

# WOW WOW! YAYOI

With a new retrospective at Tate Modern and a hugely ambitious fashion collaboration with Louis Vuitton under way, it seems everyone has gone dotty for the octogenarian artist Yayoi Kusama. By *Harriet Quick*. Portrait by *Norbert Schoerner*

**Y**ayoi Kusama's very large dark eyes are gleaming, her red mouth is opening and closing like a goldfish and her strong painter's hands – hands that have been bearing brushes, charcoals and moulding sculptures on a daily basis for nearly her entire 82-year-old life – are quivering in her lap. Her glee seems to be springing in part from the presence of the Tate's curator (who has spent two years putting together a definitive Kusama retrospective), in part from the sight of a resplendent canvas she completed last week, and in part from a Godiva chocolate that she has just popped in her mouth.

"Yes, yes, ahhh! – beautiful," she says, manoeuvring herself on a wheelchair up to a huge silver canvas: a field of trembling sunflowers and a mass of vivid green and orange strokes that fall like free-floating bunting. She has named it *Sleep in a Flower Garden*. All her canvases have wonderful poetic names – *Song of Waves*, *Look at the Gathering of Women in Search of Love*, *Serene Mind*...

Kusama is clearly enjoying putting on a show before this little audience, gathered in her three-level glass and brick studio in a quiet residential area of Tokyo. Dressed in a purple spotted dress, a Stephen Sprouse for Louis Vuitton black-and-red leopard-print scarf, and a bright orange bob-cut wig, she looks like a blend of Meiji-era ruler/punkish Debbie Harry/adorable anime character. She clearly revels in a self-image as exuberant as her canvases.

Even after a 60-year career, Kusama's work still pulsates with life; plankton and algae-like forms, dots, nets and strange hieroglyphs (spectacles, shoes, >







From top: Yayoi as a young girl in 1939, with a bouquet of zinnias; *Fern Kingdom* (1953);



Kusama in her studio at the family home in Matsumoto, c1952 – she was a prolific artist from an early age. In a bid for artistic improvement, she later burnt many of these works before moving to America



eyes, silhouetted faces included) tumble and spin over work upon work. Her favoured hues for this very colourful period of her oeuvre – cardinal red, cornflower blue, metallics silver and gold, firefly orange and green – are neatly stacked in pots, ever ready for action. Inspiration strikes Kusama on a daily basis, and even during the night. She has been known to ask for canvases to be wheeled up to her room at the psychiatric hospital near the studio – her chosen home for the last 12 years, having suffered from mental imbalances including a severe anxiety disorder since childhood. But she’s very open about her condition – for her, it’s another obsession.

Her beloved studio team (“They have been with me for 20 years!”) dutifully pull out the canvases one by one for a viewing. She has completed over 100 works in just the last two years. The vision is overwhelming and exhilarating. “Will London like these works? Will they be in my show?” she plaintively asks Frances Morris, the Tate’s head of international art collections.

“But Kusama, there are so many! We are hanging 30 of the new works in one room,” answers Morris diplomatically, mindful of the endeavour and the cost of shipping. “However, we would love *you* to come over to London for the opening!” “But I have to paint!” retorts Kusama, who has not left Japan for 12 years. “Have you ever painted during a flight? We could give you mini canvases for the journey...” suggests Morris. Kusama tilts her head to one side before bouncing to her feet from her wheelchair, much to the alarm of her assistants, and zooming over to the rack to pull out another painting.

Negotiations appear to flow like this in Japan. It is virtually impossible to procure a straight yes or no. Each party dances around the subject in an elaborate exchange of words, gestures, suggestions, retractions and recapitulations; a process made doubly complicated when working through translation, a duty that falls here on the shoulders of the very patient Yoriko Tsuruta, who works for Kusama’s Tokyo gallery, Ota Fine Arts. Kusama quite evidently has a formidable will of her own. She might first appear childlike, vulnerable even, but she talks about what she wants, when she wants. A *New York Times* journalist’s interview was abruptly terminated on the suggestion that her work was sometimes quite comic. Mention the name Yoko Ono and, it is suggested, you will be shown the door.

Asked what Tate Modern’s retrospective means for her, after decades of artistic and personal struggle, she answers with a dreamily opaque declaration on the power of fashion. “It’s an expression of the fragility and the brilliance of the moment,” she says with a

satisfied nod. “*Vogue* is not just about fashion, it is about the wonder of life and the beauty of human beings. When I was growing up in Japan just after the war, there were not so many enjoyable things around me. If people enjoy the brilliance of life through art and fashion, they might not fight, or feel such anger. *Vogue*...” she taps the cover of a recent issue and issues a small, fulfilled sigh, “is like beautiful petals falling on paper.”

Kusama, a self-taught artist, is a big believer in beauty and the power of creativity and indeed, productivity. She is not about the singular “masterpiece”, or indeed about being “precious”. Not unlike Picasso, she creates huge, epic series of works – endless variations on a theme that over periods of years she repeats to the point of exhaustion. She says the ideas and patternings, the motifs and symbols (you can trace an entire lexicon through her work: nets, spots, phalluses, flowers, eyes, macro-universes, microscopic worlds), come to her in streams. Why the love of metallic and vibrant colours now? “It just

*“I have experienced a long struggle, and now, finally, I have a peaceful mind. I see myself as one tiny little flashlight in the history of humanity”*

seems to flood me with energy,” she explains.

Some themes have preoccupied her for decades. The series vary from the gentle, meditative *Infinity Net* paintings of the late Fifties (tiny lace-like loops of white paint that unfold in waves over giant canvases – the painting titled *No. 2* sold at Christie’s in 2008 for \$5.1 million), to her *Accumulation* sculptures featuring hundreds of stuffed phalluses, to cosmic “mirror room” installations which immerse you in a spangle of tiny lights and infinite reflections, to small-scale photo-collage and ink works.

In the Sixties, Kusama also orchestrated a series of live happenings, orgies and naked interventions (meticulously documented in stills and film) that secured her fame and notoriety, and which were staged “in protest against Vietnam. The human body is too beautiful to be killed in warfare,” explains Kusama. Famously, in August 1969 the feisty young artist took a troupe to MoMA and staged a protest “orgy” in the museum’s outdoor pond. The event hit the cover of New York’s *Daily News* with the inevitable



the frottage techniques of Max Ernst, and the surreal dreamscapes of Dalí and Miró. By 1957, Kusama had outgrown the conservative confines of postwar Japan, and moved to New York and into the creative period that saw her explode into action and experimentation, and push herself to the brink of breakdown.

"There were many times in New York when I was scared and penniless; Beatrice Perry [a gallerist] would buy works to help support me. Georgia O'Keeffe told me to come to Texas. But I had to stay in New York and find myself as an artist." She toiled away in a studio on derelict 15th Street, with Donald Judd and Claes Oldenburg as neighbours and Andy Warhol nearby creating a scene with his Factory. Kusama is adamant that she came up with the idea of multiple repeat images ahead of Warhol, and that she "invented" those soft organic sculptures that Oldenburg was to make his trademark. The only artists she speaks of fondly are Judd and Joseph Cornell. As a female Japanese artist, she found it hard to be taken seriously; Kusama's highly original works and her own insistent, fiery personality proved hard to place. Even now, she refuses to be pigeonholed into any art canon "ism" or movement. "There are now many famous Japanese artists, but I have never considered my art 'Japanese'. It's a hard situation – I do not want to be part of a group or category, but to have international importance."

Much has been made of her psychiatric disorder, and the image of the dotty artist. But Kusama is not an "outsider" or "unintentional" artist. She seems very in charge of her mental state and a very astute self-promoter, too. On top of her main body of art, she has written numerous volumes of fiction and poetry (book titles include *Manhattan Suicide Addict* and *The Hustler's Grotto of Christopher Street*) and is also the creator of a hugely profitable business of Kusama pop merchandise (stickers, porcelain mugs, keyrings, spotty furniture, her spotted dog figurines, bed throws – you name it).

So, too, has she turned her hand to fashion. In the mid-Sixties she opened a boutique, Kusama Fashion Originals, selling printed silk smock dresses and an even more outré line of clothes for orgies – tunics with big holes cut out to reveal breasts, bums and, of course, penises. And this year, Kusama is collaborating with Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton (which is underwriting the Tate Modern show) on what will be the most expansive fashion and accessories line the house has ever produced (launching globally in July) – bigger than Marc Jacobs's collaborations with Stephen Sprouse, Richard Prince or Takashi Murakami. To celebrate the show opening, Louis Vuitton's Bond Street windows will be given a Kusama makeover with an installation inside – await the spot mania!

To experience Kusama is to be engulfed by a weird and wonderfully intense visual universe that can leave one feeling edified, liberated as well as completely suffocated. In art terms, the envelopment is called "immersion" – and Tate Modern will be maximising that with canvases from her different periods hung floor to ceiling, her giant sculptural flowers planted on the museum's lawn, and a dizzying mirror room. "She paints to live, and lives to paint," says Morris, who is probably quite relieved to be on the final stretch of her own Kusama odyssey. The show is timely. Over the past few years, a generation of female artists who grew up in the Fifties – Louise Bourgeois, Susan Hiller – are being reappraised as real masters, with prices spiralling and gallery acquisitions on the up.

As you behold this petite octogenarian wearing her spotty dress (handmade in silk), her toxic-coloured wig and white make-up, as her eyes burn through you as if into a parallel universe, you have to wow at her energy and courage. "I have experienced a long struggle, and now, finally, I have a peaceful mind, but I am continually going to make work after work until my death," she demurs. "In this late period in my career, I see myself as one tiny little flashlight in the history of humanity." She has no children, she has never had real intimacy with a partner (although she enjoyed a platonic relationship with Joseph Cornell for many years), and her friends are the "family" she has created in her studio. Kusama has achieved a splendidly alternative legacy. Her "Love Forever" motto is broadcast worldwide, and her spots (what better signature than a red dot set free from the Japanese flag?) cover everything from the buses that whizz through her hometown of Matsumoto to the icing on a cake served at Tokyo's Watari Art Museum.

It's a legacy that has made her a wealthy woman. She is as aware, reportedly, of her finances as she is of her media profile. (The documentary-maker Megumi Takasugi has been filming her consistently for the past 15 years.) But she remains coy about her personal fortune. "I don't know if I'm famous, my studio is my world." Even at 82, it seems you never quite escape an obsessive mindset. The wealth she has accumulated will go towards funding a Yayoi Kusama foundation. The current building, a former porn studio, will be knocked down to make space. No doubt there will be pilgrimages for years to come.

What would she choose for her epitaph? "Love forever!" she declares, eyeing up another chocolate. What would she like to come back as in a second life? "An artist – of course!" she smiles. But arguably, just one Yayoi Kusama per century is brilliant enough. ■ "Yayoi Kusama" is at Tate Modern from February 9 to June 5



Opposite: *Infinity Soul* (2009). This page, from top: a Kusama installation at Comme des Garçons in Osaka; Yayoi with one of her sculpted flowers; a giant pumpkin in Naoshima, 2005; Kusama's sculpture garden in Singapore, 2009; a polka-dotted bus in Matsumoto

