

HAYWARD GALLERY

Press Release

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Yoshitomo Nara 10 June – 31 August 2025



IMAGE CREDITS IN NOTES TO EDITORS

The Hayward Gallery presents the first UK solo exhibition at a public art gallery by leading Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara. The major retrospective invites viewers to immerse themselves in the intriguing world of one of today's most celebrated artists through four decades of work, including recent paintings and drawings, as well as sculptures and iconic portraits brought to life through richly layered colours. Expanding on the blockbuster exhibition from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, *Yoshitomo Nara* offers a window into the inner-workings of the artist, providing an insight into how Nara's life experiences are intrinsically linked to his output through core themes and motifs.

Yoshitomo Nara is best-known for his striking images of child-like figures and animals with large heads and wide eyes that challenge viewers with their direct gaze and defiant stance. Both captivating and ominous, these characters exemplify Nara's distinctive style that is recognised across the world. Although primarily a painter, he also works with a variety of materials across collage, sculpture, drawing, and installation to explore ideas of home, isolation, nature, peace, resistance and freedom.

Organised thematically, the exhibition provides a comprehensive overview of Nara's artistic evolution, illuminating his deep interest in humanity with works inspired by the people, emotions and places that he has encountered throughout his life.

Nara's formative years in Japan's northern Tōhoku region were spent drawing and listening to the Far East Network (FEN): the radio station for American troops stationed in Japan during the Vietnam War. Throughout the retrospective, viewers can see how Nara's art often draws from his lifelong love of music, ranging from the antiwar folksongs by American singer-songwriters heard on FEN, to the melancholy sounds of the blues and, more recently, punk and new wave.

Studying and living in Germany also proved crucial in establishing Nara's style. Upon visiting Germany in 1980, he discovered the masters of European modernism, the early Middle Ages and the Renaissance which influenced his later works. Enrolling at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Nara was unable to speak German and used his art to express himself, utilising techniques learnt from Neo-Expressionist artist A. R. Penck. Nara's big-eyed characters were created in this period, with early works like *Ships in Girl* (1992) countering the popular Japanese kawaii (cute) style through their mysterious expressions and rebellious demeanour.

The exhibition highlights the political and societal discourse within Nara's work, with disasters such as the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami and Fukushima Daiichi power plant failure fueling his artistic response to the widespread feelings of loss and pain caused by these events. Works like *From the Bomb Shelter* (2017), which shows a child tentatively emerging from an underground bunker, reflect his changed viewpoint of the world. Meanwhile, recent paintings such as *Midnight Tears* (2023) emanate uncertainty through the ethereal, fragmented touches of colour and tear-filled eyes of the child it depicts.

Yoshitomo Nara marks a continuation of the Hayward Gallery's longstanding commitment to bringing world-class art to the nation, echoing the Southbank Centre's drive to introduce unbeatable cultural experiences to new audiences.

Yung Ma, Senior Curator of the Hayward Gallery, says: *"We have the tendency to overuse the word 'iconic' but in the case of Yoshitomo Nara, I can hardly think of a more apt description. Nara's wide-eyed figures have become some of the most recognised motifs in contemporary art. His work engages with us emotionally, exemplifying how the power of art can transcend beyond the walls of a gallery to reach people far and wide."*

Ralph Rugoff, Director of the Hayward Gallery, says: *"Rendered in an appealing and deceptively simple style, Nara's portraits of imaginary characters evince a psychological immediacy that bridges the gap between high art and popular culture. Conveying a compelling tenderness that speaks to our desire for connection, his pictures also tap into widespread feelings of alienation, anxiety, and resistance. This is a rare achievement and it has made him one of the pivotal figures in contemporary art over the past 30 years."*

Yoshitomo Nara is curated by Hayward Gallery Senior Curator, Yung Ma, with Assistant Curator, Katie Guggenheim, and Curatorial Assistant, Charlotte dos Santos. The exhibition is generously supported by Hiroyuki Maki, the Huo Family Foundation, and the Bukhman Foundation. We are also grateful for key support from Marc and Lynne Benioff; BLUM Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York; and Pace Gallery.

Our thanks also go to Lady Alison Deighton; Solina Chau; Nicolas Dreyfus; Jenny Yeh, Winsing Arts Foundation; Eleanor and Francis Shen; the Japan Foundation and the Japan House London Trust.

A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition. Designed by Praline, the book includes newly commissioned essays by art historian Yeewon Koon and art critic Barry Schwabsky. It also features an essay by academic and music critic Josh Kun, an interview with the artist by Hayward Gallery Senior Curator Yung Ma and a newly compiled illustrated chronology.

The exhibition is co-organised by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, and the Hayward Gallery.

This exhibition is presented alongside *Freudian Typo* as part of the free RC Foundation Project Space Exhibition Series in the Hayward Gallery's HENI Project Space. You can read more about the exhibition [HERE](#).

NOTES TO EDITORS

Image Credits - from the top left, clockwise

1. Installation view of *Yoshitomo Nara. Missing in Action*, 1999. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy the artist and the Hayward Gallery.
2. Installation view of *Yoshitomo Nara* at the Hayward Gallery. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy the artist and the Hayward Gallery.
3. Installation view of *Yoshitomo Nara* at the Hayward Gallery. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy the artist and the Hayward Gallery.
4. Installation view of *Yoshitomo Nara. Miss Margaret*, 2016. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy the artist and the Hayward Gallery.

Exhibition Listing Information

Yoshitomo Nara

10 June - 31 August 2025

Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, Belvedere Road, London SE1 8XX

Full price standard: £20

Concessions available & Southbank Centre Members go free

The Hayward Gallery opening times:

Tue – Fri, 10am – 6pm

Sat, 10am – 8pm

Sun, 10am – 6pm

Further information:

www.southbankcentre.co.uk

Twitter: [@haywardgallery](https://twitter.com/haywardgallery)

Instagram: [@hayward.gallery](https://www.instagram.com/hayward.gallery)

Facebook: www.facebook.com/haywardgallery/

An [artist talk](#) by Yoshitomo Nara will take place on 10 June at 7pm in the Purcell Room, Queen Elizabeth Hall.

An [afternoon of talks and discussions](#) with leading international curators, writers and art historians delving into the work of Yoshitomo Nara will take place on 28 June from 2pm in the Purcell Room, Queen Elizabeth Hall.

About Yoshitomo Nara

Born in 1959 in Hirosaki, Aomori prefecture, Japan, Nara graduated from Aichi Prefectural University of the Arts in 1987. He moved to Germany in 1988 and enrolled at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, where he studied under A. R. Penck. Nara moved to Cologne in 1994 and returned to Japan in 2000. Since the mid-1990s, Nara has exhibited throughout Japan and internationally, in museums and galleries in the UK, Europe, the United States, Korea, China and Australia.

About the Hayward Gallery

The Hayward Gallery, part of the Southbank Centre, has a long history of presenting work by the world's most adventurous and innovative artists including major solo shows by both emerging and established artists and dynamic group exhibitions. They include those by Bridget Riley, Bruce Nauman, Anish Kapoor, Lee Bul, Andreas Gursky, Tracey Emin, Jeremy Deller, Kader Attia and Matthew Barney, as well as influential group exhibitions such as *Africa Remix*, *Light Show*, *Psycho Buildings* and *Space Shifters*. Opened by Queen Elizabeth II in July 1968, the gallery is one of the few remaining buildings of its style. The Brutalist building was designed by a group of young architects, including Dennis Crompton, Warren Chalk and Ron Herron and is named after Sir Isaac Hayward, a former leader of the London County Council.

About the Southbank Centre

The Southbank Centre is the UK's largest multi-arts centre and engages the most diverse audiences of any performing arts organisation in the UK. Our biggest venue, the Royal Festival Hall (2,700 seats) is the lasting legacy of the 1951 Festival of Britain and the ambition and values of that project – that arts, ideas, innovation and culture can heal communities and should be available and accessible to everyone – are still our guiding principles today. The Southbank Centre is uniquely able to offer a wide-ranging, inclusive and world-class artistic programme spanning contemporary visual arts, music, dance, performance, literature, comedy and spoken word across the Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, the Hayward Gallery and our free spaces. We are also home to the National Poetry Library, the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) and six resident orchestras (Aurora Orchestra, Chineke! Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Philharmonia Orchestra).

www.southbankcentre.co.uk

About The Bukhman Foundation

The Bukhman Foundation was established by Anastasia and Igor Bukhman to support breakthroughs in medical research for Type 1 Diabetes, as well as celebrate the arts and culture, and access to education. The foundation's work within arts and culture is centred on broadening and improving access to creativity and arts education through the support of pioneering institutions, complex and ambitious artistic projects, and ground-breaking young and emerging artists.

www.bukhmanfoundation.org



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