Problem children

Yoshitomo Nara's cartoonish paintings and sculptures of young girls and boys undermine Japan's love of pop-culture cuteness with hints of something altogether darker. By **Andrew Lee** and **David Pilling**

A spasm ripples through Yoshitomo Nara's wiry body, starting somewhere near his collar bone and working its way, like an electric wave, down his right arm, away through his fingertips and into the air. His whole frame shifts with the effort of releasing the pulse of energy, the product of the large cup of black coffee sitting in front of him and the cigarette smouldering between his two fingers.

Nara, one of Japan's most recognised contemporary artists, says he's been worried that he knows nothing of finance, but relaxes when we tell him the FT is here to talk about his art.

For those not familiar with Nara's work, his canvases and sculptures are filled with warp-headed children – mainly girls, and usually alone – looking angrily, sadly or accusingly at the onlooker.

In one picture, a nursery-age girl in a yellow dress has a cigarette sticking defiantly from the corner of her mouth. Nara, a heavy smoker, has turned the image into a best-selling ashtray. In another painting, there's a trickle of unexplained blood on a girl's arm; in another, she is holding a tiny knife; in yet another, a girl with red hair and a blue dress stands on a small table while a noose hangs ominously from the ceiling.

As an adult looking in, one can't help feeling as though one has discovered something terribly wrong in what was supposed to be the innocent world of childhood. With pop song titles such as "Too Young to Die", which accompanies the little-girl-smoking, or "My 13th Sad Day", the paintings often include an incongruous detail that hints at a darker sub-plot. But what?

Nara's seemingly simple drawings depict a child's-eye view of a lonely but engaging world. The children, he says, all have their origin in the artist's own childhood, growing up in the big-sky country of Aomori, in rural northern Japan. "I was born in 1959. By 1964, we had the Tokyo Olympics and Japan was starting to boom economically. Everyone was working, not only fathers, but mothers as well. That's when we started to have the phenomenon of the latch-key kids.

"In my neighbourhood, there were no kids my age, so when I came home from school I would always be alone in my house drawing pictures, or outside playing with animals, like lambs or cats or dogs. You can't really call it talking, but I was communicating with those animals. That was the world I lived in. My own kind of feeling, or vision of art, was formed then."

As a teenager Nara, like most young Japanese, came under intense pressure to conform, to stop inhabiting his "girlish" imaginary world of drawings and talking to animals. "I took up judo and got into rugby. I wanted to show that I was a man now and into sports. I stopped drawing as much and started hanging out with other guys. When I look back on that time, it's somehow difficult to remember who I was. I didn't really have my own identity at all."

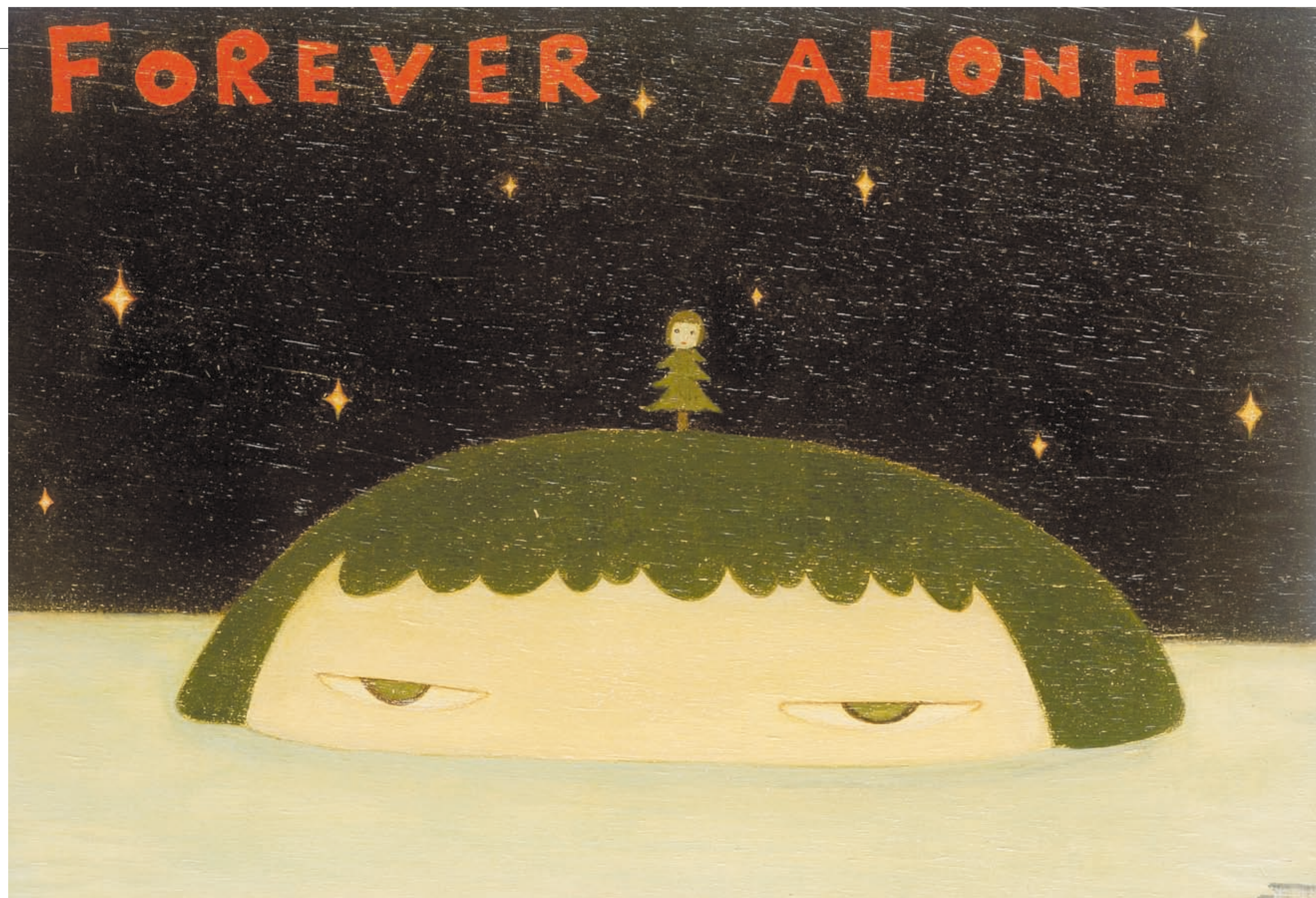
After high school, Nara signed up for a life-drawing class at art college in Tokyo, but was disappointed to find that most of the models were grandmotherly *obasans*, not the sleek young women he had envisioned. In class, he would draw the required still-lifes or nudes but back at home he would find himself recreating pictures from his Aomori childhood.

At the time he assumed these were doodles, divorced from the "artwork" he was learning at college. Later, studying art in Germany, where he was again isolated – this time by language and distance – he realised that the pictures of children were what he wanted to paint.

"I couldn't speak German well," he says of his time in Dusseldorf. "So I just drew. I thought I could express myself better through my drawing. The colour of the sky in Germany was very similar to the colour of the sky in Aomori and it reminded me of my childhood. I think I rediscovered myself as a child in Germany. I was very surprised to be so far from home and to find myself there."

Pressure to conform is strong in Japan, where the transition between the uninhibited world of children and the custom-bound existence of adulthood is particularly abrupt. Until about the age of seven, Japanese children lead a generally carefree existence, allowed by indulgent mothers to play games and explore the world. Once they start primary school and begin the arduous process of learning the 2,000-character alphabet, the serious business of becoming a member of Japan's group-oriented society begins.

In Germany, Nara was finally free from this group pressure and was able to ask himself who he really was. "I finally realised that my real self was the self that used to play by himself as a kid."



Young at art: Yoshitomo Nara's 2006 painting "Forever Alone", and (far left) "Missing in Action", which sold for $1.08m in May

Nara's children are a study of abandonment, petty violence and suspicion of the adults who have messed up the world. Although he resists the comparison, there is something of Dickens in them: the bottle-washers, runaways and pickpockets left to fend for themselves in a grimy, industrialising world.

Nara prefers to see his works as a study in personal pain. "The deep part of my work is a feeling of being victimised and of loss. Why did other children have parents to play with? Why was I left alone by myself? Why didn't I have that? It was the little things that made me happy; watching a flower bloom and seeing a small hope in that, or talking with animals and believing they could understand me."

While Nara's work reflects a deeper emotional world, it is also part of Japanese kitsch: the *kawaii* or cutesy culture that infests Japanese life with doe-eyed cartoon characters and rinky-tinky jingles. His frowning children – who adorn record covers, T-shirts and household pottery – have joined the ranks of less malevolent Japanese cartoon icons, including the pink and perfect Hello Kitty. They elicit the same high-pitch squeals of: "How *cu-te*."

Japan's obsession with the cute and cartoon-like – and the violence that is sometimes mixed with it – has been interpreted by some as the infantilism of a postwar generation discouraged from participating in the political process. But as with Nara, the explanation could be more personal: Japanese people, forever measuring their behaviour against the rigorous norms of adulthood, finding sanctuary in the private world of childhood.

Nonetheless, Nara is uncomfortable with his nation's seemingly mass retreat into childhood. "These are the kind of 'happy children' of Japan," he says of those who try to carve out their individuality by joining the latest (inevitably fleeting) trend in art, fashion or music. "They're not really serious. A lot of this is imitation, which is a lot different from creativity. There are a lot of fakes."

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Yet for someone who doesn't want to be too closely associated with Japan's pop culture, Nara has benefited greatly from its mass appeal. He has appeared in group shows organised by Takashi Murakami, the high priest of Japan's "Superflat" movement, which seeks to erase the differences between high and low art.

Nara says it is important to distinguish between talent and mediocrity, however, between the real and the phony. "What Murakami is saying is not natural. It is something he has created as part of a strategy, but I don't feel it necessary to create a strategy or theory to define my artwork."

Murakami works with a team of helpers to mix commercial art with that exhibited in galleries and produces works expressly designed for mass appeal. Nara is more like a punk poet. Wearing paint-spattered jeans and sneakers, he works alone in a studio listening to rock music. His introspection is a large part of his appeal and many of his fans are struggling, creative loners.

Nara is struggling no more. In May, one is painting "Missing in Action" fetched $1.08m at auction, one of the highest prices ever paid for a piece of contemporary Japanese art.

At the other end of the scale, his work graces dozens of mail-order items that are within the budgets of his young fans. "I'm a little different from Murakami. The people who really like my work usually don't have enough money. They are students, young people and so on. That's why I made T-shirts and fluffy toys – for them," he says.

Beneath the cutesy characters, as well as loneliness, lurks violence. This he shares with many Japanese artists who mix the flip and the explicit with abandon. But Nara distances himself from what he regards as worrying trends in Japan's pop culture.

"I think that [some other Japanese artists] actually like violence. It's like a mania. But I hate that," he says, adding that he has experience of what it is like to be physically hurt. "I actually know violence. That's why deformation or extreme violence doesn't occur in my work. There's just a little knife and a drop of blood," he says. "Never a lot of blood," he adds, reassuringly.

Nara wants to be seen as a loner. Rather than being swept along on Japan's pop culture wave, he prefers to nurture his independence by stepping back into his own damaged childhood. "I've never been married, and I've never had a real job," he says. "I guess that means I *am* childish."

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRISTIE'S IMAGES; STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON