

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Vivid Hallucinations From a Fragile Life Yayoi Kusama at Whitney Museum of American Art

By Holland Cotter



Yayoi Kusama A retrospective of this Japanese artist's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art includes paintings from 2009 and 2010.

“American” is an expandable category at the Whitney Museum of American Art, elastic enough to accommodate a retrospective of Yayoi Kusama, 83, an artist who, apart from a decade-plus stay in the United States many years ago, has spent all of her long life in Japan, where she was born.

It was during that American sojourn, however, when she lived as an immigrant in Manhattan, that she did her best-known work: eyelet-patterned abstract paintings, furniture bristling with soft-sculpture phalluses, and polka-dot designs suitable to any and every surface. So closely has her reputation rested on that New York stay that the last Kusama survey hereabouts, at the Museum of Modern Art in 1998, never strayed beyond it.

So it's been left to the Whitney to give a synoptic, transcultural take on her output, one that changes our view of its shape. By including material from the 1940s through the present, the show — which originated at the Tate Modern in London — demonstrates that Ms. Kusama made

some of her most complex and personal art before she left Japan in 1957 and after she returned there, in a state of psychological crisis, in 1973, the future of her career uncertain.

As any account of that career will tell you, including those Ms. Kusama gives, crisis mode was the source of her art. She was born in the city of Matsumoto, a few hundred miles northwest of Tokyo, to an affluent family that owned a large plant nursery and seed farm. Her father, by her account, was distant, cool and a serial philanderer; her mother, embittered by marriage, was perversely abusive.

For whatever reason, she had hallucinations from a young age. She claimed that flowers spoke to her; that fabric patterns came to life, multiplied endlessly and threatened to engulf and expunge her. These neurotic fears were compounded by the grueling realities of World War II, when she was in her teens and had begun drawing and painting with ferocious concentration, clinging to art as a lifeline.

Her grip on it was more than firm: it was unrelenting and propulsive. With a boldness unusual in a young woman of her day, she left home, under a cloud of disapproval, for art school in Kyoto. There she customized academic styles to her own subversive ends. In the show's earliest painting, "Lingering Dream" from 1949, she translates the traditional theme of a floral still life into a nightmare of withered limbs and vaginas dentata set in a blasted landscape.

Two dozen small drawings from the early 1950s that follow in the next gallery are among the exhibition's highlights. Done in ink, watercolor, pastel and collage, they include references to vegetal, animal and cellular forms. At the same time, each work is abstract, the sum of repeated, labor-intensive details: fields of minute dots, clusters of radiant lines, networks of slug-shaped strokes.

Despite the micromanaged intricacy of the drawings, she turned them out fast and in bulk, establishing a rhythm of productivity she still maintains. She established other habits too, like having herself routinely photographed with new work. And the Whitney installation, overseen by the curator David Kiehl, opens with snapshots taken over several decades.

In New York in the 1960s her preference for documenting her art this way earned her a reputation as a narcissistic self-brander, though it might equally be taken as gesture of self-affirmation on the part of someone who suffered the threat of psychic obliteration. However you see the matter — and some people consider Ms. Kusama's self-proclaimed psychosis little more than savvy self-mythologizing — the photographic image of her grave, guarded but oddly affectless gaze is integral to her art.

By the end of the 1950s she felt she had done what she could do in her homeland. And she knew that America was the place for an ambitious artist to go. In 1957 she flew to Seattle, where she stayed for a year before moving on to her ultimate goal, New York City. When she arrived, Action Painting and misogyny still dominated the scene. And Ms. Kusama, who had an instinct for undermining authority on its own terms, tackled both head on.

Right off the bat she produced abstract paintings on a king-size scale, but with gestures that, far from swaggeringly expressive, were all the same: tiny, linked curves of thick white paint laid down, one after the other, on a dark-stained ground. Four of these paintings add up to the show's most compelling installation. From a distance they look like soiled blank walls. Up close they're like sheets of openwork lace or rippling water or a raked garden.

She called them Infinity Net paintings and they were a hit with smart young artists and critics like Donald Judd, who saw in them something new being forged from something old, high art

being conflated with craft, masculinity with femininity, individuality with multiplicity. As for Ms. Kusama, who at this point had little money, scant English and a visa about to expire, she posed for her customary photographs and moved on.

In the early 1960s she turned from paintings that looked like stitchwork to stitching sculptures — small, phallus shaped — from cotton-stuffed cloth. She attached hundreds of these tuber-size objects to ordinary furniture and everyday clothes to create bristling, smothering domestic environments — “Accumulations” was her term — that, among other things, mocked the possession-crammed, father-knows-best home that had become an American postwar ideal.

Yet in the same America, a bit later in the 1960s, she aligned herself and her art with a different set of ideals, those embodied in the call for peace, sexual revolution and tolerance for eccentricity of all kinds issued by the burgeoning hippie counterculture.

The counterculture was bent on shattering ethical givens to create a new order. Ms. Kusama’s work had always been made from individual elements joined together into a whole. As if in response to a dramatically breaking-apart time, she now made one visual element in her repertory, the polka dot, a kind of universal binder that united everything it touched — paintings, collages, films, fashions, political protests, orgiastic public performances — in a personal utopia, a Kusamaworld, with the impresario-artist its center.

In the New York City of the mid-’60s she and her art were everywhere. Newspapers clamored for photographs of her wearing dots, painting dots, mingling with the dot-covered nude dancers in street performances that were part protest, part circus.

The affirming visibility she had always craved was hers; at the same time she was vanishing into her art, becoming one with it. In pictures we see a rare sight: Ms. Kusama smiling.

Then, like the Summer of Love, it was all over. The social climate changed. Peace and love wilted under a blast of national anger and violence. Polka dots, like paper dresses, went out of style. Ms. Kusama, disoriented, went into retreat. Her art experienced the equivalent of a nervous breakdown, and she tried to find her way to a safe place.

The safe place turned out to be Japan. In 1973 she moved back permanently; in 1977 she took up residency in a psychiatric hospital (where she still lives) and built a large studio nearby where she could work daily. During these years she also started making small, enigmatic paintings and collages, with luminous colors blooming against nightshade-colored grounds. In touch and mood they’re very much like what she was doing before she came to America.

The Whitney show has a dozen such pieces. Some of the titles are morbid — “I Who Committed Suicide,” “Graves of the Unknown Soldier” — but the work is imaginative and individually inflected.

It looks restoratively alive.

It would be gratifying to report that she continued to move in this intimate, diaristic direction, but such was not the case. Perhaps she felt that her conservative country needed some shaking up. She probably needed some attention.

She resumed making stuffed-cloth sculpture, larger than before, but also, for some reason, less steroidal, more abstract, more ordinary. She continued to paint, but now in high-colored acrylics on canvas, on an amped-up scale. The show’s final gallery is hung, floor to ceiling, with recent

examples, some pretty good, some pretty bad. The abundance seems calculated to make distinctions less obvious.

And she has stayed on the polka-dot path, most recently in designs for a collection of dot-patterned clothes and accessories — skirts, handbags, sunglasses — commissioned by Marc Jacobs of Louis Vuitton. Her compatriot, Takashi Murakami, received a similar commission in 2008, and his brand of profuse, decorative, acid-edged Pop owes a clear debt to Ms. Kusama. But then, many movements, artists and designers do, and always have, from Andy Warhol and Op Art in America in the 1960s to international Minimalists and Conceptualists of different stripes over time, to Damien Hirst and Rei Kawakubo today.

If aspects of Ms. Kusama's work now come across as dated and thin, there is no doubt about her heroic, barrier-crashing accomplishment over the long haul. Her Infinity Net paintings and Accumulation sculptures are deservedly classics of global stature; her Japanese work of the 1940s and early 1970s are treasures still underknown. They are things to seek out and dwell on.