Asia Society
Hong Kong Center

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Lifestyle

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Matter of life and death

Trista Yeung

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His doe-eyed children are instantly recognizable. But who is the face behind the famous images?

"The children were not something I had sought or thought out, but I simply tried to capture what was in front of my eyes," said Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara. "They just appeared when I tried to capture what was formless in my mind. Maybe the speaker for my own mind appears as a child."

The contemporary artist was in the SAR recently for his first major solo exhibition at the Asia Society Hong Kong Center. Entitled Life is Only One: Yoshitomo Nara, it features more than 20 new creations - as well as works from the past two decades, including paintings, sketches, photographs, sculptures and mix-media installations.

The title is derived from one of Nara's paintings, Life is Only One, which shows a small girl playing with a human skull. Her innocence spurs an all-time discussion between life and death.

"What differentiates Nara from many of his Japanese peers is how he portrayed figures engaged with us as individuals, usually with their own realities and voices," said Fumio Nanjo, guest curator of the exhibition. "We intend to stimulate a contemplation of this deeply meditative topic, while continuously probing on what is the meaning of being alive."

The 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami saw Nara's fears spike: the disaster triggered a meltdown at Fukushima nuclear plant, which is about 100 kilometers from his residence. The effect of the chain of events was profound, stopping him from creating anything for awhile.

"A feeling of helplessness gripped me. I realized how self-centered my previous artwork was," said the Aomori-born artist.

He decided to participate in a sculpture project with a group of university students. The primitive method of clay modeling with bare hands enabled him to rediscover his artist's instincts to feel the surroundings. "I have become more serious after the earthquake. I now treasure the emotions and feelings that I have and want to instill them into every artwork that I create by overcoming sadness with something powerful," he said.

The 55-year-old artist says his creations arose from fleeting emotions in the past. He now focuses more on leaving behind a legacy. "Instead of creating something exaggerated like what I have done before, my work is now more subtle. As the audience can't really tell what the emotions of the figures are, they have to figure out the meaning behind them."

It is not difficult to discover the essence of the artist in the video montage of photographs - which capture delicate moments: flowers, smiling children, patches of sunlight and small rocks.

Nara regards taking photos as a daily ritual reflecting what he is viewing every day. "Most of them don't have any particular meaning. But it is a process of reconfirmation, a way to express feelings deep within me."

His exhibition will run until July 26.