

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# MARKET FILE

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Tokyo-based Yayoi Kusama is an artist with global reach and a distinct, often polka-dotted, vision. She is hard at work for her April exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in New York. See page 85



# artistdossier



## Yayoi Kusama

WITH HER 80TH BIRTHDAY ON March 29, the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama is in the midst of a glorious late-career moment. Through June 8, an exhibition documenting her oeuvre from the 1960s to the present is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia. On April 16, Gagosian—Kusama's primary U.S. representative since she left her longtime dealer Robert Miller Gallery in 2007—will open a sprawling show of her recent work in New York. And just this past November, Kusama's steadily climbing auction prices culminated in a record \$5,794,500 (est. \$2.5–\$3.5 million), fetched at Christie's New York by one of her first "Infinity Net" works, the 1959 No. 2, a grand, six-by-nine-foot oil patterned with dense whorls of white paint. That considerable sum, paid by the Manhattan private dealer Philippe Ségalot, is also one of the highest bids ever earned by a living female artist, second only to the £3,177,250 (\$6,343,082) achieved by the painter Marlene Dumas last July at Sotheby's London.

Not bad for an artist who virtually disappeared from the international scene for two decades and whose home base since the early '70s has been a Jungian art therapy clinic in Tokyo. Although she suffers from a lifelong mental illness characterized by hallucinations and obsessive thoughts, Kusama has engineered her career with great savvy, even managing to mine her affliction for art's sake. The thread uniting her diverse body of work, which spans virtually every medium—painting, drawing, print, sculpture and performance, video and installation art—is her use of repetition, pattern and accumulation. This stylistic signature is most consistently expressed in a tightly clustered net/dot motif, whose origin Kusama traces to a set of troubling delusions she began having as a 10-year-old.

Born in Matsumoto City, Japan, in 1929, Kusama entered the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts in 1948. There she studied Nihonga painting, a traditional Japanese style originating in the late 19th century. By 1950, she was depicting abstracted natural forms in watercolor,

Kusama has long been critically recognized as a postwar innovator. Now, with an auction record and the backing of a powerhouse gallery, the market is connecting the dots. By Bridget Moriarity

gouache and oil, primarily on paper. During this period, she initiated a correspondence with Georgia O'Keeffe, the first woman to receive a solo show, in 1946, at New York's Museum of Modern Art. In 1958, Kusama moved to Manhattan hoping to emulate O'Keeffe's success at the center of the international postwar art scene.

The following year she showed her "Infinity Net" series at the Brata Gallery, in the East Village, where the works caught the attention of Frank Stella and her soon-to-be-lover Donald Judd. In fact, it was from this show that Judd purchased the record work, No. 2. At the time, "very few artists

Top: Kusama in the midst of her installation *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field (or Floor Show)*, at New York's Castellane Gallery in 1965. Right: *No. 2*, 1959, brought a record \$5.8 million at Christie's in 2008.



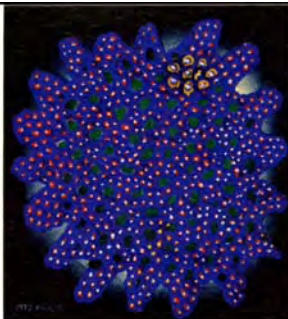


were doing purely abstract monochromatic paintings. She took the energy and compositional randomness of Abstract Expressionism one step further and well before figures like Agnes Martin did," says Alexandra Munroe, the senior curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim in New York. "There was also a deep Surrealist notion, because her paintings were so embedded in this psychic portrait of herself. And then there was the other part that makes her completely unique, which is the feminism involved. She conceived these as though she were imprisoned by these infinity nets in her own brain."

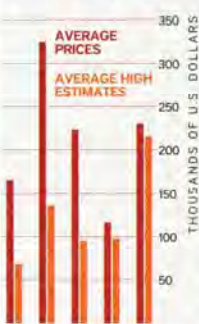
So consumed was Kusama by the concept of infinity that she began to apply the notion of endless repetition to other mediums, as in her "Accumulations" sculptures: household objects—kitchen pans, shoes and chairs—that she covered with phallic protrusions made from stuffed fabric. She also created the related series "Sex Obsession," consisting of furniture upholstered in the same manner, and "Food Obsession," for which she glued dried pasta on everything from handbags to mannequins. In 1964 she brought these pieces together in a room-sized installation at the Castellane Gallery, in New York, where she lined the walls with her "Infinity Net" paintings. By the end of the decade, Kusama had begun to use very public places, such as the Brooklyn Bridge and the pool of MoMA's sculpture garden, as stages for "happenings" in which posers of young dancers would undress to serve as living canvases for the artist's polka-dot paintings.

Kusama gained such notoriety that by 1967 she had amassed more newspaper clippings than Andy Warhol. She was delighted by the attention. "Her raison d'être has always been in a way to take over the world," says Laura Hoptman, a senior curator at New York's New Museum. "It wasn't about being famous or rich; it was about spreading the good word. It was almost evangelical." But the artistic elite looked down on Kusama's mass-culture popularity, and in 1973 she retreated to Tokyo with little money and in poor health. Although she continued to show her work in Japan, her career in the U.S. and Europe remained virtually dead throughout the '80s. "She lost touch due to her mental state, as well as to the parochialism of the New York art world and the remoteness of the Japanese art world then," explains Munroe.

An important exhibition organized by Munroe in 1989 in New York at the now-defunct Center for International Contemporary Arts and another one, curated by David Elliott at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England, the same year, were key to a revival of interest in Kusama, says Glenn Scott Wright, of the Victoria Miro Gallery, in London, the artist's primary dealer in Europe. The subsequent "Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968,"



Kusama's prices are increasing—and her estimates are catching up



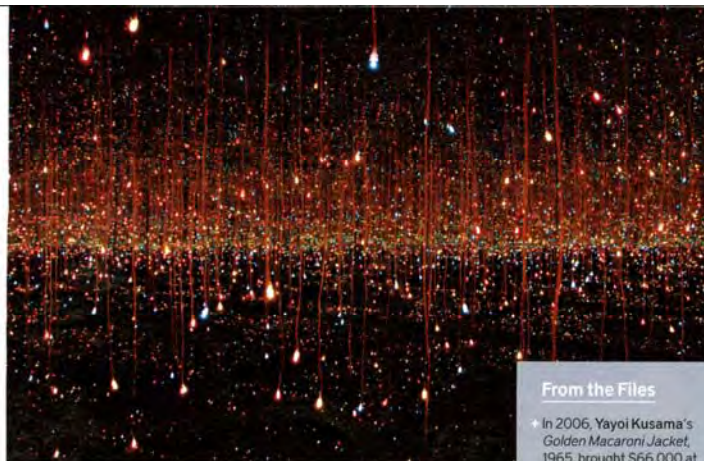
co-organized in 1998 by Hoptman, who was then at MoMA, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's senior curator Lynn Zelevansky, firmly established the historical significance of her early work.

Of Kusama's oeuvre, the top dollar is commanded by the early "Infinity Net" works, like the record-setting No. 2, Robert Manley, the head of post-war and contemporary art at Christie's New York, says of that sale: "It was one of these perfect storms in the auction world where you have a work of the absolute highest quality from an incredibly rare period, the condition was impeccable, and it had a great provenance," having once been owned by Judd. Hidenori Ota, of Ota Fine Arts, Kusama's longtime Tokyo dealer, who has worked with her since the 1980s, believes only four other examples match the record piece in scale and vintage, all of them now owned by Japanese museums. While many more smaller "Infinity Nets" exist, they, too, are hard to come by. Manley cites as evidence of this the fact that since the November auction, "we haven't gotten a single call from someone who has a late 1950s Kusama they want to sell." Sotheby's had no upcoming lots to report at press time either. »

Clockwise from top: *Nets Flower no. Q121*, an early gouache in the inventory of Anthony Meier; *Infinity-Nets Zsaffi*, a 2008 acrylic at Gagosian next month; *The Moment of Regeneration*, 2004, a 55-piece work, and *The Passing Winter*, a 2005 installation—both from Victoria Miro Gallery; and *Golden Macaroni Jacket*, 1965, which earned just under \$150,000 at Sotheby's in 2007.







Kusama's newer works have been a harder sell, but that may be changing.

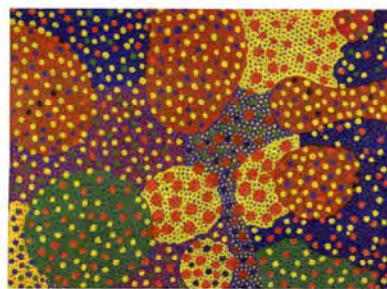
The series' rarity might explain why *Untitled (Infinity Net Series)*—also from 1959, though much smaller than No. 2 and less well preserved—brought \$1,552,000 at Sotheby's New York in May 2007, far exceeding its estimate of \$300,000 to \$400,000. The winning bid, the second highest price for the artist, went even higher within 24 hours when the underbidder bought the painting from the dealer who purchased it, says Anthony Grant, a senior specialist in contemporary art at Sotheby's: "The premium the next day was wild."

Grant notes that Kusama's works on paper are far more common than her paintings: "There seems to be no end to the drawings—even really good examples from the 1950s." Such pieces, he says, typically fetch between \$60,000 and just under \$150,000 at auction, with the top price standing at \$133,000, paid in November 2007 at Sotheby's New York for the acrylic and gouache *Stars (F.U.S.)*, 1953, which carried an estimate of \$40,000 to \$60,000. As for the artist's three-dimensional pieces, their performance on the block often disappoints, according to Grant: "Sometimes people find them almost too raw." The highest price for a sculpture from her New York years is £72,500 (\$147,687), fetched by the 1965 wool, pasta, paint and hanger assemblage *Golden Macaroni Jacket* at Sotheby's London in October 2007.

According to her dealers, the secondary market for Kusama's older work keeps pace with her auction prices. At press time the San Francisco dealer Anthony Meier had an early gouache on paper, *Nets Flower no. Q121*, 1953/1964, priced at \$100,000, and the Barbara Mathes Gallery, in New York, had a vibrantly colored untitled oil from 1967, priced in the mid six figures. When asked who is purchasing her work, Meier says "the profile is as varied as [for] any [artist]," adding that, "more to the point, many of Kusama's buyers have her contemporaries in their collections but have lacked her presence until recently."

"It's natural that when artists like Warhol, Pollock and de Kooning are going into the stratosphere, people look at other opportunities," says Manley. "Kusama is part of an expanding canon of artists from the 1940s to the 1960s."

While Kusama's vintage material is finally receiving its critical and commercial due,



## From the Files

- In 2006, **Yayoi Kusama's** *Golden Macaroni Jacket*, 1965, brought \$66,000 at **Sotheby's**. A little over a year later, the same piece sold for \$148,000 at the house's London salesroom. In May 2005, *No. 3, 1962* set Kusama's then record when the work, made from egg crates and upholstery stuffing on canvas, sold for \$12 million at **Christie's**. The firm's **Robert Manley** observes: "It was a fantastically minimal conceptual object, and it predated sculpture that would come later by artists like **Eva Hesse** and **Bruce Nauman**."
- A lesser-known aspect of the artist's output are the products—watches, hairpins, paperweights—that she began making in 1969. Kusama's studio continues to produce merchandise, which, like the artist **Takashi Murakami's** wares, is sold in gift shops of Japanese museums. As curator **Laura Hoptman** explains, "Murakami wouldn't be Murakami without Kusama."

her new work is a harder sell. According to Meier, the early pieces bring 8 to 10 times the amount her current examples fetch. It appears, however, that this price scale is being reevaluated: A 2006 Stylofoam and acrylic pumpkin earned \$264,000, the top price for one of her sculptures, at Sotheby's in March 2007, and a later "Infinity Net," *The Galaxy I Saw in My Dream*, which dates to 1993, earned 55 million yen (\$37,949) at the Tokyo-based Est-Ouest Auctions in April 2008.

Gagosian director Louise Neri believes that the true market value of the monumental paintings Kusama is actively producing now has yet to be determined. (Although "a fragile person," says Neri, Kusama leaves her clinic daily to work with a small team of assistants at her nearby studio.) "In recent years few major contemporary works have come up at auction, although there have been several early pieces that have fetched encouragingly high prices," Neri observes, adding that European buyers are more receptive to Kusama's newer work than American ones. The gallery hopes to change that with its April show, which will contain the artist's latest "Infinity Net" paintings; several sculptural pieces, including glossy hand-painted pumpkins made from fiberglass-reinforced plastic; and paintings that Neri cryptically promises will be "quite a surprise." Prices range from \$200,000 to over \$1 million, depending mainly on size.

But there will always be that lust among Kusama collectors for the old. As Manley says, "There's a sense that in the late 1950s she realized all the ideas that she'll be exploring for the rest of her career—that those early ones are really the first spark of genius." 田



Clockwise from top left: *Fireflies on the Water*, 2000, a mirror-lined room with a pool in the center and 150 hanging lights; an untitled 1967 oil in the collection of the dealer Barbara Mathes; *Pumpkin*, 2006, which brought \$264,000 at Sotheby's in 2007—Kusama's highest price for a sculpture at auction; and the artist surrounded by her installation *Narcissus Garden*, shown to controversy at the 1966 Venice Biennale.