

Global Contemporary Artist Analysis

Archive Project

Yoshitomo Nara - Heritage and Curation

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This piece above was created by Yoshitomo Nara and is titled *Miss Forest*. It is made of sculpted bronze in 2020, and this image is sourced from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art written publication called *Unframed*.

This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of

ART 4190R: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

Yoshitomo Nara Biography

To start from the very beginning, Yoshitomo Nara was born in 1959 in Hirosaki, Aomori Prefecture, Japan. His father and grandfather were Shinto priests, which was an artistic influence over Nara's artwork. Nara was often left alone as a child due to both of his parents working and his 2 older brothers being about 10 years ahead of him. Nara found solace in animals and music as a young child because he was very in touch with his emotions from an early age. Nara was originally supposed to study literature through his teen years, but after a friend showed interest in his drawings, he decided to pursue an art education. Nara was able to study at the Aichi Prefecture University of Fine Arts and Music where he received his Masters and Bachelors of Fine arts. Nara then moved to Germany and lived there for 6 years to complete an apprenticeship at The German State Academy of Arts.

Nara has completed about 40 solo exhibitions during his 36-year professional artistic career. He currently runs his art practice from Tokyo, Japan. Nara has never used assistants to create the bodies of artwork that he has produced. There is a focus of isolation in his work throughout every series. Early on in Nara's career, he admits that he focused on things that just piqued his interest. However, after the earthquake and tsunami in 2011, Nara had a paradigm shift in his work and his thought process. Nara insinuated that he didn't exercise a deep thought process previously and that he now has deeper, more meaningful conversations with himself through his art practice. It seems that after this natural disaster, Nara's work also shifts to focus more on nature and Nara's surrounding environment. Nara also uses elements of spiritual themes throughout his body of work. His work is often interpreted as being heavily influenced by Japanese manga, but Nara does not seem to think this had anything to do with his style of work.

Nara had a Retrospective Show with a massive collection of what he considers his best work that ended up being delayed by COVID-19. This was another event he mentioned that affected his perspective on the world and in turn his art practice. He mentioned that art felt like something that wasn't necessary during a global pandemic, but what brought him back to creating again was working with his hands. He began a sculptural process, which will bring us to Nara's current state of his artistic practice.

Art Analysis of Nara's Work Through David Joselit's Lens

Yoshitomo Nara is an incredibly talented artist with a very long career that has been full of transition and growth. Most of his 2D works have been associated with what is labeled the Superflat Movement. Aside from his particular visual style, Nara has specific cultural and religious references that peak through in his work. In order to fully analyze two works of Nara's through the lens of an excerpt of David Joselit's *Heritage and Debt*, I will first analyze the two images visually by themselves. I will then present Joselit's main ideas and then apply those ideas to the visual analysis of Nara's pieces. The two pieces I will be analyzing are *Midnight Surprise* and *Miss Forest*.

The excerpt from David Joselit's *Heritage and Debt* primarily focuses on defining heritage and how that definition is heavily affected by the weighted balance of the western versus the non-western world. Joselit sets up this imbalance of power between the western world being indebted to the nonwestern world by making an analogy to the international banking system:

It also continues to characterize neo-liberal or (neo-imperial) techniques of governance through debt, by which loans from international financial agencies such as the World

Bank or International Monetary Fund serve as instruments of interference in a wide range of policy issues.”¹

The “it” being the unbalanced power dynamic is what Joselit is expressing here through his analogy. Joselit then moves on to discuss the response to Eurocentrism being a readjustment to the definition of heritage to a more global, modern world. Joselit also relates this heritage redefinition to the “Global South” and how their traditions have become “reclaimed as *contemporary*.”² Joselit sets this divergence between the Eurocentric, privileged side of the world and the “Global South,” or the non-western world. Joselit describes how he prefers to focus on the western world’s potential to readjust how the world globally can experience and understand other cultures rather than critiquing it for the typical selfishness that most art critics do. Joselit finishes this excerpt by discussing the power of knowledge curation. Joselit describes how the way one may curate an exhibition, or any type of visual communication could change how we educate ourselves with the unfamiliar.

Before analyzing Yoshitomo Nara’s work through Joselit’s key ideas, I will first visually describe both artworks. Nara’s piece titled *Miss Forest* is 25 ft and 7 inches tall and is located at Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Nara created this sculpture in 2020. It is made of bronze and is Nara’s largest sculptural piece he has ever created. This piece references specific plant structures on top of the figure’s head. Nara is implicating how grand nature is and how we as humans are born from this grandiose beauty through the massive size of the structure. Nara mentions reaching to the sky as well and how that spiritual communication is referenced with this molded sculpture to show the feeling of being more connected with the earth. This particular piece could be a reference back to some of Nara’s old tendencies of isolation. It still uses a

1. David Joselit, “Heritage and Debt,” October 2020, 139.
2. David Joselit, “Heritage and Debt,” October 2020, 140.

childlike, human figure as the subject matter, but with the implementation of nature. The Japanese pronunciation of this sculpture's title is called "Moriko," which directly means "child of the forest." I found that this piece didn't signify gender, but the English version of the title does. This brings to light cultural and language differences between America and Japan just in the verbiage of Nara's title.

The next piece I will be analyzing is Nara's *Midnight Surprise*, which he created in 2017. This acrylic on canvas is part of Nara's *Midnight* series. The size of this work is rather large sitting at about 90 inches by 71 inches. The color scheme of this painting uses amber, gold, and green inflections in the eyes of this figure presented in a large, portrait style. These particular colors could be a reference to observed elements in nature. Nara created this piece during the period when he was implementing Buddhist principles in his work. It isn't just about the subject matter of a girl, but more about the layers of paint and material built up upon itself. These ideas can even be related to the painter Mark Rothko. These layers signify depth and continual contemplation during the process of creating this work. It allows the viewer to think deeply about themselves because it is an isolated experience as well as an isolated subject. You can stare deeply into this girl's eyes and see Nara's "world" for yourself and your understanding.

Most of Nara's work isn't inherently political or aggressively urging the viewer to conclude an idea or even what Nara is trying to communicate with his work. Nara's work is more meditative and about the process of material coming together and becoming the piece that he presents for himself rather than for him to explain to his viewer. I think Joselit's ideas can be related in a way to the curation of knowledge that Joselit desires for the world and Nara's process of artmaking. Nara curates many different influences alongside his own past art-making process of really just enjoying expressing visual messages versus now with his meditative

understanding of the world around him and allowing those observations to filter into his art-making process. I do think because of Joselit's desire to be specific; his read of Nara's work would ask for more information about Nara's purpose. I think the historical and cultural understanding of Nara's heritage and his relationship with his father as a Shinto priest would be evidence enough for Joselit as to how Nara's work has specific heritage indicators without insinuating the power dynamic between the western and non-western cultural understandings of one another.

The main point that coincides with Joselit's and Nara's work is that your past and your present make up your cultural heritage. This applies to the individual and the public, but what Joselit tries to convey is that curating specific individuals' past and present will allow future generations to better understand and accept others' culture in an accurate and caring way. I think Nara's work would be a beautiful example to curate and help the world have a better understanding of Nara's heritage.

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