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The Moment

Culture

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Flower Power | Kusama-rama, From Miami to Milan

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Courtesy of the Gagosian Gallery and Fairchild Botanic Gardens Sculptures by the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama at the Fairchild Botanic Garden in Miami (left) and the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan.

The Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, born in 1929, has spent the last 20 years commuting between her large studio in the Tokyo suburbs and the psychiatric hospital that she chooses to call home. Flipping through the art calendar, we see that her paintings and sculptures are living a very different life, traveling all over the world and telling the many different stories that originate in the disturbed but wonderful mind of this octogenarian artist.

After last spring's successful exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, which put her name back in the minds — and in the checkbooks — of major collectors, a small Kusama retrospective opened last week in Milan at the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea and, on Dec. 5, an installation of new sculptures will make its debut in Miami at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden for Art Basel's sophisticated audience. Both shows will stay open through spring.

The retrospective in Milan marked the first time that Kusama's work was back in Italy after her scandal-provoking presence at the Venice Biennale in 1966, when, with the help of the Milanese artist Lucio Fontana, she presented "Narcissus Garden," a rogue installation of 1,500 reflective metal balls. (At the time, Kusama, dressed in a kimono, hawked the balls herself for \$2 a piece on the lawn in front of the Padiglione Italia in the Venice Biennale Giardini.) Another version of the same work is now in Milan and it still leaves you breathless, letting you see your image reflected endlessly on the spherical surfaces. The effect was even more dramatic at night, when the images were reflected not just on the balls but on the glass wall facing the garden behind them.

Louise Neri, who curated the Milan show with Akira Tatehata, the director of the National Museum of Osaka, presented different bodies of work, some older, some very recent. One room was full of mushroom sculptures and dot paintings; another had newer paintings with drips of color that made them look like giant silk scarves. Finally, in my favorite room, "Solitude of the Earth," there was a small wooden dresser, a table and two chairs covered with netting and painted totally white.

Kusama has also designed a special facade for the front of the Padiglione, now covered completely with her signature giant red dots, and two large colorful flower sculptures sitting in the courtyard in front of the Villa Reale. The Milanese guests at the special pre-opening party last Thursday — which included industrial and fashion designers, cultural and political figures, and the “molto bene” crowd in their usual well-mannered beige outfits — had to hide their surprise. Against the gray, wet and dumpy landscape of Milan, the brightness and joy of Kusama’s artistic statement shone through.

Look out for Kusama’s influence in coming collections from Dolce & Gabbana, Angela Missoni, Consuelo Castiglioni of Marni and Ennio Capasa of Costume Nationale. These designers, along with the mayor of Milan, Letizia Moratti, who was dressed in D&G black lace, were all present at a celebration dinner for Kusama held at the Palazzo Reale, where each table was decorated with a different monster flower arrangement.

Also curated by Neri, the installation at the Fairchild Botanic Garden in Miami, which previously presented works by Roy Lichtenstein and Mark di Suvero, promises another flower-power statement with the installation of three groups of sculptures in the Arcadia setting of the 83-acre gardens. There will be a group of giant flowers on the lawn, massive polka-dotted pumpkins and, in the pond, protruding red humps in place of water lilies. This is the first time Kusama’s hallucinogenic works will be taken out of the urban and industrial settings we are used to seeing them in and put under the Florida sun. The side effects on the Art Basel crowd might be the best show in town.