

# MUSEUM FRIEDER BURDA BADEN-BADEN

---

Press Release

**YOSHITOMO NARA**

November 23, 2024–April 27, 2025



Yoshitomo Nara, Sleepless Night (Sitting) [Detail], 1997, Courtesy of Rubell Museum, Miami & Washington, D.C.  
© Yoshitomo Nara, courtesy Yoshitomo Nara Foundation

**Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara (b. 1959) is one of the most celebrated artists of his generation. He earned international acclaim for his Angry Girls, mostly large-format portraits with captivating eyes that are now considered icons of contemporary painting. In the exhibition Yoshitomo Nara, the artist's first major retrospective in Germany, the Museum Frieder Burda presents paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations spanning four decades.**

# MUSEUM FRIEDER BURDA

## BADEN-BADEN

---

**Yoshitomo Nara's works are closely connected to his own personal story. They tell of his lonely childhood in Japan; the isolation he experienced as a student in Germany; his political rebellion; his love of underground rock, folk, and punk music; his predilection for literature, cinema, and nature; and his interest in the history of Japanese and European art. Visitors are invited to experience and decipher Nara's intriguing artwork from the past forty years: from the defiant Angry Girls, whose gaze is focused confrontationally on the viewer, to his meditative figures that seem vulnerable and ethereal, all of which provide insight into the artist's inner workings.**

**Organized in close collaboration with the artist, the exhibition is a cooperation between the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; the Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden; and the Hayward Gallery, London.**

Yoshitomo Nara is deeply interested in humanity: his work explores and integrates subject matter such as home, community, and nature, and how the three fit together. Although the aesthetics of his powerful portraits are reminiscent of the Japanese cult comics known as mangas, his figures, animals, and hybrid creatures are first and foremost a reflection of his own memories and feelings. In these works, the artist explores his own experiences of childhood, much of which was marked by loneliness and isolation as a child with working parents. Due to his parents' long working days, Nara spent much time alone and began to draw. His love of literature, his knowledge of Japanese and European art history, and his encounters with other cultures were a source of inspiration to him. In addition, his love of music plays a central role in his life. Nara is still deeply rooted in the music that he listened to as a child on a radio he had made himself. His favorite station was the Far East Network (FEN), which provided the program for the American troops stationed in Japan during the Vietnam War. The radio station broadcast folksongs by American singer-songwriters including Bob Dylan with dismissive antiwar messages, melancholy sounds of the blues, and English and Irish folk music from England and Ireland. Although he did not understand the foreign lyrics, Nara perceived the sounds in a sensuous way. In combination with the images on the album cover, he comprehended the music in his own way and translated it into drawings.

**"Postwar Japan was characterized by economic growth. My parents worked, and my two brothers are much older than I am, so I spent all my time home alone. I didn't have much to do with them. It didn't matter if I rebelled or not; nobody would have known. They had no idea what I was really like. I loved music and girls. I felt totally free . . . but also abandoned." [Yoshitomo Nara]**

With the threatening, defiant, angry, melancholy, and insecure Angry Girls, which earned him international acclaim, Nara countered the kawaii style that was so popular in Japan. Kawaii, meaning "cute" in Japanese, is an aesthetic concept that capitalizes on sweet and innocently childlike motifs. Nara countered this principle with rebellious and recalcitrant protagonists. These figures symbolize the artist's pacifist, socially critical, and cosmopolitan attitude that was shaped by his in-depth examination of Japan's historical role during World War II.

Nara's political awareness, his humanitarian concerns, and his antiwar sentiments have their origins in the counterculture and folk and blues music of the 1950s and 1960s, which provided the soundtrack for the civil rights and freedom movements.

# MUSEUM FRIEDER BURDA

## BADEN-BADEN

---

Although Nara was not in the military, he traveled to Afghanistan in 2002 to document the war there, creating critical drawings and photographs. Since the tsunami in 2011, caused by an enormous earthquake off the east coast of Japan, and the resulting disaster at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima, Nara has increasingly expressed his political stance in his work. He actively supports global initiatives that are important to him, including the antinuclear movement and campaigns that draw attention to ecological problems. Nara's vivid imagery with its powerful and explicit political rhetoric and his unambiguous messages are often used on demonstration banners.

**"Now, even in this very moment, there is a bomb exploding somewhere in the world. But there must also be new life coming into the world in that moment too. 'STOP THE BOMBS!' I feel this from the bottom of my heart." [Yoshitomo Nara]**

Yoshitomo Nara was born in a suburb of Hirosaki in the isolated north of Japan in 1959. After studying painting at the University of the Arts in Aichi, he traveled to Europe in 1980, where he studied the works of European modernism and the paintings of the early Middle Ages and Renaissance. This fundamental encounter with original works had a lasting influence on Nara's later work. In this way, his round plates are reminiscent of the tondi of the Renaissance with their simple backgrounds that focus the viewer's gaze on the figures in the center of the picture. In imitation of the appearance of frescoes of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, Nara worked with pastel colors, which he covered with a thin layer of white paint.

**"I'm still trying to figure out the meaning of life." [Yoshitomo Nara]**

In 1988 Nara enrolled at the renowned Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. The following years proved to be meaningful for his artistic development. Since he did not speak German, he was again forced into isolation—as had been the case in his childhood—which empowered him even more to use art as a means of communication.

At the Kunstakademie, Nara was in the class of German artist A. R. Penck, a leading proponent of Neo-Expressionism, who gave the important impulse to combine his painting and drawing techniques. This led to Nara's unique and original imagery that is his trademark today. During this period, Nara also developed his characteristic depictions of children, whose striking large heads and widely spaced eyes create a direct emotional appeal to the viewer. At first glance they appear cute, but their exaggerated expressions and mysterious behavior give them a confrontational character.

In 1994 Nara moved to Cologne. His works were shown in solo exhibitions and in many group shows all over Europe. In 1995 he had his first exhibition in the United States. In 2000 he returned to Japan, where he is still lives and works. The exhibition Yoshitomo Nara at the Museum Frieder Burda allows this extraordinary Japanese artist to return to the country that fundamentally shaped his artistic development.

# MUSEUM FRIEDER BURDA

## BADEN-BADEN

---

### Exhibition Catalog

The richly illustrated catalog (224 pages), including essays by Lucía Agirre, Shigemi Takahashi, and Mika Yoshitake, is available from Hatje Cantz in German. The museum edition costs 39 euros.

### Project Team

Lead organization: Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (June 28–November 3, 2024)

Curator in Bilbao: Lucía Agirre

Curator in Baden-Baden: Daniel Zamani

Project manager in Baden-Baden: Christiane Righetti

### Lenders

Among the numerous international lenders are the Jumex Collection in Mexico City, the Leeum Museum of Art in Seoul, the National Museum of Art in Osaka, and the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo. Among the highlights of the retrospective are numerous masterpieces from private collections that are normally not accessible to the general public.

### Our Media Partner

The logo for the media partner 'arte' is displayed in a bold, orange, lowercase sans-serif font.

### Press Contacts

Daniela Sistermanns

+49 (0)7221 39898-33, [sistermanns@museum-frieder-burda.de](mailto:sistermanns@museum-frieder-burda.de)

Kathrin Luz

+49 (0)171 3102472, [presse@museum-frieder-burda.de](mailto:presse@museum-frieder-burda.de)

### Hours

Tuesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Open on all holidays, except December 24 and 31