

## Your Dog

Artist: Yoshitomo Nara (Japanese, b. 1959)

Date: 2002

Location: G363

Medium: Sculpture | Fiberglass

Creation Place: Japan

Physical Description: white dog standing on all four paws; upright short tail; round red nose

Accession Number: 2007.100



### Questions and Activities:

- What is this animal? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Does it look like any dog you know of? How is it different? Similar?
- Look at the dog's face. What kind of expression does it have? WDYSTMYST?
- How does the dog make you feel? What about the dog makes you feel that way?
- What do you think (s)he's made of?
- Do you have a dog at home? What kind?
- What would you name this dog? Why?
- If you could talk to the artist, what would you ask him?

### Key Points:

#### Background

- Born in 1959, Yoshitomo Nara is part of a generation of Japanese "New Pop" artists who first rose to prominence in the mid-1990s. An attempt to define a modern, uniquely Japanese aesthetic, New Pop is characterized by flat colors, crisp lines and irreverent subject matter.

- The movement employs the style and vocabulary of contemporary pop culture in order to both critique and celebrate it. Prominent New Pop artist Takashi Murakami has dubbed this aesthetic "Superflat", referring not only to the traditional flatness of Japanese drawing and animation (as compared to the historical fascination with 3-D perspective in Western art), but to the collapsing of hierarchies between fine art and commerce.
- Another aspect of Japanese pop culture to which Nara has reacted is the extreme idealization of childhood known as kawaii. Kawaii is popularly used to describe anything cute, sweet and childlike. Exemplified by characters such as Hello Kitty and Pokemon, the cult of kawaii is commonly understood as a reaction to the extreme pressures that accompany adult life in Japan: a demanding school system, inflexible workplace hierarchies and highly conventional expectations for behavior and comportment.
- Kawaii, along with more violent fantasies such as those played out in pornographic or sadistic manga (comic books), operates as a pressure valve. Idealized notions of childhood offer a small, nostalgic escape from the restrictions of adulthood.
- The kawaii phenomenon is especially poignant in a society in which children are "growing up" faster than ever. The practice of enjo kosai, or casual teenage prostitution, received widespread media attention in the 1990s. Brutal attacks and murders by children are also on the rise in Japan.

### **The Artist / Biography**

- Japanese painter, sculptor and draughtsman Yoshitomo Nara was born on January 4, 1959, in Hirosaki, Japan.
- Nara was raised in a rural area and, as a child of working parents, he spent much of his time alone with only his imagination, comic books and family pets as company.
- He received his B.F.A. (1985) and an M.F.A. (1987) from the Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music. Between 1988 and 1993, Nara studied at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, in Germany.
- Nara first came to the fore of the art world during Japan's Pop art movement in the 1990s.
- Paintings, drawings and sculptures of seemingly innocent, wide-eyed children and dogs have become his trademark. They are said to be an attempt to capture his childhood sense of boredom and frustration and to recapture the fierce independence natural to children.
- Nara's earliest paintings are simple and straightforward with thick, bold lines and primary colors. In these early works, children and animals often share space on the canvas with fragments of text and painted props, such as tiny knives, toys and cardboard boxes. His paintings have evolved until his subject-matter is reduced to its essentials—simplified child and animal figures, with piercing gazes, staring out at the viewer from an otherwise empty canvas. His sculptures, usually made out of fiberglass, share this same economy of form.
- In addition to painting and sculpture, Nara has created many drawings. These are usually hastily scribbled on the backs of postcards, used envelopes and other scraps of paper and often incorporate text in English, German, or Japanese. Unlike the composed surface of the paintings, the drawings are raw and immediate and reveal Nara's youthful, rebellious streak.
- The artist currently lives and works in Tokyo, though his artwork has been exhibited worldwide. Nara has had nearly 40 solo exhibitions since 1984. He is represented in New York City by Marianne

Boesky Gallery and in Los Angeles by Blum & Poe. His work can also be seen, and purchased, on t-shirts, postcards, CD covers, skateboards and even yo-yos.

### **The Artist's Philosophy, Ideas and Influences**

- "I want people to feel commotion beneath the surface of my pictures." - Nara
- Nara has been noted to say he has drawn influence from anime, manga, Walt Disney, graffiti, renaissance paintings, illustration, and punk rock. He claims his biggest influence, however, is his childhood- landscapes of the countryside and isolation. He is quoted as saying, "My art represents my childhood experiences. It is not influenced by Japanese pop culture. I played with sheep, cats and dogs when I came home from school."
- From his essentially Western art education in Japan, Nara cites Giotto's Arena Chapel frescoes as an important influence. Like Giotto's masterwork, Nara's paintings feature muted color schemes, and solid, static figures in a flat, shallow space. They possess a stillness and dignity that evokes an almost religious feeling. In a sense, Nara's work elevates children to a revered, iconic status.
- Despite its pop-culture focus, Nara's art also displays affinities with Minimalism. The backgrounds of his paintings are solid fields of color, often textured with pieces of canvas that have been glued on in a patchwork pattern and painted over. These surfaces reflect a concern with the physical presence of the work: more than just an image, it is an object to be reckoned with. **His sculptures** take this hallmark of minimalism one step further. Their simple, mostly white-on-white details reduce description to a bare minimum. They form a continuum with the whiteness of the gallery, extending their world into the viewer's space.
- Recent influences:
  - Banana Yoshimoto: Banana is a popular Japanese novelist. She has written *Kitchen*, and *Goodbye Tsugumi*, both of which have been turned into movies. She says her main themes are the impact of terrible experiences on a person's growth and the exhaustion of young people in contemporary Japan .
  - Superflat: A movement founded by Takashi Murakami and influenced by anime, manga and the otaku subculture. Other artists associated with the movement: Chiho Aoshima, Mahomi Kunikata, and Aya Takano. Super flat encompasses a broad style so the subject matter varies. Themes the movement often dealt with: Postwar Japan, sexual fetishism associated with otaku subculture, consumerism, and the fear of growing up, which Nara deals with.
  - Cerealart: A "company conceptualized to design, develop, manufactures and distribute a range of esthetically pleasing artist's projects to a broad marketplace." Cerealart challenges the distinction between high and low culture. Through Cerealart, Nara currently sells two sculptures, an ashtray and an alarm clock.
- "Nara taps not only a particular sense of Japanese cultural disempowerment but also a universal sentiment. As our world gets smaller and smaller and is owned and operated by fewer and larger corporations, we can all understand and identify with an inescapable feeling of disenfranchisement. Nara has distilled this experience down to its essence: the angry, powerless, yet hopeful child in all of us." Sharon Mizota, "No Place Like Chrome", *Metro*, July 21-27, 2004.

### **The Sculpture**

- "Your Dog is a huge, fiberglass sculpture of a placid, Snoopyesque canine. Smooth and pure white (except for his red nose), Your Dog represents a Platonic ideal of dogness, evoking permanence, stability and the comfort of an eternal 'welcome home'." Sharon Mizota, "No Place Like Chrome", *Metro*, July 21-27, 2004.
- "This friendly puppy created in fiberglass presents a dog's dual nature both as a cuddly pet to children and a frightening creature who is often much larger than the child. By creating this puppy on such a scale, Nara brings us back to our childhood when dogs looked enormous and had both a sweet and menacing character. Nara's surreal puppy, whimsical drawings and charming products are informed by his memories of childhood, expressing the pain, joy, and innocence of youth. " Orange County Museum of Art (November, 2004)
- "He recalls his youth as a time of both loneliness and freedom, of coming home to his empty house, which was set in an open expanse far from others, with only a pet for comfort and company. In fact, one of Nara's recurring characters is a long-eared pup. According to one story told by the artist, he abandoned a dog when he was a child, and the canine's presence seems to haunt him still. ... Nara's tender and friendly dogs, as YOUR DOG demonstrates, offer absolution and tranquility." V. Breuvar, ed., *VITAMIN P: NEW PERSPECTIVES IN PAINTING*, LONDON, 2002, p. 232.

### **Transition:**

### **Sources:**

Kristin Chambers, Grove Art Online, © 2009 Oxford University Press.

Yoshitomo Nara website: <http://www.linzercola.com/narainsp.html>.

Wikipedia

*The Lonesome Puppy* by Yoshitomo Nara, Chronicle Books (2008).

Yoshitomo Nara, Your Dog, Live Auctioneers website <http://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/939381>.

Sharon Mizota, "No Place Like Chrome" *Metro*, July 21-27, 2004.