

# NARA

YOSHITOMO

Seeing art as a catalyst  
to live more freely.

BY KATY DONOGHUE



Yoshitomo Nara, *Traveling Yamako*, 2019, pigment print, 30 x 30 cm, © Yoshitomo Nara.



The largest retrospective to date of Yoshitomo Nara's work is currently on view at LACMA. The exhibition, up through January 2, 2022, has been curated by Mika Yoshitake and features over 30 years of work seen through the lens of the Japanese artist's love of music.

The unconventional installation features paintings and sculptures, as well as album covers and drawings—almost all of the latter from Nara's personal collection. For him, drawing is a constant, everyday presence, just like music. As he describes it, whether good or bad, they are his personal treasures.

Nara told *Whitewall* recently that not only has he always created instinctively, but he can recall the atmosphere of the period in which a work was made, the music that was playing, the friends that he made, the places he traveled to.

Our conversation took place on the occasion of Nara being named amfAR's 2021 Honored Artist this year's TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art Gala and Auction. The annual event, hosted by Cindy and Howard Rachofsky and Lisa and John Runyon, benefits AIDS research through amfAR and the Dallas Museum of Art's Contemporary Art Acquisitions Fund, so far raising over \$93 million.

Sharing with us how he sees his art as a catalyst, a path that has led him to where he wants to go next—whether traveling to far places or in moving memory—Nara expressed that he's happy his sensibility isn't dead yet.

**WHITEWALL:** *What's it like to put together a show of this nature? You said that when looking at it all come together, you were surprised you could produce so much, thinking, "Did I really do all this?" Looking back at it all, can you see yourself in the work? Does it transport you to that time?*

**YOSHITOMO NARA:** I had a retrospective in 2017 titled "for better or worse" at the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art. At this retrospective, sculptures, paintings, drawings, and installations from the late 1980s to present day were exhibited all together. One could say it was the first retrospective that gathered my most representative works from the past. Also at this exhibition, I showed my personal record collection so the audience could experience the connection between music and my work. As the title "for better or worse" indicated, this retrospective was also an expression of my commitment to continue creating. It was a very unique exhibition, but did not travel and ended after that one museum.

When I received the offer from LACMA, I immediately decided to create an upgraded version of "for better or worse." Having done "for better or worse," I had already seen my past works gathered together in a single place, so I already knew that what characterized me were my drawings, rather than finished paintings and sculptures. So I decided to show a large number of drawings, regardless of whether they were good or bad, and included doodles as well.

Compared to paintings and sculptures, these drawings are more of a constant, everyday presence in my life, the way music is. They are my personal treasures. I think this is clear from the fact that almost all of the drawings in the exhibition are from my own collection.

Also included are works from the 1980s before I began to exhibit seriously; works from the nineties when I made friends with solitude in a foreign country (Germany) and pushed forward without any doubts using a form of expression I discovered through having conversations with myself; works from the 2000s when I began to become known as an artist.

As someone who lives only a hundred kilometers from the Fukushima nuclear plant, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake made me realize that, before I am an artist, I am a human being. While grappling with this, I gropingly started to paint again; these works retain a painterly nuance and connect to the present day, and are also included in this body of work.

In all eras, I think I've created instinctively, by feeling. From an occupational point of view, it's closer to amateur than professional in that sense. Every painting has memories for me. But more than that, I'm able to connect to the atmospheres that surrounded me at that time—the music that was playing in my studio, the view from my window, and my friends that I met in my travels or at live music shows. And that makes me happy, because it shows me that my sensibility isn't dead yet.

**WW:** *The exhibition was supposed to open in March 2020, but had to shut down and be postponed for a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. What effect has the past year had on your own perception of the work?*

**YN:** After the Great East Japan Earthquake, a hole opened up deep inside of me, and I felt that a lot of things flowed out. But with time, I've come to realize that along with that hole, there was also a vessel that caught the things that flowed out of me. The pandemic did not affect my consciousness as an artist. I felt like I calmly, without changing, watched the world encircling the parts of me that would flow away in a pandemic.

What was similar to the time of the earthquake was the people's panic and the uselessness of academic politics in the field. I felt awe toward the power of nature, and at the same time sensed the fragility of life.

**WW:** *You've talked about how in the immediate aftermath of 2011, drawing and painting didn't make sense—instead you worked with your hands and clay, creating large sculptures later cast in bronze. You described that process as similar to wrestling. Looking back, how do you think that way of working with clay impacted the work you made next?*

**YN:** It's not that drawing itself lost meaning, but that I felt self-loathing about how I had mass-produced a lot of meaningless drawings. There are some drawings that are treasures for me. It's just that I felt I could not forgive myself for getting carried away and creating a bunch of easy drawings.

**WW:** *How has the way you work with clay evolved since then?*

**YN:** I'm still doing it! I think that continuing is the evolution. I like to think that my evolution is not in technique or how a piece turns out, but about what's inside of me as I create.

**WW:** *What was your vision for the large-scale outdoor sculpture, Miss Forest, outside of LACMA?*

**YN:** The vision for this piece is an image of an antenna reaching up from the earth, to communicate with space.



Installation view of Yoshitomo Nara's "For Better or Worse: Works 1987-2017," Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Toyota, Japan, 2017, photo by Mie Morimoto, © Yoshitomo Nara.



Photo by Ryoichi Kawajiri, © Yoshitomo Nara.



Installation view of "Yoshitomo Nara" at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, April 1, 2021–January 2, 2022, art © Yoshitomo Nara, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

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 ”

**WW:** *And how does it relate to the sculpture of the same name, made a few years previously?*

**YN:** I fantasize about placing lots of *Miss Forests* in various sizes, all around the world.

**WW:** *Can you tell us about the work Fountain of Life and its placement in the show?*

**YN:** The truth is that what I really wanted to do was to create a small room and display the piece directly on the ground with no base. But a museum is a public space with a lot of regulations, so not everything can go exactly as one wants. In that situation, where I placed it was the best option.

**WW:** *What was it like to work with Yo La Tengo on the record for the show's catalogue, featuring cover songs and original music?*

**YN:** It was super fun!

**WW:** *Can you tell us about your studio and what a typical day is like for you there?*

**YN:** It varies day by day. There are times when I create the whole day, and there are other times when I don't work at all and just read books or nap on the sofa. In the last four, five years, I've been traveling up north more than working in the studio. To be honest, I am more drawn to traveling to

remote areas, with no tourism or attractions, than painting.

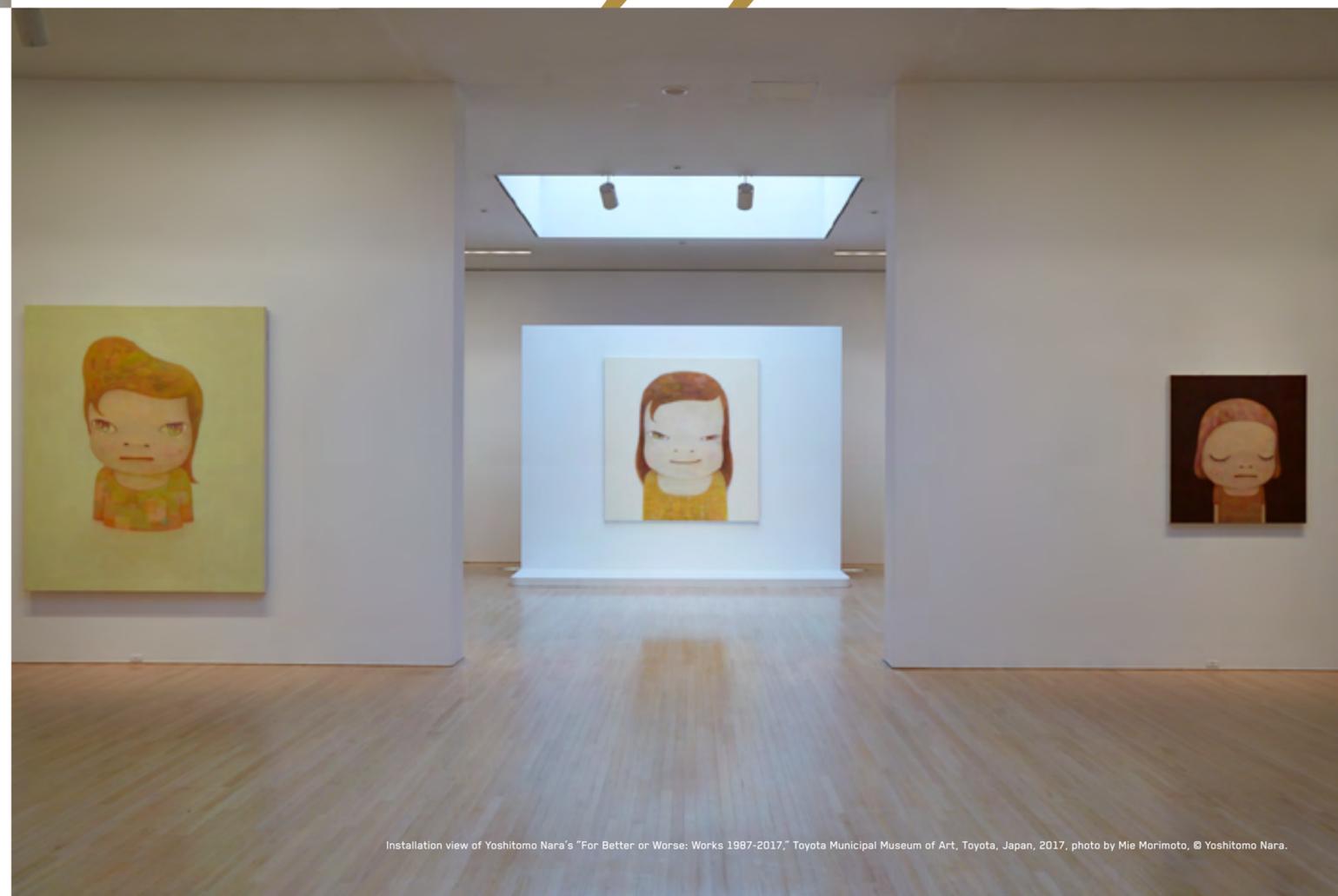
**WW:** *Congratulations on being the TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art honoree. Can you tell us about what this means to you?*

**YN:** It doesn't feel real to me yet, so I don't know. But when I think about it in a positive way, it makes me feel that I'm not just a passing fad as an artist in the United States and I may become a part of art history, and this makes me happy.

**WW:** *How has having put together a major retrospective impacted what you are working on at the moment?*

**YN:** I feel like . . . I've created so much that I can already retire. A so-called true artist may keep on creating passionately until they die, like Picasso, but I know for certain that that's not me. I don't mean to say I'm going to retire right away. But I will keep painting only the things I truly want to paint, when I want to paint, and do so without worrying about time.

I feel like art was a long roundabout path I took to discover what I really want to do. I want to travel to the outlands of the north country where I was born and raised, and I want to encounter the landscapes that my ancestors saw. I think the works I've created have turned out to be a sort of catalyst, setting me on the path to those places. I want to keep on traveling physically, and also internally, toward the memories etched deep into the DNA of my heart. I want to live more freely away from the word "art."



Installation view of Yoshitomo Nara's "For Better or Worse: Works 1987-2017," Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Toyota, Japan, 2017, photo by Mie Morimoto, © Yoshitomo Nara.