

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art

Reviews

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Aftermath of
Obliteration of
Eternity

Yayoi Kusama

★★★★★

Gagosian Gallery, through June 27
(see Chelsea)

The Japanese artist once again wraps her head around infinity.

By **T.J. Carlin**

Yayoi Kusama reminds me a bit of the cheerful and persistent panhandler on my corner: The consistency with which both approach their tasks can be irritating, impenetrably relentless and disarming, all at the same time. Kusama's work never prompts quite the same reaction twice, and as such, she very literally dismantles Einstein's famous observation that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

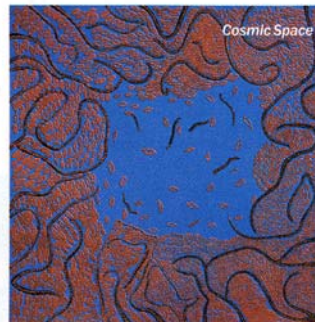
Few artists make it as difficult to separate personal history from art as Kusama. Troubled as a child by colorful, patterned hallucinations, she began to produce work that reflected these visions of infinity. After moving to New York at age 27, she befriended artists central to the contemporary conversation, including Frank Stella and Donald Judd. Large outdoor installations, which often constituted patterned

sculptures or objects such as trees, morphed into events in which she hand-painted the bodies of naked performers with her personal motifs. She rapidly began to rival Warhol for status as an enfant terrible, and was addicted to the attention, even though her happenings received mixed critical response. Insolvent and in declining health, Kusama moved back to Japan in 1973, and committed herself to an art therapy clinic where she continues to reside and create work.

Kusama is known for tightly controlling her public persona; in no photograph is she ever seen to smile, and she rarely grants interviews. It would be convenient to see her oeuvre as purely obsessive-compulsive expression, and yet her level of business savvy—she recently designed a cell phone for the Japanese corporation KDDI—indicates a keen ability to harness media vectors.

For all her self-promotion, no other artist seems quite as intent on creating a common arena in which the viewer can share her personal reality. She quite literally takes it to the streets in this exhibition, which consists of two installations and a series of

paintings. The entrance to Gagosian's 24th Street location is flanked to the left by an approximately 20-foot-long room that's open to the outdoors, painted canary yellow with black dots, and filled with three tumescent, human-size pumpkins whose patterns match the walls. It's undeniably pleasing to bask in its sunny glow, set against the gray concrete of a Chelsea sidewalk, and to watch people pause and take photos, tourist-style. In the short time I stood inside her other installation, *Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity*, one of an ongoing series of freestanding "Infinity Rooms," approximately 12 people passed through, including



Cosmic Space

one man whose iPod was turned up so high, I could hear strains of the Allman Brothers. The general sentiment among visitors was one of wonderment at the tiny blinking lights hung throughout the box, the scintillations repeating ad infinitum

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in the mirrored walls of the small space. A platform set above a shallow layer of water covering the floor of the installation quite literally forces a common point of view. Kusama is, as ever, able to indulge her personal vision and still ensure the pleasure of others.

It is appropriate to consider Kusama in the context of Minimalism, especially her paintings, which straddle a significant art-historical gap. While all of the works here were made within the last two years, they're an extension of a series she began in the '60s, in which she explored the concept of infinity as a palpable extension of the visions she claimed to be having. While using process-oriented strategies employed by her male counterparts at the time, Kusama didn't attempt to divorce herself from the emotional associations of her work. She still doesn't. The violently hot pink-with-yellow-spots in *I want to live forever* are a good example of a highly evocative work, rippling with warm and cool masses that are, in fact, the buildup of the former color painted over the latter in varying amounts. Whereas artists such as Judd steered very clear of illusion, representation or any human reference in their works, this vast field suggests oceans of nearly psychedelic space, and the title could possibly imply that, at age 80, Kusama is aware of the fact that she's approaching the threshold of that ultimate human infinity.

Personal and art histories aside, it's impressive to see these works hung together in a museum-quality show. In their scope, they demonstrate Kusama's intensely serious yet humorous investigation into the very finite ways we occupy space and time. ■