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Yoshitomo Nara
My Imperfect Self
Curated by Yeewan Koon

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December 12, 2024, Los Angeles, CA—BLUM is pleased to present *My Imperfect Self*, Yoshitomo Nara's tenth exhibition with the gallery, commemorating thirty years since the artist's first US show, entitled *Pacific Babies*, at Blum & Poe in 1995.

A standout piece from that first exhibition, titled *There is No Place Like Home* (1995), employs dark humor to explore the complexities of belonging for a young Japanese artist living in Germany on the cusp of international acclaim. Today, that restless uncertainty has given way to a deep-seated sense of connectedness, including attunement to remote places that remind him of growing up in Northern Japan. It was in Sapporo, Hokkaido, when Nara first started using remnants of unused clay to deconstruct his iconic image of the child into misshaped forms that bear traces of his hands, reestablishing his connection to the material and his sense of place. This process culminated in a new series of bronze sculptures, eleven of which are presented for the first time in this latest exhibition. Seen together, these works highlight how far Nara has transformed the *kawaii* aesthetic into an alternate realm of beguiling misfits.

My Imperfect Self: Yoshitomo Nara

This exhibition highlights Nara's evolving sculptural practice, featuring eleven mid-size heads exuding a quirky strangeness and dark charm that defines the artist's work. These heads, presented for the first time, are integral to Nara's exploration in clay, intertwining ideas and techniques developed since 2011, but also express a poignant return to his roots. The exhibition also includes paintings and drawings that resonate with the sculptures, inviting deeper reflection on his ongoing experimentation throughout a career that gained international acclaim with his seminal work, *The Girl with the Knife in Her Hand* (1991).

This collection of heads is full of contradictions that lean toward the peculiar and anomalous. Although cast in bronze, they were first made in clay as palm size pieces, and then enlarged and cast in bronze. In their transformed state, the malleable nature of the clay's original form remains evident, enticing viewers to retrace Nara's touch across its pillowy surface. Many feature a flattened face on which Nara cleaves lines, pokes holes, and scratches indentations on their matte white planar surfaces, wrapped within marshmallow globs of hair. However, these markings are not aggressive inflictions but rather embedded scarifications that lend the figures a raw, carefree quality of oddity. The overall effect is of a child, but one who we have never seen before in Nara's oeuvre. Gone are the rounded cheeks that we expect from his stylized depiction of the child motif, instead *Medusa* bears a shy smile with gouged eyes, and retreats into deep folds of imperfect hair; while *Long Tall Peace Sister*, the largest of the sculptures in the show, has flowers in her hair formed by using traditional tile molds. She smiles with delight, even with the five skeletal lines that form each eye.

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The awkwardness of these heads embraces the possibilities of mischance and imperfections. They form their own gang of misfits. For Nara, this reflects a renewed engagement with the praxis of making—the dynamic interplay between hand and body, craft and object—which directs his curiosity toward possibilities of incompleteness.

The artist's turn toward this more embodied practice is shaped by three significant sources. The first comes from his response to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, which left an indelible mark on Nara, whose natal home was close to this site. Struggling to paint, he took a large block of clay and threw his entire body against the solid mass of grayness, attacking it as if he were a sumo wrestler. It was a method of freeing himself to paint again, while also rekindling his interest in clay. The intensity of his bodily approach left imprints that, when cast in bronze, became permanent traces on his figurative heads—a contrast to the impermanence of life so clearly brought home by Fukushima's fate.

A second source, from around 2016, is drawn from Nara's time spent in Northern Japan, including Tobiu, a remote village with Ainu roots in Sapporo. It was there that he began making his palm-size heads, initially as something playful where he would mindlessly give in to the material. These small, more spontaneous, heads speak to his wandering spirit, where forested landscapes and remote settings deepen his sense of being in the world. By working at a small scale, he sculpts with a gentler touch, shifting his bodily energy to reconnect with nature, rather than fighting with the clay as he had done in 2011. Scaling up, however, affords the artist a chance to experiment even more with the paring down of the figurative into quirkier forms of existential inelegance.

A third, less direct source, is a return to Nara's earliest paintings and drawings, especially of works that may have received less attention, such as figures with elongated almond-shaped bodies or squashed circular heads. It demonstrates a practice of Nara's where he retrieves older works that may have once been considered imperfect, finding the open potential yet to come from that which is flawed.

There is a strong connectivity across Nara's works—evident when considering the paintings and drawings as a spectrum from the meditative to the spontaneous, exploring the potential of the unformed and of returns. The iconic figure in his large painting *Blurry Mind* draws viewers in to see the many layers of radiant colors that dance and glimmer across the canvas. This painting is a testament to Nara's deep interest in the painterly effects of color, and its ability to hold viewers' attention. This work is, however, also an iconic image of the "Nara-child," one which the artist is seeking to deconstruct with these eleven sculptures, to find a new form that can push him into different directions. His process of taking apart his own pictorial language or returning to earlier, perhaps forgotten, drawings and paintings as inspiration also underscores the theme of this show.

In the past decade, while continuing to exhibit in major museums worldwide, Nara has embraced a slower, more reflective approach to his work. He enjoys the tactile nature of his materials and the connective charge between hand and mind—elements that are evident in his latest paintings and sculptures. Notably, Nara aligns these methods with his own way of being in the world—where attentiveness to small, seemingly imperfect acts can yield a deep sense of freedom.

– Yeewan Koon

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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, 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; Hayward Gallery-Southbank Centre, London, UK (2024–25); *Yoshitomo Nara: The Beginning Place*, Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori, Japan (2023); *Yoshitomo Nara: All My Little Words*, Albertina Modern, Vienna, Austria (2023); *Yoshitomo Nara*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; traveled to Yuz Museum, Shanghai, China; Kunsthall Rotterdam, Netherlands (2021–23); *Yoshitomo Nara for better or worse*, Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Aichi, Japan (2017); *Life is Only One: Yoshitomo Nara*, Asia Society Hong Kong Center, Hong Kong, China (2015); *NARA Yoshitomo: a bit like you and me...*, Yokohama Museum of Art, Japan; traveled to Aomori Museum of Art, Japan; Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, Japan (2012–13); *Yoshitomo Nara: The Little Little House in The Blue Wood*, Towada Art Center, Aomori, Japan (2012); *Yoshitomo Nara: Nobody's Fool*, Asia Society Museum, New York, NY (2010); *Yoshitomo Nara + graf*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle, UK (2008); *Yoshitomo Nara + graf: A to Z*, Yoshii Brick Brew House, Aomori, Japan (2006); *Yoshitomo Nara: Moonlight Serenade*, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Ishikawa, Japan (2006); *Yoshitomo Nara— From the Depth of My Drawer*, Hara Museum of Art, Tokyo, Japan; traveled to Kanaz Forest of Creation, Fukui, Japan; Yonago City Museum of Art, Tottori, Japan; Yoshii Brick Brewhouse, Hirosaki, Aomori, Japan; Rodin Gallery, Seoul, South Korea (2004–05); *Yoshitomo Nara: Nothing Ever Happens*, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, OH; traveled to Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, PA; San Jose Museum of Art, San Jose, CA; Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis, MI; The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu, HI (2003–05); *I DON'T MIND, IF YOU FORGET ME*, Yokohama Museum of Art, Yokohama, Japan; traveled to Hiroshima Museum of Contemporary Art, Hiroshima, Japan; Ashiya City Museum of Art and History, Ashiya, Japan; Asahikawa Prefectural Museum of Art, Hokkaido, Japan; Aomori Museum of Art, Aomori, Japan; Hirosaki Yoshii Brick Brewhouse, Hirosaki, Japan (2001–02); *Walk On: Works by Yoshitomo Nara*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, IL (2000); and *Yoshitomo Nara: Lullaby Supermarket*, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, CA (2000), 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.

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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 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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