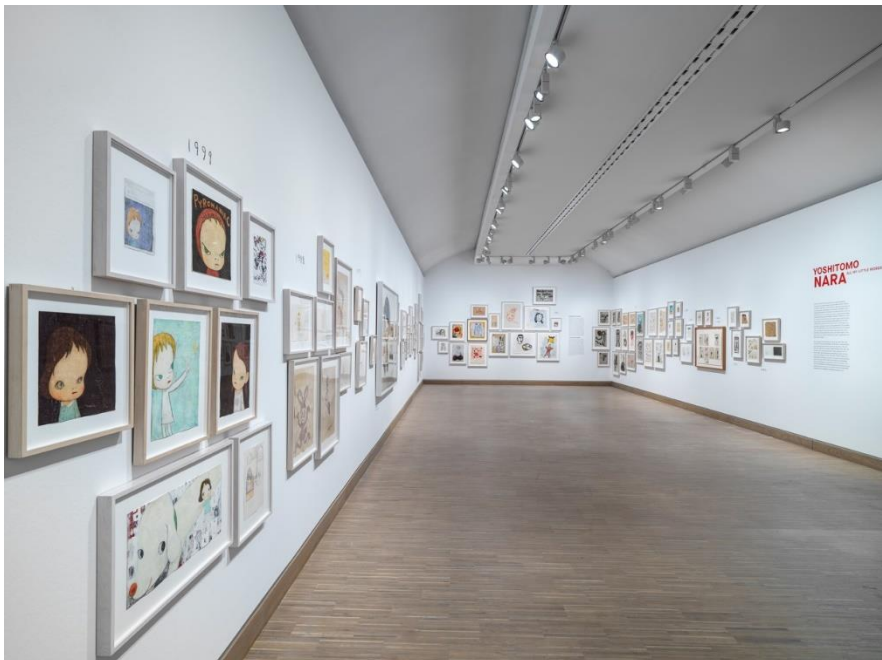
Yoshitomo Nara
Exhibition view:
My Drawing Room 2008 (exterior view), bedroom included, 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery
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Photo: © Sandro E. E. Zanzinger



Yoshitomo Nara
Exhibition view:
My Drawing Room 2008 (Interior view), bedroom included, 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery
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Photo: © Sandro E. E. Zanzinger



Yoshitomo Nara
Exhibition view:
Drawing Table
Courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery
© Yoshitomo Nara
Photo: © Sandro E. E. Zanzinger



Yoshitomo Nara
Exhibition view: Yoshitomo Nara – ALBERTINA MODERN
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