

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



Opening on June 28

Yoshitomo Nara

Sponsored by

Fundación
BBVA

For the BBVA Foundation, it is a great pleasure to sponsor this comprehensive retrospective devoted to Yoshitomo Nara organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. It is also highly stimulating to follow through four decades in the production of this Japanese artist up to the present day, the phase that has been regarded as the plenitude of his career.

Nara has won both international critical support and massive recognition by the general public. The artist believes in the need for emotion in art and seeks to arouse empathy and affinity in those who view his drawings, paintings, sculptures, or installations, appealing directly to their feelings so that in a certain way they will make the images they see their own.

As this exhibition makes clear, popular culture, and especially music, is a constant in Nara's art. Since his beginnings, his passion for rock and punk has accompanied his moments of creation and provided the artist with a source of inspiration. Beneath an appearance of spontaneity, Yoshitomo Nara's works are often the result of careful elaboration and accumulate different levels of interpretation. Besides the lasting presence of the world of sound and the manifestation of a personal universe in which social concerns become increasingly palpable, his images blend thematic and visual references from the artistic traditions of both East and West.

Through the gallery of characters who inhabit his singular imaginary and progressively demand more space and autonomy, and through the recurrent motifs that appear in his pieces such as the house in relation to the concept of home, grass sprouts, fire, or knives which function as symbols of a personal iconography, Nara places us before life by appealing both to our memories of childhood and also to our faculty for feeling and reflecting as adults, with the ability to weigh up the worries and challenges posed by contemporary reality from the perspective of our experience. I am sure that a sizeable public will come to Bilbao to appreciate the suggestive appeal that characterizes Yoshitomo Nara's unique universe.

Carlos Torres Vila
Chairman of the BBVA Foundation

Yoshitomo Nara

- Exhibition Dates: June 28 – November 3, 2024
 - Curator: Lucía Agirre
 - Sponsor: BBVA Foundation
 - Organized by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in collaboration with the Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, and the Hayward Gallery, London
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- Yoshitomo Nara is one of the most celebrated artists of his generation, and his impressive-images of children with large heads and big eyes—at times menacing, challenging, and defiant, but also melancholic and uncertain—are widely recognized.
 - Nara's characters, his figures and animals, are a reflection of himself: Childhood memories, his life experiences, his knowledge of music, art, and society, in Japan and abroad, are the sources of his creativity.
 - The motifs which recur in his work—including the red-roofed house, the sprouts, the puddle, the box, the blue boat, and the forest—reveal the continuity of thought he has maintained throughout his career, and they serve to highlight his stylistic development.
 - The first major solo exhibition of Nara's work to be held in an European museum is uniquely devised for the gallery space at Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and will tour to Baden-Baden and London, where the display will be reconfigured in relation to each venue.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Yoshitomo Nara*, an exhibition sponsored by the BBVA Foundation, Strategic Trustee of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao from 1997. This retrospective exhibition reveals and explores the intriguing world of Yoshitomo Nara. It takes us on a journey through his evolving creativity from the origins of his ideas. Organized by theme, rather than chronologically or according to technique and materials, the exhibition offers an insight into Nara's conceptual and formal processes. The broad selection of paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations made over the course of the last four decades—1984 to 2024—reflects his empathetic response to the people and places he has encountered over the years.

This is the first solo major exhibition of Nara's work to be held in Spain and in a prominent European museum. The presentation was uniquely devised for the gallery space at Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. The exhibition will tour to Baden-Baden and London, where the display will be reconfigured in relation to each venue.

Yoshitomo Nara (b. 1959, Hirosaki, Aomori Prefecture, Japan) is one of the most celebrated artists of his generation. His impressive images of children with large heads and big eyes—at times menacing, challenging, and defiant, but also melancholic and uncertain—are widely recognized.

Nara's characters, his figures and animals, are a reflection of himself. They are a visual representation and a means of expression for his innermost thoughts and emotions. Childhood memories, his life experiences, his knowledge of music, art, and society, in Japan and abroad, are the sources of his creativity. Nara has a profound interest in humanity and his work examines and incorporates ideas surrounding concepts of home, community, nature, and their interconnectedness.

This survey exhibition is arranged thematically, according to Nara's specifications. The motifs which recur in his work—including the red-roofed house, the sprouts, the puddle, the box, the blue boat, and the forest—reveal the continuity of thought he has maintained throughout his career, and they serve to highlight his stylistic development. Nara views himself as a painter, first and foremost, but he explores each theme within a range of other materials and formats—drawing, sculpture, and installation.

Nara's childhood memories—marked by a feeling of isolation—his travels abroad, time in Germany, and his knowledge of art history, are key to an understanding of his work. It is also deeply rooted in the music he listened to as a child: folk songs by American singer-songwriters like Bob Dylan, with their dissenting, anti-war message during the Vietnam war and support for the civil rights movement; the introspective, melancholic sounds of the blues; and grassroots folk music coming out of England and Ireland. With no understanding of the foreign-language lyrics, Nara absorbed the sounds on a sensory level. Combined with what he intuited from the album cover images, he understood the music on his own terms and invested it with personal emotion. This was long before the era of punk or new wave, from which Nara would later draw inspiration. Through music, Nara connected with a respect for humanity, community, and a sense of freedom.

In February 1980, as a twenty-year-old student, Nara travelled to Europe for the first time. This visit allowed him to view, firsthand, early medieval and Renaissance paintings, with their biblical themes and religious narratives, and the work of European modern masters. They had an immense emotional pull for Nara and he experienced an enlightened awakening through these encounters. He gained a wealth of knowledge from the Impressionists and Expressionists and from artists associated with the School of Paris. He drew from their philosophies, spirituality, and techniques to reconsider everything he had learned up to that point. In Nara's own words, "After leaving Japan, I realized that seeing things from Mount Fuji is completely different from seeing things from Mount Everest."

Nara made a second impactful trip to Europe in 1983, and several years later, following his graduation from Aichi Prefectural University of the Arts in 1987, he decided to move to Germany and study at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. This period became hugely significant for Nara's personal and artistic development. His inability to speak German led to his conscious return to a state of solitude that had characterized his childhood and the realization that he needed to communicate through his art.

At the Kunstakademie, Nara studied under the artist A. R. Penck, who was a leading proponent of German Neo-Expressionism. Penck's influence was already clear in Nara's formal approach—figures depicted crudely using loose brushstrokes and strong, vibrant colors—and in his imagery, as seen in *Make the Road, Follow the Road* (1990), a painting which combines the mundane and the spiritual, establishing a personal mythology. Notably, Penck identified a dissonance between Nara's painting and drawing from this period and advised Nara to integrate his two practices. This led to the refinement of his narrative compositions, giving rise to more streamlined, commanding, and emotionally direct works which became recognized in the European art world for their individuality and distinctiveness. Children with wide-set, often confronting eyes became characteristic.

After being awarded a master's degree in painting from Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, Nara moved to Cologne, where he lived from 1994 until 2000. During his time in Cologne, Nara had a number of solo exhibitions and was included in group shows across Europe. Through the sale of his work, he was able to earn a living and devote himself wholly to his artistic production. New themes emerged, such as *Mumps*, which shows a child with a bandage wrapped under its chin and tied in a bow on top of its head, and *Abandoned Puppy*, a child dressed in a puppy costume. Both children are sometimes pictured inside a box, which for Nara is a signifier of shelter and protection.

In 1995 Nara had his first solo exhibition in the United States and he came to the attention of a wider audience. Critics highlighted the disturbing acerbity of his work. Three years later he was invited to be a guest lecturer in painting at the University of California. For three months he shared an apartment with fellow Japanese artist Takashi Murakami, which led to Nara's participation in several exhibitions curated by Murakami in 2000. Nara's work began to enter collections in North America: *Sleepless Night (Sitting)* (1997) was acquired by the Rubell Family Collection.

After living in Germany for twelve years, Nara made the decision to return to Japan in 2000. The following year his major solo exhibition *I DON'T MIND, IF YOU FORGET ME* opened at Yokohama Art Museum. The exhibition traveled to five other venues across the country, including the Yoshii Brick Brew House in his hometown of Hirosaki, and Nara became one of the most prominent and widely-known artists in Japan. Works exhibited included his circular dish painting *Too Young to Die* (2001), which depicts an archetypal Nara character puffing on a cigarette, the composition echoing the shape of a Renaissance tondo.

On March 11, 2011, Japan suffered the combined disasters of the Great East Japan earthquake, its resultant tsunami, and the nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant. The extent of the destruction caused by the power of nature had a life-changing impact on Nara. Faced with the enormity of the loss and the pain endured by those affected, he felt forced to reconsider his role as an artist and redirected his focus toward the Tohoku region, where he had grown up. Nara saw how rural areas fared badly, economically and culturally, in relation to the overwhelming demands of big cities like Tokyo, and he initiated local, community-based art projects.

Nara's pictorial language reflected his changed view of the world. *From the Bomb Shelter* (2017) shows a child tentatively emerging from an underground bunker. His monochrome image represents a continuation and development of two of his most enduring motifs: the box and the submerged figure, who accesses a portal, connected to a communal domain, through a puddle. *From the Bomb Shelter* was inspired by the 1953 film *Hiroshima*, directed by Hideo Sekigawa, based on the best-selling book *Children of the A-Bomb* (1951), a collection of firsthand accounts of school children who survived the Hiroshima bombing.

A similar sense of uncertainty emanates from his paintings *Blankey* (2012) and, more recently, *Midnight Tears* (2023). The children appear ethereal, painted with fragmented, multiple touches of different colors, a move from the solid areas of color seen in earlier works. Their horizontal, closed mouths give little away—the previously pouting or slightly upturned lips, verging on a smile, are gone—but deep emotion is communicated through their tear-filled eyes.

This exhibition spans the forty years since Nara's second trip to Europe to the present day. It shows how Nara's departure from Hirosaki and his time away from Japan were pivotal and necessary for him, providing him with the tools to rethink his role as an artist and reevaluate his relationship with communities in Japan, his interactions with the people and with nature: "I finally felt like I now possessed the things I had been missing, like anything else I might need was right at hand, and I was capable of living in a provincial area. But I think this is something I had to leave my hometown for a while in order to understand."

CATALOGUE

This exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with texts by Lucía Agirre, exhibition curator, Mika Yoshitake, and Shigemi Takahashi, which examine Yoshitomo Nara's oeuvre and reveal the relationships, harmonies, and dissonances in his paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations.

DIDAKTIKA

As part of its Didaktika initiative, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao designs didactic spaces, online content, and special programs that complement the exhibitions and offer the public tools and resources to better appreciate the works on display. Sponsored by the Fundación EDP, the Didaktika project for the present exhibition is offered online, featuring the artist's biography with special emphasis on the music that inspired his life and career.

Programs

Opening Talk (June 26)

Yoshitomo Nara will present his exhibition to the public in an event taking place before the show opens. An exclusive opportunity to be introduced to the show by the artist himself.

Shared Reflections*

Led by museum professionals, these tours offer new perspectives on the Nara exhibition:

- Curatorial Vision (July 3): With Lucía Agirre, Museum Curator and curator of the exhibition.

- Key Concepts (July 10): With Luz Maguregui Urquiza, Education Coordinator.

*Sponsored by Fundación Vizcaína Aguirre

Cover image:

Yoshitomo Nara

In the Deepest Puddle II, 1995

Acrylic on cotton mounted on canvas

120 x 110 cm

Takahashi Ryutaro Collection

© Yoshitomo Nara, 1995

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation

For more information:

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For more information, please get in touch with the Press Department of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao by calling +34 944 359 008 or emailing media@guggenheim-bilbao.eus.

Yoshitomo Nara
Make the Road, Follow the Road, 1990
Acrylic on canvas
100 × 100 cm
Collection Aomori Museum of Art
© Yoshitomo Nara, 1990
Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara
Ships in Girl, 1992
Acrylic and colored pencil on paper
28 × 34 cm
Collection of the Artist
© Yoshitomo Nara, 1992
Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

In the Deepest Puddle II, 1995

Acrylic on cotton mounted on canvas

120 × 110 cm

Takahashi Ryutaro Collection

© Yoshitomo Nara, 1995

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Sleepless Night (Sitting), 1997

Acrylic on canvas

120 × 110 cm

Courtesy of the Rubell Museum, Miami and Washington, D.C.

© Yoshitomo Nara, 1997

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Missing in Action, 1999

Acrylic on canvas

180 x 145 cm

Courtesy of Sally and Ralph Tawil

© Yoshitomo Nara, 1999

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Fountain of Life, 2001/2014/2022

Lacquer and urethane on fiber-reinforced plastic (FPR), motor, and water

175 × 180 cm diameter

Collection of the Artist

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2001

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Too Young to Die, 2001

Acrylic on cotton mounted on fiber-reinforced plastic (FPR)

180 cm diameter

Courtesy of the Rubell Museum, Miami and Washington, D.C.

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2001

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Joey, 2008

Pencil on paper

51.5 × 36.5 cm

Collection of the Artist

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2008

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

My Drawing Room, 2008, *Bedroom Included*, 2008

Installation, mixed media

Approx. 301.5 × 375 × 380 cm

Collection of the Artist

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2008

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Miss Forest, 2010

Ceramic decorated with platinum, gold, and silver liquid

144 × 102 × 100 cm

Leeum Museum of Art, Korea

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2010

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Blankey, 2012

Acrylic on canvas

194.8 × 162 cm

Private collection

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2012

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Little Thinker in the Garden, 2016

Ceramic

52 × 38 × 35 cm

Private collection, Paris

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2016

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

From the Bomb Shelter, 2017

Acrylic on jute mounted on wood

180.5 × 160.5 cm

Collection of the Artist

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2017

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara

Midnight Tears, 2023

Acrylic on canvas

240.5 × 220 cm

Collection of the Artist

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2023

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation



Yoshitomo Nara seated in front of *TOBIU*, 2019,

donated by the artist to the TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art auction, 2021

Patched corrugated board mounted on wood

294.5 × 354 cm

Courtesy the artist, Blum & Poe, and Pace Gallery

© Yoshitomo Nara, 2019

Photo: Ryoichi Kawajiri

Courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation

