

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Art's Polka-Dot Princess Returns to New York

By PHOEBE HOBAN



Getty Images. Yayoi Kusama in her Tokyo studio in January. The artist is being celebrated around the city this summer.

Manhattan is on the cusp of an unofficial Kusama-fest: From this week through the end of the summer, the legendary Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, once dubbed "the Polka Dot Princess," will have work on display in six city venues, from Louis Vuitton's flagship Fifth Avenue store, which will sport an eye-popping Kusama-patterned façade (accompanied by 14 Kusama-inspired windows in Vuitton locations throughout the city) to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where a major show, Ms. Kusama's first New York retrospective in 15 years, opens Thursday and runs through Sept. 30. Across the street, Gagosian, the artist's U.S. gallery, will mount several recent paintings and put a whimsical sculpture on its penthouse terrace.

Downtown won't be left out: Vuitton's SoHo shop will become a pop-up polka-dot oasis when it turns its travel room into a Kusama Concept Store; down on Pier 45, off Prince Street, there's a multi-part Kusama installation, "Guidepost to the New Space," that looks like a herd of hippos bred with ladybugs. And in addition to the catalog accompanying the Whitney retrospective, which originated at the Tate Modern in London, Rizzoli Publications is releasing a colorful coffee-table compendium on the artist, edited by Louise Neri, a director at Gagosian, in August. The Kusama convergence, Ms. Neri said, "will take her New York connection to another level."

Coronation of the 'Polka Dot Princess'



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

Ms. Kusama's sculpture, called "Guidepost for Heaven" and exhibited in France in 2008, features her signature polka dots.

Not since the 1960s, when Ms. Kusama was a galvanizing New York art-world fixture along with such contemporary artists as Donald Judd, Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol, has the work of the artist, who is 83 and has voluntarily lived in a Tokyo psychiatric hospital for the last 35 years—with a fully staffed studio nearby—been so ubiquitous.

"Kusama became an artist in New York," said Whitney curator David Kiehl. "She pushed a lot of buttons. Her work took on a form that could only have happened in New York because she had freedom here. The New York period is crucial, and the work that follows is derived from language she developed here. I think the show is going to be an eye-opener for a lot of people."

The Whitney retrospective ranges from her early paintings, drawings and collages to her groundbreaking Infinity Net canvases and her soft phallus-studded Accumulations sculptures. "Fireflies on the Water," her mirrored "Infinity Room," has been attracting crowds since it opened at the museum in mid-June. Add to that the new Kusama collaboration with Marc Jacobs by Louis Vuitton, which includes polka-dotted clothing and accessories (shoes, purses, watches and jewelry,) and hordes of New Yorkers are likely to go literally dotty over the artist.

Said Ms. Kusama of the Vuitton venture, "I know it will be displayed beautifully, and I like the product designs and look forward to having a look at the Kusama dolls which are scheduled to be displayed in the windows." The elusive artist is even expected to make a rare New York appearance at both the Vuitton launch and the Whitney opening.



Fred W. McDarrah/Getty Images
The artist on the Brooklyn Bridge in 1968.

The masterful merging of art and commerce is not new to Kusama; in fact, the high-profile New York launch of the Vuitton collaboration (which includes pop-up stores and window displays worldwide) brings the concept full circle. Ms. Kusama was one of the first artists to exploit the concept of self-branding. Before Takashi Murikami and Damien Hirst arrived, her signature polka-dot patterns could be found on lip gloss, key chains, T-shirts and cars.

The current celebration of Ms. Kusama's work represents something of a second New York coming for the artist. She arrived in Manhattan in 1958, moving into a modest apartment on East 19th Street. Her first show in the city, in 1959, featured five Infinity Net paintings—large canvases entirely painted with a repeated pattern of small arcs. Its prescient minimalism was praised by, among others, Mr. Judd, a neighbor with whom she became close. He helped her scavenge furniture from the streets to turn into Accumulations—a couch, for instance, covered with fabric phalluses—for her Sex Obsession series, which also proliferated on chairs, tables and even shoes. (Despite the artistic engagement with sexual issues, she had an aversion to the act itself; her relationship with Joseph Cornell at the time was, according to her, passionate but platonic.)

Obsessive-compulsive repetition is the most characteristic motif of Ms. Kusama's work. Since her unhappy childhood in Imperial Japan, she has experienced hallucinations, and she has exorcised her demons by transforming them into art. Ms. Kusama immersed herself in the turbulent sexual and anti-Vietnam politics of the 1960s, creating a series of radical performances and happenings. She also expertly manipulated and marketed her own self-image as part of her work, hiring photographers to document everything—from exhibitions where she posed in outfits matching her art, to the nude happenings she staged at the Museum of Modern Art and outside the New York Stock Exchange, where naked people were painted with polka-dots.

"She leapt on every opportunity to self-promote, and her entrepreneurial talent was legendary," said Tate Modern curator Frances Morris. "She had a deep-seated need to project her vision through every possible means."

Ms. Kusama's multimedia activities ranged from a fashion store where she sold clothes covered with polka dots and with cutouts exposing breasts and buttocks, to a marketing company, Kusama Enterprises, to her association with a sex-centric paper, "Kusama Orgy."



Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal

The facade of the Louis Vuitton store on Fifth Avenue, currently covered in Kusama polka-dots.

"It's difficult to say in a word, but in New York in that time I became more productive," Ms. Kusama said of her intense New York experience. "When in New York in the '60s, I overcame many difficulties to gain recognition."

But the nonstop self-promotion that worked so successfully for Warhol eventually backfired on Kusama. (One critic remarked at the time that "Kusama is definitely suffering from over-exposure of over-exposure.") In 1973 she returned to Japan. Four years later she moved into the hospital that has since been her home. But she has remained amazingly prolific. Her career rebounded in the '90s, and her multifaceted work—from her early Infinity Net paintings to her biomorphic patterns to her brightly colored acrylic canvases and large-scale sculptures of stylized flowers and pumpkins—has earned her world renown.

Now New Yorkers will get to see the full range of Ms. Kusama's vision. "At the end of my life," she said, "it comforts me deeply that the many people in New York now seem to enjoy my works and be moved or pleased with them."