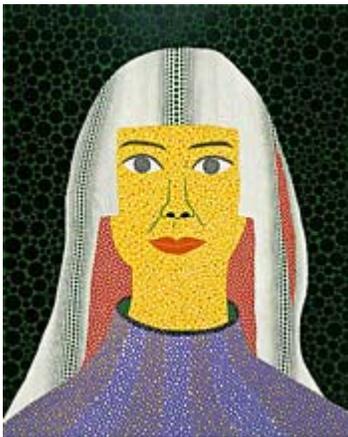


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Yayoi Kusama

Self-Portrait

2008

Gagosian Gallery



Installation view of Yayoi
Kusama at Gagosian Gallery

THE KUSAMA MYTH

by Jody B. Cutler

My art originates from hallucinations only I can see.

-- Yayoi Kusama

Yayoi Kusama, who celebrates her 80th birthday this year, has had an art career of mythic dimensions. Obsessively drawing her signature net patterns and polka-dots by adolescence, she fled her restrictive family, first to art school in Kyoto and then, in 1958, to New York City. A correspondent with Georgia O'Keeffe and lover to both Joseph Cornell and Donald Judd, she was an integral part of the New York avant-garde, despite (or perhaps because of) the obstacles she faced as a mentally fragile young woman alone, without financial support or English language proficiency. Her huge proto-Minimalist white net paintings, first exhibited in 1959, were



Installation view of Yayoi Kusama at Gagosian Gallery



Installation view of Yayoi Kusama at Gagosian Gallery



Yayoi Kusama

Fear of Death

2008

Gagosian Gallery



Yayoi Kusama

I Want to Live Forever

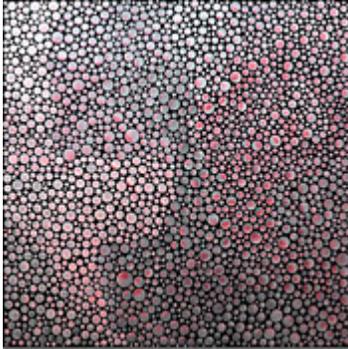
compared to the work of Jackson Pollock, and her objects covered with soft, stuffed-fabric phalluses provided the inspiration (she said) for Claes Oldenburg's soft sculpture.

In the 1960s, Kusama mounted "counterculture" performances that featured nudity in parks, at the Museum of Modern Art, in Times Square, on Wall Street, billing some of these events as homosexual orgies, which attracted attention from the police and the media. Though she remained clothed herself at her happenings, she did orchestrate art photographs in which she appears nude among her works, images that convey the close identification of her body with her art production. In 1973 she returned to Japan, where she was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder and hospitalized. She wrote several novels, and continued to make art; her art career began to take off again in the 1980s, culminating in a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1999.

Her current show of new works at the world's top contemporary art gallery -- Gagosian Gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea art district (and the forthcoming exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles) -- is still another triumph. Kusama has always aspired to fame and posterity, not least through her prolific output,

2008

Gagosian Gallery



Yayoi Kusama

Cosmic Space (TWBBAA)

2008

Gagosian Gallery



Yayoi Kusama

Infinity-Nets (TBBBTY)

2008

Gagosian Gallery



and in that she certainly seems to have succeeded.

Kusama's oeuvre has been generated largely by hallucinations symptomatic of a neurotic disorder that she first experienced around the age of ten, a condition that the artist has discussed widely and openly in interviews. These episodes were characterized by floating dots and net patterns, which surrounded and threatened to obliterate her physical and emotional sense of self. Aided by some training in Japanese Nihonga painting, Kusama gradually took to recreating her disturbing visions as a compulsive activity and self-therapy designed to control the illness. She has continued the practice, as well as psychiatric treatment, throughout her career.

Visitors to her new exhibition at Gagosian Gallery are greeted at the entrance by a colossal, Pop-Pointillist self-portrait of the artist composed from variously sized cartoon-like dots. Like a bluntly emanating Byzantine icon, the image is authoritative, close to the surface and ultimately impenetrable. About a dozen paintings are exhibited in the main galleries, some quite large, including two seemingly arbitrary dot compositions in silvery tones that perpetuate her earliest formal theme, and three pictographic works dominated by the image of

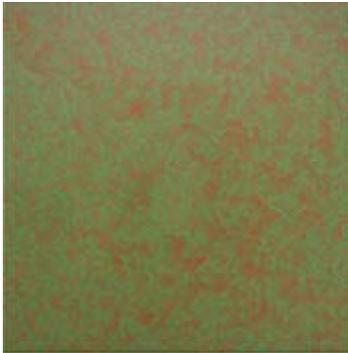
Yayoi Kusama

Enlightenment Means Living a

Life Unconcernedly

2008

Gagosian Gallery



Yayoi Kusama

Infinity-Nets (ABCETO)

2008

Gagosian Gallery



Yayoi Kusama

Aftermath of Obliteration of

Eternity

2009

Gagosian Gallery

a repeated, disembodied eye.

An apotropaic sign of omnipotence in many ancient cultures, this loaded symbol has emerged in Kusama's oeuvre over the past two decades and can be linked in Surrealist sensibility to her earlier use of phallic forms. It may be read as a personal symbol or metonym for the watchful, clinging presence she maintains with her work, as well as otherworldly inspiration and the pre-eminence of sight in confirming her existence. A rare variation from purely abstract motifs, the dotted almond eye shape in her hands is nonetheless simplified and multiplied to become also a stylized pod pattern related to the "holes" in her ubiquitous nets that are featured in the majority of the paintings on view.

Kusama developed the all-over net form in the milieu of Minimalist aesthetics, although the connection was more apparent (large scale, repetitive motifs, monochromatic color) than fundamental. The difference was in her hand-hewn and intimate, rather than broadly seamless or gestural, application of delicate patterns over vast expanses, which has been theorized in feminist and psychoanalytical terms by Izumi Nakajima, among others. But the buzzing picture plane created by the massive, solid lace (as Donald Judd once



Yayoi Kusama

Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity

2009

Gagosian Gallery



Yayoi Kusama

Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity

2009

Gagosian Gallery



Installation view of Yayoi Kusama at Gagosian Gallery

described the effect) suggests primary optical content, a direction she has pursued.

Collectively, the new net paintings convey formalist intentions in their focus on depth and surface perception through a series of binary juxtapositions of color, texture and other technical elements. The net imagery is tightly arranged into undulating passages that can evoke snakeskin or the center of sunflowers, enhanced by subtle pentimenti revealing layered reversals of the surface schemes. The most striking example, titled *I Want to Live Forever*, is a wall-sized, multi-paneled work of saturated neon cerise and lime-yellow. The hues have been scraped and woven into a blinding brocaded screen that fluctuates between a distinct organic gridding of lime-yellow superimposed over the cerise and a pulsating orange static. It's suggestive of looking into the sun.

Kusama has long claimed that something autonomous perpetuates her decades of web-making, which as both an obscure affliction and a survival tactic recalls the myth of Arachne. An accomplished weaver, Arachne dared contest with Minerva and at the tale's climax the goddess begins to physically punish the mortal girl who has challenged her. When Arachne attempts suicide to escape the blows,



Installation view of Yayoi
Kusama at Gagosian Gallery

Athena takes pity and restores her, albeit in devolved, arachnid form that reduces her willful creativity to biology.

Kusama's own biography includes a strained relationship with a domineering and abusive mother, and her emotional lack and the subsequent self-absorption latent in this painting mode of diminutive, introverted gestures can be linked to narcissism, which Kusama has taken up directly as subject matter (for example, in her *Narcissus Garden*, an outdoor installation of mirrored balls shown surreptitiously at the 1966 Venice Biennale after she was not invited to participate, and reprised in New York's Central Park in conjunction with the 2005 Whitney Biennial), and indirectly through the inclusion of herself in photographs of her art and her noted use of mirrors.

Among Kusama's best known works are two mirrored rooms exhibited in the mid-1960s at the Richard Castellane Gallery in New York (recreated in recent years for several travelling retrospectives), one viewed from the interior amid a field of spotted, soft phallic sculptures, the other viewed through apertures on the exterior and filled with blinking colored lights to produce infinite bouncing reflections, intermixed with fleeting partial images of

viewers. This immersive perceptual form was developed, like her painting style, to approximate real psychic experience (according to the artist), in this case an overwhelming sense of infinity in which the recurrent threatening elements endlessly proliferate. Yet, these works also suggest broader voyeuristic and narcissistic references beyond self-content and display an inventive handling of unconventional materials.

Though several New York Minimalists, notably Dan Flavin, were using common items from the hardware store to make sculpture, Kusama's mirrors remain metaphorical in the conventional, Classical sense, employed as mimetic devices to replicate her subjective, visual reality. The creative and destructive implications of the gaze may also be recalled via the reflecting pool of the Narcissus myth; while, in a complementary Eastern sense, the mirror is an empty sign without essence (following Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 1970).

The new mirror room at Gagosian is unabashedly poetic, replete with the cosmological allusions of its title, *Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity*. Building on a preceding piece, *Fireflies on the Water*, which references Japanese landscape and folklore (and which

was exhibited at the 2005 Whitney Biennial, and is now part of the Whitney collection), viewers step onto a dock-type platform into a darkened mirrored space punctuated by hundreds of miniature flickering lanterns to become part of a pleasurable, though slightly numbing, magical environment. With elusive means Kusama blends tropes of psychedelic and mystical visions with divine artistic ones like those presented in the myth of Narcissus.

Finally, in a front room painted orange and covered with large black dots, and viewable only from a window on the street, is a tableau of three overblown shiny orange pumpkins, ornamented with fastidious rows of black dots in a visual dialectic of bright, absurdist imagination and "diseased" vision that is typical of Kusama. Both playful and oppressive, the sculptures suggest the childlike otherness of the fictional Alice Liddell, as well as the giant apples of Magritte in claustrophobic cut-away views.

Kusama has recently added the pumpkin to her morphological repertoire, perhaps induced by her recollection of the bland fruit as a food staple during the war years, as well as the natural still life subjects of Nihonga. Within self-imposed limits expanded incrementally and discriminately, Kusama continues to weave a

range of themes in her oeuvre together
diachronically, with psychic compulsion, formal
art energy, and wide open eyes.

Yayoi Kusama, Apr. 16-June 27, 2009, at
Gagosian Gallery, 555 West 24th Street, New
York, N.Y. 10011

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