

art

## Yayoi Kusama: A Fine Madness

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Since 1977, Yayoi Kusama has lived in a psychiatric hospital, with her studio close by. The stories of her illness are legion, and point to the fact that she suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder, a condition that has affected Kusama since childhood. Even so, the artist has come a very long way, from her years spent painting in Japan, to the long period she lived in New York where she staged protests (often with nude participants) against the Vietnam war, and and to her famous infinity net paintings, made on her return to Tokyo. Despite her advanced age—the artist is now in her eighties--Kusama continues to be highly active in making and promoting her art. The story of her mental suffering supports the view that despite her madness, she has been a focused, professional artist from the start. Very early on in her life, Kusama suffered from hallucinations, mostly visual in nature. But through the savvy promotion of her own work, a call to fame enhanced by her physical beauty, Kusama has made sure her name remains at the center of the world's art scene, a position that she has tenaciously held on to since relatively early in her career. Although Kusama is not a household name like Warhol, she is an artist whose fame exceeds that of the art world, to the point where her celebrity surrounds her art activities and promotes her work wherever she shows.

There can be little dispute that Kusama's background propelled her into mental instability. According to biographical materials, her father was an extravagant philanderer and her mother supposedly beat her. From the beginnings of childhood, Kusama tended to have hallucinations, a burden that might well be the source for the obsessively repetitive cloth, and phallic embellishments sewn onto such objects as a boat, a couch, shoes, ladders, and chairs. Yet of course the illness inevitably goes deeper than the consideration of visual repetitions of phalli; it makes us feel sadness and sympathy and no small amount of wonder and respect that the artist can be so profligate with her energies despite the condition of her illness. In a larger sense, there is the dichotomy between the outsider artist and the professional, a duality that persists even today in categorizing art; interestingly enough, Kusama manages to embrace both groupings with work whose obsessive nature is accompanied by a sure sculptural sense. But sculpture is not the only medium in which the artist excelled; some of the early paintings, done with a nice eye for surrealism, stand out as visionary examples of Kusama's sensibility. So it becomes clear that unlike most naïve artists, Kusama has a sharp understanding of what it takes to become famous in the art world, and has been particularly savvy about moving into wide recognition in New York, coming to that city in June 1958.

Kusama's stay in New York lasted until 1973, when she returned to Tokyo. The importance of her time in New York should not be underestimated; she developed friendships with important artists such as Donald Judd and Joseph Cornell. During the fifteen-year period she lived in New York, Kusama participated in happenings and

political protests, made her famous infinity paintings, won notoriety for covering everyday objects with cloth phalli, and generally gained a reputation for originality—not only in her work, but also in her behavior. Kusama, however, participated not as a naïf, but as someone intelligent and savvy enough to develop her reputation in New York's art world. This ability to gain access to the art scene at the highest level demonstrates a skilled sophistication on the part of the artist, whose life story inevitably connects with her art. As viewers, it is likely best that we separate the drama of Kusama's career from our judgment and appreciation of her work, which yields efforts of remarkable beauty and depth. Many of her pieces, the early work especially, can be seen as art uninfluenced by her emotional struggles. As a result, we can enjoy Kusama's depth as a young, melancholic (but not necessarily crazy) artist without referring to her illness, even should Kusama herself communicate her difficulties as she searches for ever-greater notoriety. (It is really beyond the scope of this essay for me to comment on her psychiatric illness. In the cases in which the work looks like it has been influenced by mental difficulties, that point will be mentioned because they have become part of the work itself.)

Kusama is surely best known for her phallus-covered objects, including a rowboat, a couch, and chairs. Supposedly born of the artist's fear of male genitalia, the works are quirky but decidedly sculptural. Here is a case of sexual anxiety whose story is inevitably linked to the work that was made. But the vital energy of these pieces demonstrate that, even when they were constructed in a period of high nervousness, Kusama had the esthetic sense to see the art as separated from her sense of self, existing as sculptures in their own right. One of her signature images consists of a rowboat and oars, covered with cloth phalluses and surrounded by black-and-white pictures of the object (the work was made in 1963). It is, like most of Kusama's three-dimensional work, both dazzlingly eccentric and sculpturally inspired. In some ways, Kusama's idiosyncrasies bring her close to surrealism; indeed, many of the paintings of the mid-1950s look very much as if the artist had been influenced by Joan Miro. Kusama seems to have the wherewithal both to work in very finely expressed terms and to produce art that was direct to the point of being vulgar. Swinging to the ends of both sides of the artistic spectrum, she manages to impress with her Asian subtlety and New York assertiveness, the latter being so clearly evident in Kusama's phallic-embellished sculptures.

These works are humorous as well. Stuffed with the protuberances, a cabinet is transformed into something comic, stuffed with fabric penises, while a ladder loses its straight lines, lapsing into a work with a soft outline and loosing its sense of functionality. This is not the work of an outsider artist, although there is a kind of naivete accompanying the forms; on the other hand, the work is only part of Kusama's oeuvre—all one has to do is to look at a publicity picture of the artist, naked, with long lashes, lying on her stomach with spots applied to all parts of her body, to know how clearly she could insinuate herself into the art world's collective unconscious. Clearly, Kusama knows how to catch the eye through eroticism, which shows her to be far more knowing than we might initially understand her to be. If she is mad, she is mad like a fox: someone who uses her condition with full consciousness to attain the fame she sought from the beginning of her career. In what has become a worldwide culture of narcissism and gossip, Kusama's madness—which most think of as genuine—is a great additive to her career. The question whether she has used her illness to advance her position toward and

financial success cannot be easily answered. Given the charisma of her personality, it is hard to read her efforts as those of a weak, emotionally ill woman. Instead, the psychiatric condition makes her that much more attractive to the worldwide public, which devours stories that are outrageous or titillating.

The story of Kusama's career is not complete without an exploration of her early paintings in Japan. The works she produced in the 1950s demonstrate an original talent whose idiosyncrasies may border on the bizarre but in fact enhance the essential otherworldliness of the artist's disposition. This is work that seems to have sprung directly from Kusama's unique intelligence; they are lyrical and look abstract, although at the same time her titles give the paintings a figurative bent. *Flower Bud No. 6* (1952) looks a bit Miroesque, but the image might relate to calligraphy even as it signifies the blossom of a flower. In the painting, a black design predominates over a yellow series of stripes that echo the black. In the middle are thin lines that form a kind of question mark, while small black dots punctuate the rest of the painting. The work is strikingly original, keeping a conversation mostly with Kusama's other works of this period. *The Stem*, also from 1952, shows a slightly skewed grid of thin black lines; a few thicker lines cross the width of the composition, and red areas enliven the black in the work. There is a yellow columnar diagonal next to some thick black splotches in the middle as well. The painting shows the artist at her most original. And, at the same time, she is willing here to let her vision speak for her, without the help of psychiatric glosses.

One could argue that these paintings are the best of Kusama's oeuvre. They were made before her stay in America, where her desire for fame and notoriety resulted in work that is striking but extravagant. The paintings from the 1950s demonstrate introspection but not psychosis, although clearly she changed from an Asian subtlety to the American forthrightness that characterized her art once she had left Tokyo for New York. It makes sense that the early work would be original; Kusama was young and creative and living a psychically marginal life that would keep her alert to the healing possibilities of her imagination. Her position had not yet hardened into a stylistic stance that sought the outrageous in sculpture as a means of defense and a call for attention. Some of the 1950s paintings refer to something specific—this despite the fact that at first glance the painting looks utterly abstract. This happens in *The Gill* (1953), which shows a generally fishlike shape in moss green and blue-gray, surrounded by dots and squiggles. The fish mouths red blotches that go all up the right side of the painting. Or it may be that the shape is that of a gill isolated from a fish that bleeds.

A few years further on, in the late 1950s, Kusama did a whole series of "Infinity Net" paintings, which consist of entire canvases being covered by small curving strokes that form a net-like appearance and serve as a kind of introduction to the artist's obsessive-compulsive disorder. These paintings, along with the phallus-covered furniture, made Kusama very popular during her extended stay in New York City. At the same time, their construction made it clear that Kusama was working out of some obsessional neurosis, a psychiatric condition her audience found as interesting as her art. Just like Jackson Pollock's drinking, womanizing, and depressions became an integral part of his reputation as a great artist, so same happened to Kusama, whose illness made for stories

that threw light on her reputation from both personal and vocational angles. Even if the stories exaggerated her condition, or were apocryphal from the start, they nonetheless added to the aura surrounding a beautiful woman whose art was sometimes openly erotic. There is one work, *Accumulation of Nets* from 1961, which consists of squared, black-and-white pictures of parts of the “Infinity Net” series; pieced together in a fairly large composition, the pictures compel attention through their different shades of gray and confirmed obsessional forms. The piece is one of Kusama’s best because it emphasizes, in novel ways, how repetitive actions can become the base of highly original work.

The iteration is important because it allows Kusama to work within the limitations of her condition—one hesitates to call her troubles an illness because she has overcome much of it in her art. But, even so, the obsessional nature of the art argues that Kusama does struggle with a disorder—but happily, in the sense that she transforms her neurosis into striking artworks. There is in her character a determination to make art no matter what the obstacle, as well as tenacity in meeting the confines of her ill health. And in the meantime, it surely doesn’t hurt her as an artist that many people are fascinated by Kusama’s long stay in a Tokyo psychiatric hospital, her very close friendship with the American artist Joseph Cornell, and the naked be-ins she staged (while remaining clothed herself). The real question facing us as her audience turns on the actual achievement of her art. As an artist remarkably accessible in her work, Kusama clearly can reach a broad spectrum of viewers. But that does not necessarily account for accomplishment—witness the questionable career of the British artist Damien Hirst, whose work is literal and often ridiculous. And yet he has proven that he can make lots of money for himself and others, so he is taken seriously as an artist.

Kusama’s more populist works, such as her *Narcissus Garden*, created for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Venice Biennale in June 1966, show her to be an artist capable of reaching the masses. The installation comprised 1500 polished, mirror-like balls, all of them 200 millimeters in diameter. The balls reflected the viewers who held them, the environs of the Giardini, the park where the work took place, and the other balls. During the exhibition, according to the catalogue, Kusama wore a gold kimono and distributed copies of the British critic Herbert Read praising her talent (1). Kusama went so far as to offer the balls for sale at approximately two dollars apiece, but this attempt to subvert what was already becoming a market-driven biennial was quickly shot down. Still, the point was made: Kusama had her finger on the pulse of the time, and she was not afraid of challenging the decision-makers—even in so prestigious an affair as the Venice Biennial. Altogether, Kusama always had had her own way of doing things, and she did not always meet eye-to-eye with authorities. But we know rebellion is part of the artist’s armamentarium, being, in the case of Kusama, an often whimsical comment on less attractive aspects of the time, such as excessive commercialism and the Vietnam War.

In 1973, as we have noted, Kusama returned to Tokyo. Her life there was difficult at first—she briefly sold the work of Western modern masters but was cut short by the oil crisis, which made it difficult for collectors to spend money. Then, according to catalogue notes, Kusama suffered psychically in the mid-1970s, necessitating several hospitalizations (2). Her paintings again look surrealist and psychologically dark; a 1972

*Self-Portrait* presents a complicated pink figure surrounded by butterflies, standing in the middle of white-topped waves. This perhaps was a better time for Kusama as a writer than an artist; she published in 1978 the novel *Manhattan Suicide Addict*, a heavily autobiographical account of her life based in New York City. The terms of her fiction were as disturbing as much of her art, but won an audience and encouraged an outpouring of writing—twelve novels, a book of poetry, and an autobiography (3). Clearly, Kusama's iconic morbidity had become so interwoven with her cultural production, literary as well as artistic, that it is no longer possible to dwell only on the work; somehow her personality and mental condition must be mentioned because both shaped the later art she made. Given the public's current penchant for the extravagant and the outrageous, Kusama's public image as a wounded artist can be seen as the result of some very conscious publicity on her part, as well as the endless fascination popular culture has with extreme circumstances and behavior.

In the explorations Kusama undertook in the 1980s and the 1990s, we see her returning to earlier forms—with some changes. The phalli that covered the objects were stripped of the objects themselves, becoming sculptures in their own right. In *Heaven and Earth* (1991) Kusama produced an installation of the white phalli, now elongated and differing in width, arranged in nests of snake-like bodies covering the floor. This piece demonstrates the artist's ability to rework early imagery in fruitful ways; the intermingling of the forms in *Heaven and Earth* is reiterated in the painting *Yellow Trees* (1994), which consists of densely interwoven, snaking shapes composed of rows of yellow circles against a black ground. We can notice how the obsessive nature of Kusama's mind found its visual equivalent in art that resulted from her anxiety and fixation with form. Usually we expect of a major artist that he or she is consistent within periods of change and from period to period. By returning to her origins, Kusama demonstrates that she is a sophisticated artist—someone intent on maintaining an ongoing persona no matter where she lives or how she might feel. Returning to Tokyo has made life easier for Kusama, but it has not changed the driving nature of her creativity.

But old age--Kusama is now in her 80s—has resulted in bravely colorful, poster-like new work, again worked up through repetition of forms. The new paintings are, to this writer, not as high in quality; their colors are garish, and the forms lack the specificity of earlier work. Strangely, they look rather like conventional outsider art—we remember that at this point in time Kusama enjoys a more or less worldwide reputation, and wonder why her work would turn toward the naïve. Still, the technical skill Kusama has always possessed overwhelms her audience in the small rooms she has constructed to create the feeling of mystery or infinity. In the space that *I'm Here, but Nothing* (2000), we see, in darkened light, a table with glasses surrounded by chairs; off to the left side, there is a mirror and a coat rack with a coat hanging from it. The furniture, floor, wall, and ceiling are covered with luminous polka dots, at once destabilizing the viewer and focusing on the installation's artifacts. Even the bouquet of flowers sitting in a vase on the dinner table has the polka dots, which essentially change the world as we see it. The environment has a slightly supernatural aura, whose visual strangeness equates with Kusama's personality. Disorientation is the constant we regularly experience in her art.

Yet sometimes that disorientation can result in images, or in Kusama's most famous works, environments that coalesce the finite senses in the face of the infinite; indeed, the installation *Fireflies on the Water* (2002) creates a sense of the boundless with the first word of its title, and works out a measureless experience by covering the walls of a small cubed room with mirrors, and hanging tiny colored lights throughout the darkened space—so that no one can tell, in the single minute the visitor is allowed to spend in the room, whether the lights are actual or reflections. The floor consists of a small pond of water, also dotted with lights, and a dry path that goes to the center of the room. It is a magical experience to situate oneself in the middle of the space and meditate on an infinity constructed by a person who has created a scenario that is all-inclusive in its unbounded sense of space, built by mirror facing mirror. In many ways this room is the zenith of Kusama's creativity. Like most successful art ideas, it accommodates and even exhorts a change in the mind of the visitor, whose standing body is also part of the reflective landscape. Kusama is seeking a transformation of psychic and visual terms, and her art supports her ambition. It is important that we neither dismiss nor exaggerate her mental difficulties—and it is even more important that we concentrate on the art itself, whose magical effects make Kusama stand out in important ways for our time.

#### References

1. Rachel Taylor, "Walking Piece, Narcissus Garden and Self-Portraiture 1966," p. 109, in *Yayoi Kusama* (London: Tate Publishing, 2012).
2. Rachel Taylor, "Return to Japan: 1973-1983," p. 123, In *Yayoi Kusama* (London: Tate publishing, 2012).
3. Rachel Taylor, "Return Japan: 1973-1983," p. 123.