

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

5/15/09 :: New Media, Visual Art

Kusama—Life, Death, etc.

by Susan Yung



Yayoi Kusama, born in 1929, has been a fixture in contemporary art circles for decades, and rightly so. Her obsessive canvases (“infinity nets”) and humorous, eye popping installations allow her work to traverse the verdant median between rigorous abstraction and loosely knit narrative. That her personal backstory, dealing with dark psychological impulses and obsessiveness, manifests itself in her work and makes it all the more rich. Her popularity, in fact, is so widespread that her work suffers a bit from overexposure,



even predictability. It can fit in just about any group show for the reasons above.

That’s partly why her current show at Gagosian is so impressive. The first work you’re likely to encounter is the pumpkin installation, situated in the garage space next to the gallery’s entrance behind a glass-fronted roll-up door. Three big squashes,

sized like the three bears and trimmed with Kusama’s trademark polka dots, sit contentedly within the same colored, dotted walls. The pumpkin, purportedly a self-representation by the artist, is a pleasing shape and the proximity of the three indeed feels like some kind of family unit. It’s fun, funny, and ominous.

A self-portrait hangs in the entryway. Kusama's cartoonish figure is composed of dots of varying colors and sizes; they hover like microwaved atoms threatening to disperse or explode with a gust of air. Recent infinity net and dot paintings make up a bulk of the show. They seem to possess an even greater "inner life" than her previous work, to my memory, anyway. Certain massings or color densities proscribe something approximate to geography or foliage. For example, *Enlightenment Means Living a Life Unconcernedly* (2008), in black and white, has a terrifyingly biological aspect to it. If it started to spread down the wall and across the floor, it wouldn't be much of a surprise.

Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity (2009), the exhibition's crowning achievement, sits in the back gallery, within a stand alone room that you enter one or a few at a time. It's lined with mirrors; many small, low wattage lights hang at varying heights. The cycle begins in darkness, and the golden lights brighten imperceptibly until they form a heartbreakingly gorgeous phosphorous surround. They dim, pitching you back into darkness. I doubt there has ever been a more concise parable of birth, life, and death. Of life's possibilities coming into focus or receding just as quickly.

If you can manage to shut your jaw after exiting *Aftermath*, the paintings take on an added resonance upon re-viewing. And the pumpkins now seem to be laughing with you instead of at you. Or vice versa.