

Connecting the Dots

BY SCARLET CHENG

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SCARLET CHENG, AN OCCASIONAL CONTRIBUTOR TO CALENDAR, WRITES FREQUENTLY ABOUT THE ARTS AND FILM. SHE TRAVELED TO TOKYO FOR THIS ARTICLE

TOKYO — Artist Yayoi Kusama has alarming eyes—or perhaps they are alarmed. Large and staring, there is an edgy apprehension in them, as if afraid of what she might see. There is also a burning intensity that comes from seeing what she does, which is perhaps too much.

As a child, she had hallucinations in which dots would cover everything from floor to ceiling, in which the patterns of violets lept from the kitchen tablecloth and bloomed into the space around her. These were not happy visions—they were terrifying—and once, as she tried to flee from them, she tripped down a flight of stairs and broke her ankle.

Unlike many others who might have suffered such delusions, whether in the privacy of protective homes or the lockup of institutions, Kusama went public with them, transforming her obsessions into art. Today she is a spry 68, as forcefully creative as ever, and enjoying a blossoming international reputation as one of Japan's foremost contemporary artists.

Beginning today, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is honoring her with her first major museum retrospective in the United States, "Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968," focusing on her creative sojourn in America. The exhibition includes more than 80 works, including sculpture, painting and drawing, as well as re-creations of several major installations.

It is winter in Tokyo, a gray city with gray skies, and down a gray street in an unassuming low-rise building is Kusama's studio. Inside, vivid colors strike the eye. Black boxes filled with nests of bright hues line the entry, a tall golden soft sculpture of spiraling projectiles springs like a giant sea anemone from one corner. And more striking still is this diminutive woman wearing an electric purple blouse with lacy neckline and cuffs, a thick beaded necklace at her throat.

Yayoi Kusama steps forward to greet her visitor with a shy smile. She has deathly pale skin and long black hair with the bangs cut short and straight across her forehead, a style which adds to the severity of her appearance. She examines her guest with those huge staring eyes—off-putting if it weren't for the childlike curiosity that is also in them.

She sits for an interview in the office half of the studio, which is neatly organized with shelves of books and papers along the walls. A translator and her secretary join in as coffee is served in colored demitasse cups and saucers based on her signature dot and net designs. The other half of the studio serves both as storage and workshop for large works-in-progress—five young women are helping to prepare a statue destined for New York's Robert Miller Gallery, for a show timed around the presentation of "Love Forever" at the Museum of Modern Art next summer.

This is clearly the space of a successful artist.

"Almost everything I make is sold," Kusama announces briskly. "In fact, so many people want things from me now, it's difficult to keep up."

Though eager to talk about her work, every so often she pulls nervously at the long strands on the side of her head, every so often she loses track of what she is saying. It is as if so many thoughts rush into her head at once that she gets derailed. But a quick reminder and she's back on course, her memory astonishingly sharp about events that occurred decades ago.

Her English is rusty, and she speaks mostly through translation. But now and then she jumps in to answer before the translator has a chance to speak. Certain key phrases in English have stuck in her mind. Looking at a photo of her youthful self lying naked atop a protrusion-covered sofa from 1962 ("Accumulation No. 2"), she methodically points to the different elements of that captured performance—"Net obsession, phallic obsession, dot obsession, food obsession," she says.

With the first phrase, she points to the intricate net pattern painted on the wall, then to the soft-sculpture encrusted sofa, then to her own polka-dot covered body, and finally to the floor strewn with tubular and wheel-shaped pasta.

While her tone remains matter-of-fact, Kusama is revealing her most deep-seated phobias--the lusts and needs of the human body, the void of the universe, and all the things that have threatened her with obliteration and depersonalization.

As she once said, "Up to now I have never not wanted to kill myself."

Kusama grew up in Nagano prefecture, the home of this year's Winter Olympics. She recalls the "glittering silver" of the mountain ranges but also that life at home was a nightmare. Her parents were ever trying to keep her in conformity, discouraging her dreams of an art career, encouraging her to get married soon.

As a young child, she found refuge in art, getting lost in drawing and painting. "What drove me to work in art were not only mountains and rivers of beauty which would take my voice, the azure emptiness of highlands, stars shining more brilliantly than usual in the heavens at night and so forth," she wrote for a 1993 book about her prints, "but also, on the contrary, the miserable feeling of a human being in a family life which can be compared to hell."

She was diagnosed a schizophrenic, got medication from the local mental hospital, and a doctor even became interested in her art. In the early 1950s, she participated in several solo and group shows but felt that she would never be taken seriously as an artist in conservative post-war Japan.

"In Japan, everyone just called me crazy; I couldn't find anyone who could understand me," she says. She was already 28 and long restless. "So I wanted to go to New York; I thought it would be more free and open there." She even wrote to Georgia O'Keeffe about her ambitions. O'Keeffe wrote back, "When you get to New York take your pictures under your arm and show them to anyone you think may be interested." But added, "It seems to me very odd that you are so ambitious to show your paintings here, but I wish the best for you."

Kusama was indeed ambitious. In December 1957, she made it to America, with a show at the Zoe Dusanne Gallery in Seattle. The following June, she arrived in the mecca of modern art: New York. Armed with some 500 drawings and watercolors, she followed O'Keeffe's advice. "I just went with my portfolio from gallery to gallery," Kusama says. She got into several group shows, and at the end of 1959 she achieved a solo show at Brata Gallery, a respected artists' cooperative. Her five white-on-white paintings, nearly as big as the gallery walls, won praise. Critic Dore Ashton called her art "a striking tour de force, but disturbing nonetheless in its tightly held austerity."

Sidney Tillim wrote in Arts magazine, "This stunning and quietly overwhelming exhibition is likely to prove and remain the sensation of a season barely a month old."

Throughout the decades, the visual essences of Kusama's art have held remarkably consistent, much of it evident in work she did even before leaving Japan. In the U.S., she developed and expanded them in different media and idioms. Over and over again, we find the dots that once floated from the freckles of her mother's face onto everything around her, the net pattern which at once suggests shattered plate glass, as well as the inescapable interlace of the universe. Through art, Kusama embraced the polarities of her psyche--repulsion and attraction became one.

Around 1961, she began to incorporate phallic shapes into soft sculpture. The LACMA show includes a number of these pieces, including "Accumulation No. 1," an armchair covered with stuffed phallic protrusions, and "Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show," a rowboat and oars similarly covered (the original installation included 999 photographs of the boat). In "Untitled" (1963), she stuffs 10 pairs of women's high-heeled shoes with these tubular shapes.

Kusama readily admits she has had lifelong phobias about sex. Although she did not think about her position as a woman in the 1960s, in 1993 she is quoted in a publication saying "Except for childbearing, something men consider an act of nature, men monopolize all rights to a full life, granting women nothing but an unproductive place in society. Men believe women exist for sex only and are useful only as a sex tool."

In the early 1960s, she also fixated on macaroni, a typically American food, coating clothing, suitcases and human statues with the stuff. "One day I had a vision of all the food a person eats in a lifetime," she says. "You know, three meals a day, eating rice, drinking coffee, I saw all that food passing on a conveyor belt, and it was horrifying!"

In New York, Kusama quickly met the "Who's Who" of contemporary art. She palled around with the likes of Donald Judd and Barnett Newman, went to openings, and played high priestess over a number of notorious happenings. For the latter, she had people strip, then painted or pasted dots on them, and sometimes she put them behind masks of Nixon and Castro. The events' titles alone--"Anatomic Explosion," "Weekly Flesh-in" and

"Bust Out"--conjure up a whole bygone psychedelic era. (LACMA will present a film that captured some of these happenings, "Kusama's Self Obliteration," made in 1968 by Jud Yalkut.)

Though today it may all sound terribly funky and glamorous, Kusama's New York years were often lived on a shoestring. She recalls one apartment as derelict and freezing in the winter, the glass in the windows broken. She supported herself by selling her works and with occasional gifts from friends--Joseph Cornell, her on-and-off boyfriend of 10 years, would sometimes give her a piece of his art, which she would then sell for a few thousand dollars.

Asked what kept her going through such difficulties, she says, "When I arrived in New York, I went to the top of the Empire State Building one day and looked down over the city. I said to myself, 'I am going to succeed, I am going to make it here.'"

In fact, from what she says, Kusama kept going by keeping going--producing her artwork, finding outlets for it, promoting it. Her works are typically repetitive and labor-intensive, and in those days she would do everything herself: paint a roomful of mannequins and household furnishings with her net pattern for an installation, sew hundreds of phallic-shaped socks and stuff them for a soft sculpture.

In the early 1970s, Kusama fell ill with a disease she declines to name and returned to Japan. She spent a couple of years in treatment and recovery, occasionally going back to the U.S. In 1975, she checked herself into a mental institution in Tokyo. By 1977, that institution became her permanent home. Back in Japan, she again made the rounds with her portfolio. One target was Fuji TV Gallery, one of Japan's foremost contemporary art venues.

"She was very persistent," recalls Michiyasu Itsutsuji, who was then director of the gallery. Today he runs his own showroom, Gallery Itsutsuji, in a quiet residential neighborhood in east Tokyo. "She would call me all the time, saying that I had to have a show for her," he says. "When I finally did see her art, I was surprised. I didn't know she could do such wonderful work, since we knew her mainly for her reputation as a performance artist."

Fuji TV signed her on in an exclusive contract. Itsutsuji adds, in tones of deepest reverence, "Kusama is a truly great artist."

But the return to Japan also meant that Kusama was virtually forgotten in America, swept out with the ephemera of the swinging '60s.

Lynn Zelevansky, associate curator of modern and contemporary art at LACMA (and co-curator of the show with the Museum of Modern Art's Laura Hoptman), believes that Kusama, the artist, was not really appreciated at the time. No major gallery stepped forward to underwrite her career, and her existence in the U.S. was always a financial struggle.

"I will argue that the '60s were not the period when Kusama's oeuvre was optimally in sync with dominant cultural currents," she writes in the exhibition catalog, ". . . that period appears to be the present."

Indeed, Kusama has been rediscovered in the past decade. A small survey at the Center for International Contemporary Arts in New York in 1989 and her subsequent solo tour de force at the 1993 Venice Biennale, where she represented Japan, were two of the key events that brought her renewed recognition. These days a steady stream of curators, gallery owners and admirers arrive at her studio doorstep.

"This is the first major museum exhibition of her works outside Japan," Zelevansky says. "We're trying to retrieve a piece of art history."

Not only was Kusama an important and influential figure in the New York art world of the '60s, Zelevansky points out, but the artist prefigured the repetitive forms and monochromism which would later be au courant. Furthermore, her work has proven a precursor to feminist art. In "Traveling Life" (1964), for example, high-heeled shoes are arranged on the rungs of a phallic-covered step-ladder--what more potent metaphor for women trying to ascend the pyramid of patriarchy?

As her visitor prepares to leave, Kusama gets up and shows the way to the other side of the studio, where assistants are working. Later, she asks her secretary to put on the Peter Gabriel music video of "Love Town"--made a few years ago and visually inspired by Kusama's art, in which dots and squiggles infect the landscape of a suburban household. The artist clearly enjoys showing her handiwork, and she becomes immersed in the video, too, as if seeing it for the first time.

While Kusama says she lives a life apart from contemporary Japanese society--which she once fled in desperation--she has clearly found a certain balance here. She still resides at the mental institution she checked into 20 years ago, doing artwork in her room and a studio they have set aside for her. The studio where she is today appears to be where the business of her career takes place.

"I want to explain something about where I live," she offers. "It's not a place with bars on the windows or anything like that. It's a very open place, where I can come and go. The good thing is that everything is taken care of for me--food, laundry, cleaning--so in a way it's quite ideal. I can just concentrate on my work."

And the work has been well received. Since she left the exclusive representation of Fuji TV Gallery several years ago, Kusama has been much sought-after and she has been represented in shows at major galleries all over Japan. In New York, she has shown both at the prestigious Paula Cooper and Robert Miller galleries.

"Every day I think about moving back to New York," she admits. "But things are going so well here."

Preparing to leave the studio for the day, Kusama puts some items into a tote bag, dons her fur coat and sees her visitors to the door. "Thank you for coming," she says, bowing, that essential Japanese politeness floating to the surface. She is smiling now, her eyes soft and warm--grateful for those who have shared a moment of her vision with her.

* "Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958-1968," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd. Opens today. Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, noon to 8 p.m.; Fridays, noon to 9 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Through June 8. (213) 857-6000.

* The exhibition will travel to the Museum of Modern Art, New York (July 15 to Oct. 27) and to Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (Dec. 19 to March 7).