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Polka Dot Queen: Yayoi Kusama On Her Whitney Retrospective And Vuitton Collaboration

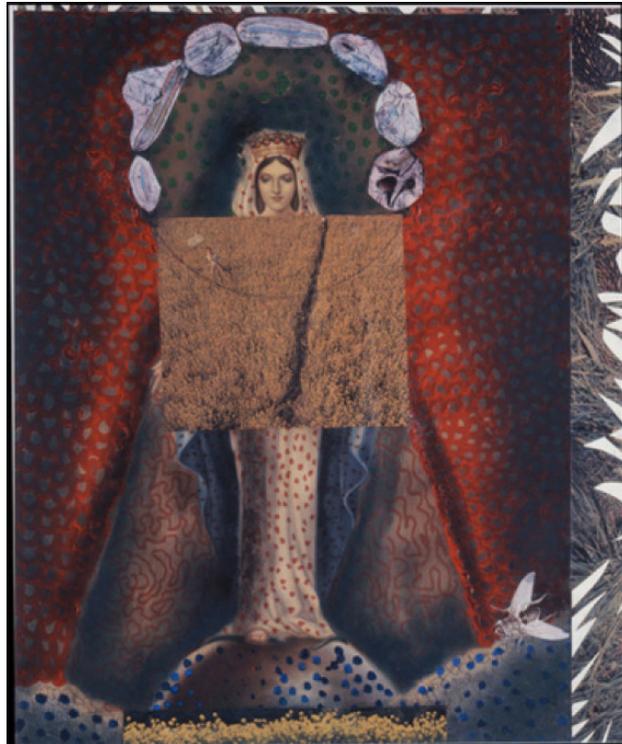


This is Yayoi Kusama's year. She collaborated with Louis Vuitton on a fashion collection and is now exhibiting a traveling retrospective, all while continuing to live in a mental institution in Japan. But who is this enigmatic woman?

Like many aspects of Kusama's strange world, internal states and external surroundings seem to be in cahoots. The artist's polka dots have procreated with unstoppable fecundity, dominating and defining Kusama's work since 1949. And now she has made a similar move with her own persona, spreading her image as Kusama-in-Wonderland, playful and pained, across physical and digital galleries worldwide. (Is it a coincidence that dotty means obsessed or infatuated?) The prolific Japanese artist presents her artwork and her personal narrative as one and the same; her dots, her art, literally manifest themselves on everything she sees, creates, is. Embedded in Kusama's retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York are old family photos, depicting her years before the first time she hallucinated a polka dot. The first photograph shows a tiny Kusama swallowed whole by supernatural-

looking petals. There is something strangely relevant, if not necessary, about the image, depicting this little Alice already in Wonderland -- her external surroundings mimicking her strong imagination and altered mental state. Her pictures of herself are dappled with dots; even at a young age, she presents herself as afflicted.

In order to learn more, we asked the polka dot queen some questions about her work. Her answers are mystical at best, evasive at worst, but we love her all the more for the terse delivery.



HP: In news coverage, your works are often depicted as playful; however, in interviews it seems that you view them as painful in many ways. How do you confront these two interpretations?

YK: As you mentioned, my works are painful and at the same time playful. Some are often seen as playful works, but others are static.

HP: You have referred to your polka dots as a kind of virus, spreading over everything in their midst. With the idea of "viral" in mind, do you see any relationship between your place as an artist in history and the dots you continue to depict?

YK: Since my childhood, I have always made works with polka dots. Earth, moon, sun and human beings are all represent dots; a single particle among billions. This is one of my important philosophies, which is accepted by many people.

HP: The clothing (or lack thereof) you created in your happenings were sort of anti-fashion. Which leads us to ask: What led you to collaborate with Louis Vuitton? Do you see any discord between your old and new fashion explorations?

YK: At first Mr. Marc Jacobs is a big fan of my works, and he offered me the collaboration with Louis Vuitton. I willingly accepted the offer because he is a genius designer with wonderful creativity. Basically my idea and explorations on fashion have not changed, however I believe I'm going state-of-the-art on fashion.

HP: Your move to New York and start an art career was, in a way, inspired by your correspondence with Georgia O'Keeffe, who was an established artist by that time. Do you feel as though you have had such an effect on another young artist?

YK: You could say so in some aspects and not in the others.

HP: You devote great care to both telling your personal life story and seeking self-obliteration. How do you balance the idea to express yourself and destroy yourself through art?

YK: Certainly, I devote my energy to both telling my personal life story and seeking self-obliteration. However, I will not destroy myself through art.

HP: You have been making work in a mental institution since 1975. How do you find inspiration in such a confined space? Would you ever think of leaving the institution?

YK: It doesn't matter at all for me that I work in hospital or anywhere with limited space. Every day, I'm creating new works with all my might.



Kusama's early spot paintings appear like a dark plague, a swarm of unwanted guests. In reds, grays and blacks, the dots hover as if caught in a storm, surrounded by teeth. Sometimes Kusama splays her canvas wide open, mixing sensuality with a sense of dread and violation.

In the next recursion of dots, they are creatures of depth rather than line, heft rather than shape. Gobs of paint entwine to resemble a stretched fishing net or the scales of whatever creature was caught in it. Part frosting, part quicksand, this room of oversized cream-colored canvasses hints that the spots are gaining force.

The spots take the backseat in the room depicting Kusama's relationship with special box maker Joseph Cornell, whose devotion to his mother prevented them from having an intimate relationship, although it was an obsessive one. His odes to her cry out: "Yayoi fly back to me spring flower and I shall be a spring to you like this butterfly." The two artists made collages of butterflies and poems best whispered, spent many hours on the phone and none at all in bed.

Combining real pain and surreal sweetness, Kusama tackles a lifetime of sexual paralysis through soft, plushy phalluses that cover boats, sofas, high heeled pumps and suitcases. The smushy genitalia sprout like over-eager vegetables that rot before they even get ripe. Her fear of the penis, she has repeatedly said, stems back to her philandering father who would parade his mistresses on display, leaving his wife to take her anger out through verbally abusing Kusama.

Kusama's neurosis is a peculiar one to try and parse. On the one hand she is a narcissist, taking her picture, recounting her victories, creating a character for herself as she lives it. And yet she spends an immense amount of time and effort attempting to obliterate the self, perhaps impermanently.

Aside from her obsession with the dot, Kusama has returned again and again to the motif of the "infinity net," an ever-reaching field that when realized, obliterates the self. Her retrospective features an infinity net of sorts with "Fireflies on the Water," a stunning installation in which the viewer stands alone in a room full of mirrors and twinkling lights atop a sheet of still water. Experiencing the illusion of fireflies glittering in a dark pocket of the universe, Kusama invites us to leave New York City and enter the abyss -- until a museum docent opens the door and reminds you that your minute is up. Her nets recall the vast yet illusory expanse of the internet, where you become a speck, a dot.

Kusama's pattern of self-curation and simultaneous obliteration has gone viral in every sense, extending past museum walls and onto the way we have come to understand and proliferate ourselves. Kusama's works are not just playful and expressive, but help us see how we use patterns and memes to create and curate our personas.

Yayoi Kusama's retrospective is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York until September 30, 2012.