

YOSHITOMO NARA · **YOU'RE A VOYAGER** · 2004
 COLORED PENCIL ON PAPER / BUNTSTIFT AUF PAPIER · 29,7 x 21 CM

CHILDHOOD AND MELANCHOLY

After graduating in Japan, Yoshitomo Nara studied at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art under the tuition of A.R. Penck and Michael Buthe. He is the initiator of an abbreviated, figurative language of images, whose motifs mainly address the subject of childhood, revolving around the domestication techniques associated with childhood as well as rebellion against these techniques. His paintings, drawings, and sculptural objects lead into what seems at first a harmless and apparently naive fantastic kingdom. His often grim-looking figures look like they come from comics, the illustrations in children's books, or the world of dolls and puppets, conveying both a perfect world and a world of despair side by side. Occasionally these round-eyed figures are shown with speech balloons adjacent to their mouths that are either empty or filled with stuttered speech, emphasizing their longings, fears, and desolation. In Nara's world the naive touches on the existential. The figures look both standardized and individually created and are full of stories and tales about childhood and youth. They seem exemplarily to embody the condition of contemporary humankind. They are always isolated, and with their numerous injuries, plasters, and bandages they stand for the perception of an extremely threatening world. This impression is further emphasized by the daggers, knives, and other sharp instruments in the small fists of the protagonists in Nara's pictures, providing a stark contrast to the notion of the "little child" – now no more than a frozen mask.

Although Nara's pictures appear to portray the perspective of a child, they doubtlessly stem from the world and the knowledge of an adult. Instinctively we think of the French author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. His book *The Little Prince* appeared in 1943 and was soon translated into a great many languages. In a short foreword the author dedicated the book to an adult, his best friend, and justified this is a number of ways, although he knew that children would see themselves as the true readers of his book. And yet, Saint-Exupéry senses that his apologies are not sufficient, so he corrects himself and wishes to dedicate his book to the child that the adult once was. After all: "All grown-ups were once children, though few of them remember it."⁶

Although it is read and loved by children the story itself is not a children's story, and the narrative perspective is clearly that of the (grown-up) author. It is therefore not surprising that some passages from *The Little Prince* lend themselves for the captions to Nara's pictures: "In the moonlight I looked at his pale forehead, his closed eyes, his locks of hair that trembled in the wind, and I said to myself: 'What I see here is nothing but a shell. What is most important is invisible.'" ⁷

Another element in Nara and Sugito's painting that is always present, but has not yet been mentioned here, now becomes clearer. This is melancholy. When artistic production involves self-reflection, it refers to a lived childhood, individual and collective, to which there is naturally no return. There is a poem by Yoshitomo Nara on the inexorable nature of passing time: "Time passes by / Before it fades and vanishes. I want to grab even a bit and make it last. ... Imagination doesn't stop for the past or the future. And that makes me both happy and sad."⁸

In the opening credits of the film *The Wizard of Oz* there is incidentally also a dedication comparable to that in *The Little Prince*, which also relativizes the categories of old and young. The credits say that this story has served faithfully for nearly four decades and that time has been powerless in outdating it. The film is therefore dedicated to those who are "young at heart."⁹ Yoshitomo Nara speaks of the film with great affection and particularly emphasizes its now obsolete "analog" trick techniques. In his view their sometimes wooden superficiality and evident artificiality possess great warmth and openness, thus inviting the viewer to take a closer look. The perfection of recent fantasy films or animations on the other hand gives off a hermetic coldness: