

STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY

Yoshitomo Nara

New Works

28 April – 1 June 2016

Private view Wednesday 27 April 2016, 6-8pm



Yoshitomo Nara, a studio view © Yoshitomo Nara

Stephen Friedman Gallery is proud to present its fourth exhibition of new work by internationally acclaimed Japanese artist, Yoshitomo Nara. He returns to the gallery following recent solo exhibitions at Yokohama Museum of Art, Japan; Asia Society Museum, New York; Asia Society Hong Kong Center and Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland. Along with Yayoi Kusama and Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara is considered one of the most important living contemporary Japanese artists. This exhibition consists of new paintings on canvas, paintings on cotton mounted wood panel and works on paper.

While Nara's work is often associated with Japanese pop culture including anime and manga, his output should be viewed through the lens of his childhood in post-war Japan. Nara was born in 1959 in the rural north of the country. A lonely latchkey kid, his early years were informed by illustrated children's books and Western music playing from the radio of a nearby military base. Following a period studying in Germany under A. R. Penck, Nara developed his trademark language and technique, creating complex characters in a deep investigation of childhood sensitivities. In his paintings, figures stare out to us wide-eyed, or smoke, swear and scowl.

Nuanced considerations of alienation, anger and curiosity are undertaken with each work. The apparent naivety of the character and animals he depicts are juxtaposed with slogans and often salty language. The contrast deftly illustrates the angst of adolescent experience. The characters are at once cheeky, vulnerable and threatening. In this way Nara's work crosses cultural and national boundaries in its examination of emotional truth, and essentially human dilemmas.

"This solo exhibition is comprised of 'paintings' (on canvas), 'billboard paintings' (patched cotton mounted on wood panel) and 'drawings' (on paper). Upon hearing this description, most people would think that this sounds like an ordinary exhibition for a painter. However these new paintings on canvas are more painterly than other works I have shown previously. They are marked by a conscious use of colour and subtle layering, which has become important in my recent practice. In contrast to my work on canvas, I originally called the paintings on wood panel 'billboard paintings', due to their catchy and iconic imagery and the use of flat planes of colour that is reminiscent of the style often used on billboards. Although the 'billboard paintings' in this show are still evocative of this style, these ones which are rendered on patchwork cotton are much more painterly, with many layers of colour.

Drawing is natural to me. Without being conscious of the eventual audience, I usually follow my emotions and just draw. For this show I am exhibiting a series of drawings that I think of as being mental images without colour. It is probably the first time that I have shown so many of these drawings all at once. I work in sculpture and installation, but for this exhibition I became very conscious of showing myself as a painter." Yoshitomo Nara, April 2016.

Nara's work seamlessly fuses elements of western Modernism with references borrowed from popular culture. Most notably, the artist has underlined the important influence music has had on

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his practice. Ranging from Rock and Punk to the artist's fascination with folk and amateur music subcultures, his diverse taste has an ongoing effect on both the content and style of his work. When viewed in this context, the lyrics and slogans that accompany the subjects of his paintings can be seen to resemble album covers. In this way Nara reflects on the force that music and pop culture wield during adolescent life and the crucial role they play in forming one's identity. This is particularly pertinent in the global environment that children now grow up in, in which they are exposed to multiple influences from around the world via the internet. The result is a distinctive language that is imbued with an immediate and strangely universal familiarity.

Drawing and painting have long been concurrent and equally important in Nara's practice. In making his return to Stephen Friedman Gallery, Yoshitomo Nara's work is as fresh, relevant and affecting as ever. His re-evaluation of contemporary portrait painting has been critical in Japan and his work continues to appeal to our contemporary sensibility worldwide. In Nara's own words "If you look only at the surface, my work will not really reveal itself to you".

Recent solo exhibitions include; 'Life is Only One: Yoshitomo Nara', Asia Society, Hong Kong Center, China (2015); 'Yoshitomo Nara Greetings from a Place in My Heart', Dairy Art Centre, London (2014); a bit like you and me..., Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama, Japan; traveling to Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori, Japan and Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan (2012 - 2013); The Little Little House in the Blue Woods, Towada Art Center, Aomori, Japan (2012); Yoshitomo Nara: Nobody's Fool, Asia Society Museum, New York (2010); 'The Crated Rooms in Iceland - Yoshitomo Nara + YNG,' Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland (2009); 'Yoshitomo Nara + graf, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle, UK (2008).

Recent group shows include; 'Hey! Ho! Let's Go: Ramones and the Birth of Punk' Queens Museum, New York, NY (2016); travels to The Grammy Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2016); 'Takashi Murakami's Superflat Collection' Yokohama Museum of Art, Japan (2016); 'To the North, From Here: Naoki Ishikawa + Yoshitomo Nara', Watari-um, Tokyo, Japan (2015); 'Go-Betweens: The World Seen Through Children', Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan; traveling to Nagoya City Art Museum, Nagoya, Japan; Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum, Okinawa, Japan; and Museum of Art, Kochi, Japan (2014); 'Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950', Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C (2013) and 'Print/Out: Multiplied Art in the Information Era, 1990 - 2010', Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012).

Nara's works are included in prominent collections internationally, including The British Museum, London; Centro de Arte Contemporaneo de Malaga, Malaga; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo; Takamatsu City Museum of Art, Takamatsu, Japan; Zabudowicz Collection, London; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA; The National Museum of Art, Osaka, Japan; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan; The Rubell Family Collection, Miami, USA; Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori, Japan; The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan; Yokohama Museum of Art, Japan; Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea.

Gallery One: Horizon That Appears Out Of the Sleepy Woods

Yusuke Asai, Takanobu Kobayashi, Kyoko Murase and Syozo Taniguchi selected by Yoshitomo Nara 28 April - 3 June 2016

Featured artwork: 'Lady Margaret', 2016, acrylic on canvas, 162 x 194 cm ©Yoshitomo Nara

Gallery hours are: Tuesday to Friday, 10am - 6pm and Saturday, 11am - 5pm

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