

Yoshitomo Nara

Reach Out to The Moon, Even If We Can't

Artwork Labels

The art of Yoshitomo Nara movingly conveys the shifting emotional states that occur as we attempt to navigate the present, as it is shaped by the past, against the horizon of uncertain futures.

Nara's work is direct and instantly recognisable, but also incredibly complex as his figures embody an enormous range of cultural and historical references. These include memories of growing up in rural Northern Japan amidst the lingering presence of World War II; political events of the 1960s and 1970s; the sound and graphics of pop, rock and folk music; literature; art from Japan's Edo and modern periods; his personal travel and encounters with Romanesque sculpture and modern European painting; and his time studying and living in Germany in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Born in 1959 in Hirosaki, Japan, Nara rose to prominence in the 1990s and is now one of the most significant and popular contemporary artists in the world. This exhibition provides a richly layered encounter with this major creative figure, one whose practice sensitively connects the personal, political, social and historical in a profound meditation on the interconnected vulnerability of life on this planet.

This exhibition includes works made between 2011 and 2022, a period marked by challenge and creative renewal. Its title, *Reach Out to The Moon, Even If We Can't*, reflects this. Taken from a quote by one of Nara's heroes, the late Joe Strummer of The Clash, and also used on a ceramic displayed here, the words are a pointed and conflicted twist on the maxim 'reach out to the moon – if you miss, you'll hit the stars'. For Nara, Strummer's phrasing is particularly important: it poetically channels his commitment to imaginative aspiration especially in dark times.

It is a commitment that was tested after the Fukushima disaster of 11 March 2011, a series of connected events comprising the biggest earthquake ever to hit Japan (known as the Great East Japan Earthquake), a tsunami and nuclear reactor breakdown. The initial shock of the events and their subsequent human and environmental impacts, saw Nara radically question the purpose of his practice. For a while he was unable to make work at all:

I am sure that the loss and helplessness I felt then was shared by everyone in Japan. I think a lot of Japanese people had to rethink their value systems, and for me that was art.

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When roads reopened, Nara travelled north through the most damaged zones to spend time with his mother in his home town and help with relief efforts in Iwate prefecture. Still shaken some months later by what he saw, he returned to Aichi University of the Arts (where he had studied in the 1980s before leaving for Germany) to undertake a residency. It was there that he found his way back to his practice through his body, making clay sculptures that physically engaged him:

I couldn't make picture on a blank canvas, but I found I could confront a piece of clay. I wouldn't think about it with my mind. I would just attack it like a sumo, with my body.

Out of this process came a renewed focus on three-dimensional forms that then expanded in scale and stretched across other mediums, such as those that are the core of this exhibition. Accompanying these sculptures are photographs, drawings that deal with the unknown rising to greet us, and paintings that amplify the idea of an expressively wounded witnessing and a resistance to corrupt ideologies.

Yoshitomo Nara
born 1959 Hirosaki, Japan
works Japan

Auspicious heavens
2019–20
bronze

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E441

Auspicious heavens

2019–20

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E435

No war love & peace

2020

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E440

Nara has referred to his sculptural figures made after 2011 as being, at least in part, witnesses. They observe and offer reactions to the world's ever-growing catalogue of achievements, disasters and all that happens in between. In response, we might feel observed by them. Yet we might also feel looked over, or past. As much we might intuit an intimate connection between us and them, so too might we be aware that we are being kept carefully, and to varying degrees, just outside their confidence. Nara's figures calmly stake out their right to individual inviolability, refusing to say everything, to completely explain themselves; they harbour much we will never be able to access.

Peace head

2020

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E436

In alignment with Nara's anti-war stance is his anti-nationalist position. Aware of Japan's own past role as an Imperial and military aggressor, Nara – like other major Japanese artists such as Yoko Ono, Banana Yoshimoto and Haruki Murakami – is suspicious of authority and group identification. His focus on the intricate moment to moment nuances of individual expression, honours the ambivalent and conflicted nature of human subjectivity against the certainties of ideology. His examination of these qualities also speaks back to aspects of Bushido (Samurai) philosophy that considers emotional expression a weakness; it was a perverted form of Bushido that the Japanese army employed at several times in its history.

Long tall sister

2012
fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E424

Lucy

2012

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E425

Wicked looking

2012
fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E426

When you feel so sad

2012

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E427

Miss Tannen

2012

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E428

Regent dog

2012

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E429

Long hair cat-eyed girl

2012

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E430

Thinking sister

2012
fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E431

Unknown

2012

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E432

Putting out a small tongue

2013

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E433

Matryoshka

2020

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E434

Peace head

2020

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E436

Ennui head

2020

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E437

Midnight pilgrim

2012

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E438

O.K.

2020

fibre-reinforced polymer

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E439

Midnight pilgrim

2012

bronze

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E442

Ukedo Elementary School: 7km to Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station

2013

pigment print

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E443

Ukedo Elementary School: a blackboard and the clock that stopped at 3:39 on March 11th, 2011

2013

pigment print

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E444

Located only 300 meters from the ocean, Ukedo Elementary School was particularly impacted by the Great East Japan Earthquake: 127 people died, and 27 went missing. Subsequently, the school closed and is now a memorial, preserved in its ravaged state. Nara's photographs were taken two years after the quake. In a compassionately undramatic manner they reflect a sense of loaded stillness that echoes how such events continue to haunt places and people.

Ukedo Elementary School: the clock that stopped at 3:38 on March 11th, 2011

2011

pigment print

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E445

Bodies of water are generative things in Nara's work; they bring forth energies and entities that we have no choice but to deal with. These are often metaphorical explorations of the fragility of life in the light of our inability to control what comes at us from outside, or indeed inside.

Such an unavoidable event came from the Pacific Ocean at 2.46 pm on 11 March 2011 when the tectonic plates 30km below sea level off the northern coast of Japan dramatically shifted. This caused an earthquake that registered 9.0 on the Richter scale and remains Japan's largest recorded earthquake. An hour later, a tsunami measuring around seven meters flooded the coastal city of Sendai with the water penetrating ten kilometres inland. When the quake hit, the nearby Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant shut down automatically. It was, however, flooded when the tsunami arrived; cooling systems were damaged causing several explosions within the plant in the days that followed. As a result, nuclear radiation leaked into the surrounding area, mostly into the Pacific Ocean. While no people died from radiation poisoning, 18,000 lost their lives due to the flooding and many more had their worlds upended.

LOVE FROM THE SEA

2020

pen on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E446

End of the road

2021

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E447

Nara has often depicted his figures as islands coming up from the sea, sometimes offering new places to live, to look at, to look out from.

The earthquake that caused the 11 March 2011 disaster occurred due to tectonic plates clashing; when these plates open molten lava pushes upwards and islands are sometimes formed. New islands come into being quite regularly, the most recent near Japan being Nishi-no-shima, a volcanic island that is still expanding and that only stopped erupting in late 2022.

Considered in relation to these geological forces, we might see Nara's figures as being generated by strong flows of feelings that can no longer be contained.

Mini drawing

2016

coloured pencil and ballpoint pen on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E448

Love or nuclear

2013

coloured pencil on paper (envelope)

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E449

Bud vase Mt. Fuji

2011

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E450

Untitled

2016

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E451

Untitled

2016

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E452

Cat-eyed girl

2020

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E453

Shi-Ma

2020

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E454

Day and Night/Vampire

2020

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E455

Mini 2

2020

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E456

St. Face

2020

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E457

Stay good

2020

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E458

A gun in my heart

2018

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E459

Reach Out to The Moon, Even If We Can't

2016

ceramic

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E460

As noted at the entrance, the title of this exhibition is found in this ceramic. Nara also used this phrase online in 2015 to pay homage to the birthday of the singer and songwriter Joe Strummer (1952–2002). Under his post Nara featured the lyrics to *I Fought The Law* a song written by Sonny Curtis that The Clash covered on their 1979 EP, *The Cost of Living*. The song tells of several doomed exchanges between those with power and those without; the inference Nara draws is that it might be better to reach out and express what you believe in, even when there's little chance of change.

Peace in your heart

2019

acrylic on canvas

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E461

Anti-nuclear themes have been present from the start of Nara's practice. This is perhaps unsurprising given that Nara grew up close to a US Army base and felt that the second World War (that ended with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945) was still very close; it was hanging over his early life. Importantly, his concerns were never partisan, but completely anti-war. As such, even his most rebellious figures do not swell into dominating entities but instead wield their exposed pain as weapons of conscience.

Alone in the wind

2018

acrylic on canvas

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E462

Girl with eyepatch

2018

acrylic on canvas

The Labora/Hartland & Mackie Family Collection,
courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe,
Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

2022/E463

WP2

2022

acrylic and grease pencil on canvas, framed

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E464

WP1

2022

acrylic and grease pencil on canvas, framed

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E465

Untitled

2011

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E528

Searching

2011

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E529

Untitled

2011

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E530

Untitled

2011

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E531

Untitled

2011

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E532

Untitled

2011

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E533

Untitled

2011

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E534

Untitled

2011

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E535

Sketches for Yokohama

2011

ink on paper (set of 2)

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E536.a-b

Miss Tannen

2012

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E537

Sketches for the sculpture

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E538

Sketches for the sculpture

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E539

Headache

2012

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E540

Untitled

2012

pencil on paper

On loan from the artist, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E541

Sketches for the sculptures

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from a private collection, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E543

Sketches for the sculptures

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from a private collection, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E544

Sketches for the sculptures

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from a private collection, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E545

Sketches for the sculptures

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from a private collection, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E546

Sketches for the sculptures

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from a private collection, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E547

Sketches for the sculptures

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from a private collection, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E548

Sketches for the sculptures

2011–12

pencil on paper

On loan from a private collection, courtesy Pace Gallery

2022/E549