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Yoshitomo Nara
I Draw the Line

BLUM Tokyo
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Tokyo, Japan, October 18, 2024—BLUM is pleased to present a solo exhibition of new paintings and drawings by Yoshitomo Nara. This body of work produced over the past summer, features Nara’s familiar wide-eyed, large-headed figures, often accompanied by declarative slogans or lyrics, which readily come to mind as he works. The words and phrases, in Japanese and English, are an expression of Nara’s ideas and emotions—they are integral to the communication of his potent, thought-provoking messages.

Painted on large wooden panels and bearing phrases such as *CHEER FOR YOU* and *WE ARE OUTLAWS YES!*, Nara’s recent paintings resemble placards, making pronouncements in a public forum. A number of these works are based on sketches Nara made earlier this year—bold, simple outlines in black marker pen on small sheets of notebook paper. Using a projector, he enlarged these images onto wood, thereby maintaining his initial creative energy while adding surface texture and a limited, muted color palette. Nara captures in paint the same freedoms he finds in drawing—the possibilities of rapid execution, fluid delineation, and strong definition.

The wooden panels are found objects, repurposed from everyday life. Nara appreciates the familiarity of used, discarded materials—he feels at ease with them. His resources, including old envelopes and fabrics, are readily available and sustainable. The panels bear the rough edges, nicks, and embedded nails of their previous use—their depth and “lived” characteristics emphasize their weight and physicality. Nara utilizes these properties and the natural textures—unique grains—to animate the surface of his paintings and suggest other associations.

Nara began to “draw” with paint in the late 1980s, on the advice of A. R. Penck, the German Neo-Expressionist painter whom he studied under at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Penck advised Nara to introduce his drawing style into his painting practice. This led Nara to simplify his narrative compositions, pare down his use of color, and introduce the same economy of line. This change gave rise to striking painted images, widely recognized for their individuality and originality, echoing the spontaneity and immediacy of his drawings, which remain central to Nara’s practice—he sketches constantly, on any material that comes to hand, and often these ideas become paintings.

The drawings in this exhibition were made during Nara’s summer stay in Toya, a village in southern Hokkaido. Nara finds the remote, rural setting similar to his childhood experience of Aomori, with its old-style, wooden houses dotted across an expansive landscape. He is drawn to the small, close-knit communities that still exist in this region, far from the large cities, and feels at home in this place with no social hierarchies, where everyone knows each other.

Using Sakura’s Solid Marker solidified paint sticks, launched in Japan in 1978 and widely used in construction and manufacturing, Nara worked on these drawings with the meter-high sheets of paper laid on the floor of a rustic, wooden building, which matches the ascetic simplicity of these monochrome works. Nara has used the Sakura industrial markers since 2022, and they allow him to work in a different way, with distinctive results. In contrast to the light touch of graphite pencil and the translucent effects

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of acrylic paint, with these solid markers he can achieve a richly opaque coverage and broader lines that remain loose and expressive.

The oversize format of Nara's new drawings was influenced by his recent experience working on large-scale sculpture. He also feels the need, as he gets older, to draw with bolder, wider sweeps, rather than lighter, more delicate touches. Notably, he finds inspiration in Henri Matisse's late cut-outs. For Nara, his own approach to line is equivalent to Matisse's simplification of process, which he considers to be an honest artistic development.

Nara's imagery is direct, accessible, and impactful, with unequivocal rhetoric, and it reflects the sensibilities and sentiments that arise for him in this area of northern Japan. The sea, mountains, and steam-emitting volcanoes echo Nara's deep-rootedness in the local terrain and his concern for the environment. A girl wears a wolf-like balaclava, recalling an animal now extinct in Japan. A child's face has cat's eyes and fangs that echo indigenous folklore. Other earlier motifs recur—the house with a pitched roof, a fir tree, and puddles—revealing Nara's continuity of thought throughout his stylistic development.

The close interrelation between image and text is a thread that runs through Nara's work. *Power in a Union* takes its title from Billy Bragg's song *There Is Power in a Union* (1986), which calls for solidarity among workers. This reference reflects Nara's social conscience and political awareness, rooted in the counterculture and folk and blues music of the 1950s and '60s, the sounds of the civil rights and peace movements that he listened to from a young age. Since the Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011, Nara's political stance has become increasingly overt in his work. Inscriptions, such as "DEFIANT GUYS," signal his conviction, determination, and active support for global initiatives close to his heart, including the anti-nuclear lobby.

Music has been an enduring passion of Nara's since childhood, providing a framework for his compelling images. His figures frequently wear the helmet-like hairstyle that recalls the look of Johnny Ramone, one of Nara's musical heroes. For Nara, on a sensory level, music has the powerful effect of giving birth to sudden inspiration and expressive energy. He enjoys the lyrics, but his images emerge from his individual emotions and unique visualizations, generated by the melodies he listens to. Music also provides a link to communality and the intangible sense of belonging. As Nara has said, "I am drawn to music that creates a sense of unity, . . . looking in the same direction."

This solo presentation is Nara's ninth solo exhibition with BLUM and will be followed by a larger show at BLUM Los Angeles, opening in January 2025.

— Text by Clare Preston

Yoshitomo Nara (b. 1959, Hirosaki, Japan) graduated with an MFA from the Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music, Nagakute, Japan, in 1987, he completed his studies at the Kunstakademie, Dusseldorf, Germany from 1988 to 1993. Nara began his career during the decade he spent in Cologne, and from the mid-1990s he exhibited widely in Europe, the United States, Japan, and all over Asia. His return to Japan in 2000 coincided with a surge of global interest in Japanese pop culture, particularly in the United States. While he is primarily a painter, his practice encompasses drawing; sculptures made of wood, FRP, ceramic, and bronze; installations that incorporate scrap materials; and photographs that document everyday landscapes and the encounters he has during his travels. Influenced by music,

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literature, and his own life, Nara's works transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, touching people globally.

Nara's numerous solo exhibitions include *Yoshitomo Nara*, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain, traveling to Frieder Burda Museum, Baden-Baden, Germany, and the Hayward Gallery-Southbank Centre, London, UK (2024); *Traveling with Hazy Humid Day in Penghu*, Penghu Reclamation Hall, Magong, Taiwan (2024); *The Beginning Place*, Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori, Japan (2023); *All My Little Words*, Albertina Modern, Vienna, Austria (2023); *Reach Out to The Moon, Even If We Can't*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, Australia (2023); *Hello, How Can We Do a Nara Yoshitomo Show? Documents on Nara Yoshitomo's Hirosaki Exhibitions 2002-2006*, Hirosaki Museum of Contemporary Art, Hirosaki, Japan (2022); *Recent Work*, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH (2022); *I Forgot Their Names and Often Can't Remember Their Faces but Remember Their Voices Well*, Dallas Contemporary, Dallas, TX (2021); *Yoshitomo Nara*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, traveled to Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China, and Kunsthal Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands (2021); *NARA Yoshitomo: a bit like you and me...*, Yokohama Museum of Art, Japan, traveled to Aomori Museum of Art, Japan, and the Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan (2012); *The Crated Rooms in Iceland: Yoshitomo Nara + YNG*, Reykjavik Art Museum, Iceland (2009); *Yoshitomo Nara + graf*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle, UK (2008); among many more.

About BLUM

BLUM represents more than sixty artists and estates from seventeen countries worldwide, nurturing a diverse roster of artists at all stages of their practices with a range of global perspectives. Originally opened as Blum & Poe in Santa Monica in 1994, the gallery has been a pioneer in its early commitment to Los Angeles as an international arts capital.

The gallery has been acclaimed for its groundbreaking work in championing international artists of postwar and contemporary movements, such as CoBrA, Dansaekhwa, Mono-ha, and Superflat, and for organizing museum-caliber solo presentations and historical survey exhibitions across its spaces in Los Angeles, Tokyo, and New York. Often partnering with celebrated curators and scholars such as Cecilia Alemani, Alison M. Gingeras, Sofia Gotti, Joan Kee, and Mika Yoshitake, the gallery has produced large-scale exhibitions focusing on the Japanese Mono-ha school (2012); the Korean Dansaekhwa monochrome painters (2014); the European postwar movement CoBrA (2015); Japanese art of the 1980s and 1990s (2019); a rereading of Brazilian Modernism (2019); a revisionist take on the 1959 MoMA exhibition, *New Images of Man* (2020); and a survey of portraiture through a democratic and humanist lens (2023); among others.

BLUM's wide-reaching program includes exhibitions, lectures, performance series, screenings, video series, and an annual art book fair at its base in Los Angeles. BLUM Books, the gallery's publishing division, democratically circulates its program through original scholarship and accessible media ranging from academic monographs, audio series, magazines, to artists' books.

Across the three global locations, BLUM prioritizes environmental and community stewardship in all operations. In 2015, it was certified as an Arts:Earth Partnership (AEP) green art gallery in Los Angeles and consequently became one of the first green certified galleries in the United States. The gallery is also a member of the Gallery Climate Coalition, which works to facilitate a more sustainable commercial art world and reduce the industry's collective carbon footprint. BLUM is committed to fostering

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inclusive and equitable communities both in its physical and online spaces and believes that everybody should have equal access to creating and engaging with contemporary art.

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