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**Blossoming in Winter:
Yayoi Kusama at Tate Modern**

by Leslie Camhi



The Japanese-born artist Yayoi Kusama, who turns 83 in March, is both a veteran of the countercultural revolution and the art world's latest darling. It's tempting to call her an *éminence grise*, were it not for the electric red wig that the tiny artist often sports at openings, with an electric red dress enlivened by her signature polka dots.

Her fierce commitment to charting a unique postwar path has made her a feminist icon, though she wasn't above trading on a kooky, sexy exoticism for attention. In 1960s New York, she covered everyday objects—a baby carriage, shoes, a sofa, etc.—with countless phallic forms, sewn and stuffed, and presided, goddess-like, over orgies. Yet in her 2002 autobiography, *Infinity Net* (now published for the first time in English by University of Chicago Press), she claims a lifelong horror of the male member and

a deep fear of sex.

“Yayoi Kusama,” a survey drawn from six decades of paintings, sculptures, films, installations, and performances, which opens tomorrow at the Tate Modern, is unlikely to smooth over these contradictions. But one thing is certain—in today’s global market, the fascination with Kusama has never been greater. After decades without support, her career is now managed by a triumvirate of dealers, including (since 2007) Gagosian Gallery. Formerly notorious, she’s now a cult figure in Japan, where she returned in 1975 to live permanently, shuttling between her studio and her voluntary internment in the open ward of a Tokyo psychiatric hospital.

Confinement has helped channel her irrepressible creativity into large-scale public projects, like her monstrously baroque, brilliantly hued flower sculptures, installed in Paris’s Tuileries Gardens through the spring. And in July, coinciding with the stateside arrival of her retrospective at the Whitney Museum, we’ll see her latest commercial collaboration—leather goods, ready-to-wear, and accessories, with Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton.

Is she a psychologically frail case study, a brilliant and poetic formalist, or a canny media manipulator à la Warhol? And how did the work of this influential artist fall into near oblivion?

Her journey began in provincial, Matsumoto, Japan, where as a young girl her passionate commitment to art shocked her conservative, bourgeois family. With stunning audacity, she wrote to Georgia O’Keeffe, then America’s most famous woman artist. O’Keeffe encouraged her, and by 1958 Kusama had escaped to New York, painting furiously through the nights in a freezing loft.

Kusama claims her monumental canvases from that era, covered with dots and fine tracery, were partly inspired by the hallucinations she’s suffered from since childhood, but they also staked new artistic ground. Donald Judd was an early supporter; Claes Oldenburg took a page from her soft sculptures; Warhol copied her wallpaper.

By the late sixties, her wild Happenings were making headline news in the tabloids. Other artists had courted popular attention without losing their place in the pantheon. But after her return to Japan, Kusama, like Louise Bourgeois and Louise Nevelson before her, endured decades of neglect by the art establishment. The reputations of all three sky-rocketed in their senior years. If you can survive the mid-career desert of attention, it seems, and bridge the gap between East and West, there’s hope for a fantastical late blossoming.

“Yayoi Kusama” is on view February 9–June 5 at Tate Modern in London, tate.org.uk; and July 12–September 30 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, whitney.org