

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Yayoi Kusama, PAC, Milan

By Rachel Spence

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I Want to Live Forever, the new show of Yayoi Kusama's work in Milan, is one more example of the increasingly ambiguous rapport between public institutions and private galleries.

Although on display at PAC, the Pavilion of Contemporary Art, which is run by the city council, the show has been proposed and curated – though not funded – by the Gagosian Gallery, which represents Kusama. Out of the 34 works on display, more than half are owned by the gallery.



Trademark polka dots: 'Pumpkin: medium' (2008)

Such a marriage of public and private could not have alighted on a more appropriate subject. In the late 1960s, Kusama, who is now 80, was fiercely criticised for selling out her vision. She started a fashion line based on her trademark polka dot motif and was chided by the 1966 Venice Biennale for trying to sell to passers-by the mirrored spheres that made up her installation "Narcissus Garden". Today, her website contains a link to her line of trinkets sold in the museum shop in her home town of Matsumoto City.

Yet Kusama's talent for merchandising is just one strand in the story of one of 20th-century art's most compelling and enigmatic protagonists. Born in 1929 to well-to-do but unhappily married parents, Kusama suffered from hallucinations – nets that threatened to engulf her, talking flowers, an infinity of polka dots – from an early age. “These strange, uncanny things ... drove me half into madness for many years,” she wrote. “The only way to free myself from them was to control them myself – by reproducing [them] on paper ...”

A brief period studying traditional Japanese painting instilled a formal serenity western painters struggled to attain. By the time she arrived in New York in 1957, she had transcended an early Surrealist phase and was already figuring the nets and spots that would make her famous. Her first plaudits were for vast canvases painstakingly painted with crochet-like loops which she christened “infinity nets”. Subsequently, her obsession with what she described as “infinite repetition” drove her to cover paintings and installations with polka dots, airline stickers, cartons and toy-like phalluses. She made mirrored rooms and orchestrated happenings such as painting naked models with polka dots on Brooklyn Bridge.

Although her performances sometimes took the guise of antiwar or anticapitalist protests, Kusama never pretended to be driven by anything other than a compulsion to represent the patterns that colonised her mind. It was her good fortune to be born in the modern era: her vision was uncannily coherent with the mid-century avant garde. Donald Judd and Frank Stella both bought her work; Claes Oldenberg and Andy Warhol were influenced by her.

By the early 1970s, she had fallen out of critical favour. Derided as a publicity seeking phoney, she returned to Japan and checked herself into a psychiatric hospital, where she still lives. Over the next 20 years, she wrote several novels – grotesque, psychedelic voyages that now enjoy cult status – but barely exhibited any art. Only in the late 1980s did she start to re-emerge. Today, with galleries such as Gagosian and Victoria Mirò behind her, she is firmly established as a grande dame of the

contemporary art scene. In November, one of her “infinity nets” tied with a piece by Andy Warhol for top price at Phillips de Pury in New York.

By and large, her vision has stood the test of time. Suspended with LED lights that glow like votive lamps above a floor of water, her most recent mirrored room, “Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity” (2009), may be no more than a variation on earlier works but the effect – myriad, tiny flames stretching away into liquid darkness – is as poetic a realisation of infinite space as any artist, from Italo Calvino to Lucio Fontana, has achieved.

Not all the pieces are successful. In paintings such as “Death is Inevitable” (2008) and “Cosmic Space” (2008), she bravely opts for empty space and unpredictable pattern. Yet the results, discordant and lifeless, suggest that the formal nature of her vision is crucial to its power.

Though once feted by feminists, Kusama’s vision is far from the sinister fury of Louise Bourgeois or the self-lacerating tendency of Tracey Emin. On show in Milan, “Life (Repetitive Vision)” (1998) – a forest-style installation of soft, plastic, phallus-like forms patterned with black and yellow spots – is a re-elaboration of “Sex Obsession”, a cycle of phallus-upholstered furniture she made in the early 1960s. That series, she said, was inspired by her terror of male sexuality. Yet the later piece’s realisation is less neurotic than bold.

If Kusama is a feminist, it is in the manner of Emily Dickinson. Another visionary genius who knew how to temper passion with form, the 19th-century poet retired to her father’s house to write thousands of poems unimpeded by the demands of life as a wife and mother. As prolific at 80 as at 30, Kusama has likewise retreated from the world, with equally creative results. Apparently she works every day in her studio, where, in true postmodern style, she is aided by a team of assistants but (as a video on Gagosian’s website testifies) also still paints and models herself. Both buyers and sellers of her work must be praying that she does indeed live for ever.

Until February 14