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The world according to Yayoi Kusama

By David Pilling

The dame of the Japanese avant-garde talks about obsession and fame



Yayoi Kusama is 82 years old. But when she is wheeled in, on her blue polka-dotted wheelchair, she looks more like a baby, the sort you might see played by an adult in a British pantomime. Her face is large for a Japanese woman and at odds with her smallish frame. Apart from her intense, saucer-shaped eyes and the arc of deep red lipstick across her mouth, there is something masculine about her features. She wears a lurid red wig and a dress covered in engorged polka dots. Coiled around her neck is a long red scarf decorated with worm-like black squiggles. When she is out of the spotlight, without her splashy red wig and garish outfits, she looks like a nice, grey-haired old lady. But in public situations like this, surrounded as she is today by visitors from Britain, Kusama's art and Kusama the artist converge. It is as if the patterns she has obsessively replicated since childhood have seeped off

the canvas and into the three-dimensional world of flesh and blood.

The baby-like impression is compounded by the behaviour of her female helpers, acolytes who fuss around her, cooing and coaxing the dame of Japanese avant-garde. They call her sensei, meaning teacher or master, but they treat her as they might a wilful and gifted child. Occasionally they giggle indulgently at her eccentricities. They have brought her to the studio, a little three-storey complex in a quiet and orderly Shinjuku back-lane, from the nearby mental hospital where she has lived for nearly 35 years. All eyes are fixed on Kusama. She looks flattered by the attention, if a little nonplussed.

"It's very appreciate about your visit to my studio," she ventures in the English she once spoke with a degree of fluency. Every few words are let out like air from a tyre. Then a pause. Then another emission. "I was in the US about 15 years. Especially in New York. And then I came back to Japan." She is rehearsing the details of a life with which everyone in the room is fully familiar.

Today's chief supplicant at the court of Kusama is Frances Morris, curator of the artist's forthcoming exhibition at London's Tate Modern. It is one of the most important solo shows in the artist's six-decade career. "This is the best moment in my life," she says of the growing attention her art is receiving. "I want to become more famous, even more famous." Then she adds, a little anxiously, "Do you think they will like my art in London?"



Kusama in her studio, December 2010

As well as Morris, there are three British journalists, including me, and another member of the Tate team crowded into the bright, modern studio where Kusama paints almost every day. Then there is a woman, video camera in hand, from NHK, Japan's state broadcaster, dressed in a gaudy red, blue and yellow shirt. She has just filmed a three-hour documentary about the artist, chronicling an 18-month period in which Kusama completed a hundred paintings, some of which will be shown at the Tate. The camera's presence – filming us talking to her – adds to the sense of Kusama's life as performance. I take a photo of the camera woman to

complete the circle.



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Many of Kusama's recent works, whose bright colours and bold patterns give them an aboriginal quality, are in racks at one end of the studio or leant against the walls. Her latest, a red and silver swirl of faces and jagged lines, is on a table. Kusama, who in her younger days used to paint enormous canvases perched on a step ladder, now works sitting down with her canvas in a horizontal position.

Morris asks if she has a favourite among her recent paintings. "No," she says, switching to Japanese. "I love them all." How does she choose her colours? "I have a flood of ideas in my mind. I just follow my vision." I look at some of the squiggles on the canvas and wonder if they are worms. "I don't know," she says doubtfully. "What's written on the back?" An assistant disappears behind the painting. "Stars," she

calls out.



'Anti-war Naked Happening', New York, 1968

The guests are brought cold mugicha, a roasted barley tea, served in cups splattered with Kusama's trademark polka dots. These are the multicoloured blobs that sprout, uncontrollably, from Kusama's brush or spray can. They cover her clothes, her sculptures (of dogs and flowers), her cushions, cars and the naked bodies of scores of volunteers. Not even a bus in her hometown of Matsumoto has been spared. Asked in the NHK documentary whether the bus was comfortable to ride in, she replied sharply, "Of course it's good. It's got dots on it." Now her pointillist signature has reached London, where one million spotty Tube map covers have been distributed to publicise her forthcoming show.

I had been warned by the Tate staff that today's meeting might be unpredictable. "She does find interviews tiring and is not able to speak one-on-one for extended periods of time," one email said. I had requested an interview with Kusama in 2004 after she had opened an exhibition, KUSAMATRIX, on the 52nd floor of Tokyo's Roppongi Hills, then the city's newest and most glamorous skyscraper. I had been much taken with the show, which included polka-dot-covered, gourd-shaped sculptures and a room of pungent hay crowded with hundreds of cut-out paper figurines. The answer had come back from her office that she was not in a fit mental state to see

me.

One of the best pieces I have read about Kusama appeared a few years later. It was written by Alexi Worth, an American artist and art critic. Worth had persuaded Kusama, who was then approaching 80 and in an unusually camera-shy phase, to be photographed by Nobuyoshi Araki, a famous practitioner of nude bondage photography. After the (non-nude) shoot, during which Kusama is described as evincing an unsmiling "fixed, dour blankness", the interview began. The journalist ventured that, for an artist whose work was often so hilariously funny, it was odd that she so seldom smiled. "I don't know what you're talking about," Kusama responded, apparently without a trace of emotion. There was some whispering in Japanese. The interview was declared over.

Today, Kusama seems less on edge and happy to be photographed. "When I was in New York I spoke better English, but now I am painting all the time and I've forgotten everything," she says. "I love painting so much that nothing else matters."



'Compulsion Furniture (Accumulation)', 1964

I want to ask about the past, though I have been told that such questions can confuse her. During her years of penury in New York, I wonder, did she really use an old door for a bed and rummage through trashcans for fish heads as she has written? Yes, she says. She reaches for a story about Georgia O'Keeffe, the celebrated American artist with whom she had a lengthy correspondence. "Georgia O'Keeffe-san was worried about me and came to New York and started to pack my stuff to bring me to Texas," she says, slurring the words slightly. "At that time, I was painting so much every day. I called the hospital many times and the doctor told me

I should call the psychiatric hospital instead. So I was treated by the psychiatric hospital. The doctor said, 'You are painting too much. That's the cause of your illness.'"

Kusama's story begins in the conservative, not to say quasi-fascist, surroundings of rural Japan in 1929, where she was born in Matsumoto, Nagano prefecture, into a family of seedling merchants. One early photo, taken at the age of about 10, shows a serious, rather beautiful girl with short hair, holding an enormous bunch of chrysanthemums. So upstanding was her mother's family, that her father, a philanderer who spent much of his time in the company of geisha, adopted the Kusama name as his own. At around the time the photograph was taken, Kusama was already producing pencil sketches featuring dots and a net-like motif. Even a portrait of her mother, whom she hated for her strictness and prudish values, is covered in dots as though she were suffering from chicken pox. "My parents were a real pain," she tells me. "I couldn't stand it. They were very conservative. My family had been running the business for 100 years. My parents had old customs and morals."

From early childhood Kusama experienced "visual and aural hallucinations". In her autobiography, a document that, one suspects, is better treated as artistic statement than faithful record, she writes of her experience sat among a bed of violets. "One day, I suddenly looked up to find that each and every violet had its own individual, human-like facial expression, and to my astonishment they were all talking to me." On other occasions, "suddenly things would be flashing and glittering all around me. So many different images leaped into my eyes that I was left dazzled and dumbfounded." Whenever these hallucinations occurred, she would rush home and draw what she had seen.

In 1948, after the war had ended, she began a formal course in Kyoto where she was instructed in Nihonga, a style of Japanese painting. She hated the rigidities of the master-disciple system where students were supposed to imbibe tradition through the sensei. "When I think of my life in Kyoto," she says, "I feel like vomiting."

She began to absorb the influences of cubism and surrealism, gleaned from magazines. In these styles she was almost entirely self-taught. Her artwork started to attract attention in Japan, where she staged several exhibitions. Some time earlier she had discovered a book by Georgia O'Keeffe in a second-hand bookshop in Matsumoto. Something connected and she sent O'Keeffe a letter, enclosing several of her watercolours. To her astonishment, one she continues to express six decades later, O'Keeffe wrote back with words of encouragement. It was the first of several letters the great American artist would send the "lowly Japanese girl".

In spite of O'Keeffe's warnings that New York would be a tough place for a single Japanese woman, Kusama decided she belonged in the art scene of America's greatest city. It was difficult to travel in those days. Japanese were restricted in the amount of foreign currency they could take out of the country, and Kusama had to sew bundles of notes into the lining of her clothes. Eventually, she

made her way to New York, via Seattle, where she had persuaded one gallery to stage a small exhibition.

Her first years in New York, where she was to spend more than 15 years, were financially and psychologically traumatic. Winters in her unheated apartment were so cold she stayed up all night painting. She called it a “living hell”. But it did not lack for excitement. This was the era of Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko and Philip Guston and of pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. Kusama, a frenetic experimenter, absorbed everything she could. Though she played on her exotic qualities as a Japanese woman, often wearing a kimono, she became very much an American artist. “America is really the country that raised me, and I owe what I have become to her,” she wrote. Within a year she was ready to strike out on her own, telling a Japanese magazine, “I am planning to create a revolutionary work that will stun the New York art world.”

The revolution came in the form of lace-like paintings that she called “infinity nets”. She filled huge canvases, sometimes more than 30ft-long, with endlessly repeated white loops of paint. Though it must not have looked that way at the time, the “infinity nets” were to become her defining creation. She sold some for as little as \$200. Fifty years later, two months after Lehman Brothers went bust in 2008, one of her “infinity net” paintings, No. 2, was auctioned at Christie’s. It fetched \$5.1m, a record sum for a living female artist.

By the early 1960s, Kusama had moved on to so-called soft sculptures in which she covered everyday objects – sofas, ladders, shoes – in white sausage-shaped objects. The motivation was supposedly her distaste for the male organ, which she associated with her father’s extra-marital adventures. “I don’t like sex. I had an obsession with sex,” she tells me. “When I was a child, my father had lovers and I experienced seeing him. My mother sent me to spy on him. I didn’t want to have sex with anyone for years.”

Much as with her dots, which she describes as helping to “obliterate” her anxieties through repetition, the rationale for sewing endless phalluses was to overwhelm her fears. “I make them and make them and then keep on making them, until I bury myself in the process. I call this process ‘obliteration’,” she says. She once told an interviewer, “I don’t want to cure my mental problems, rather I want to utilise them as a generating force for my art.”

Art became a way of working through these obsessions. In one sculpture, shown in the Gertrude Stein Gallery in 1963, she covered an entire rowing boat in sprouting penises and displayed it in a room surrounded by photographs of the same phallus-enveloped boat. She was photographed by her creation, naked with her back to the camera. She called the piece, “Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show”, though another critic later named it, perhaps unkindly, “Alice in Willyland”. “The sexual obsession and the fear of sex sit side by side in me,” she said.

In 1966, heart problems now compounding her psychiatric afflictions, she went uninvited to the Venice Biennale. There, dressed in a golden kimono, she filled the lawn outside the Italian pavilion with 1,500 mirrored balls, which she offered for sale for 1,200 lire apiece. The authorities ordered her to stop, deeming it unacceptable to “sell art like hot dogs or ice cream cones”. Andrew Solomon, writing in Artforum many years later, said Kusama’s “lust for fame” had to be put into context. Comparing her to Andy Warhol – whom Kusama claimed had copied her – he wrote, “It should not be forgotten that she was less readily accepted since she was a woman; and battling for ground in a foreign tongue; and living in a society recovering from aggressive wartime prejudice against Japan.”

Around this time, she began to stage “naked happenings”. It was perhaps the height of her fame, but a low point in her reputation. Bands of Kusama followers, whom she recruited through newspaper advertisements, would descend on a public place such as the New York Stock Exchange. There they would disrobe and cavort around to the sound of bongo drums, while Kusama, the Japanese sorceress, would daub polka dots on their naked bodies. They were called orgies, though the amount of actual sex that went on may have been minimal. Certainly, Kusama herself, still revolted by the male organ, never took part. Most of the happenings were, in any case, quickly curtailed by the police. One of the events – a sort of psychedelic pre-configuration of Occupy Wall Street – took place in the famous New York financial district. Kusama issued a press release in which she suggested, in capital letters naturally, that her aim was to “OBLITERATE WALL STREET MEN WITH POLKA DOTS.” In this, as in many things, she was ahead of her time.

There followed a series of stunts designed to create the maximum publicity. In one, she wrote an open letter to Richard Nixon offering to have sex with him if he would stop the Vietnam war. “Let’s forget ourselves, dearest Richard,” she wrote, “and become one with the Absolute, all together in the altogether.” Nixon turned her down. Still, for a brief period she was more written about than Andy Warhol, appearing on the front page of the New York Daily News, and launching her own (short-lived) magazine, Kusama Orgy.

Artforum’s Solomon, an expert on psychology as well as culture, writes, “By this time it was difficult to tell the difference between Kusama’s authentic obsessions and the affected ones that she manifested in order to increase her own hype! ... She herself could no longer tell where an actual illness trailed off and the constructed personality began.” By 1973, depressed, broke and facing a media backlash after her five minutes of uber-fame, she returned forlorn to Japan. The reception was hostile. She knew no one and belonged to no Japanese art movement. “It must have been deeply humiliating for her to come back to Japan,” says Morris, the Tate curator. “She had a breakdown, she needed surgery, she had no money. It was burnout.”

Kusama checked herself into the Seiwa Hospital for the Mentally Ill and eventually took up permanent residence. She has lived there ever since. In the 1970s and 1980s she drifted into semi-obscurity, though she wrote poetry and fiction that won her a cult following

in Japan. Only in 1989, when New York's Center for International Contemporary Arts staged a retrospective was interest revived in her art. She became more active again, mounting several one-woman shows in the US. In 1993, she went to the Venice Biennale, this time officially, where she produced a mirrored room filled with the pumpkin sculptures that are now central to her repertoire. Today, her silver pumpkins fetch around half a million dollars each. Kusama's revival gained even greater force in 1998 with a major exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. That was the same location where she had been stopped from staging an unauthorised protest 30 years before, "Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at Moma." Her career had come full circle, or to borrow the language of Kusama, it was repeating and obliterating itself.

Back in her studio in Shinjuku, Kusama seems to be tiring. Sometimes she fails to grasp the question, or simply ignores it. Periodically, she calls out for Etsu, one of her long-time assistants. "Where's Etchan," she asks anxiously, using the diminutive. A few minutes later, she asks again. "Is Etchan here?" A couple of hours after we have met, she suddenly looks at me as if for the first time, and asks, "Who are you?" Does she think Japan is less conservative than in the past, I persist? "It is still conservative but much better than it was." Does she intend to go to the Tate exhibition in person? She wants to go but her leg hurts. "I have no trouble, just mentally. It's a long flight." Then she looks around. "Where's Etchan?"

The fog seems to lift, however, when it comes to how she wishes to be regarded as an artist. She does not want to be associated with other commercially successful Japanese artists, such as Yoshitomo Nara or Takashi Murakami. "Such Japanese art is categorised as kawaii culture," she says, wrinkling up her nose at the word for "cute" that has come to define an entire genre. "I have never seen my art as kawaii like that. I don't want to be seen as a Japanese artist. I just want to be able to explore my art freely in an international context." In case I have not got the message, she adds, "I am not happy being put in that kawaii category. If I do something that is considered to be like that, I want to scratch it out."

These days Kusama's biggest obsession is her legacy. When she was told recently about the price her silver pumpkins fetched, she nearly cried, not because of the financial gain but because of the recognition such large sums implied. Several times, often unprompted, she mentions the foundation she has established to spread her fame after she is gone. "I am always trying to transmit my own message to as many people as possible," she says. "My main message is please stop war and live out the brilliance of life. I want to keep my profile as high as possible even after I have died." Until then, there are obsessions to obliterate and canvases to fill.

"I am getting old and I am facing death," she says. "I feel it is not so far in the future."

David Pilling is the FT's Asia editor. Yayoi Kusama's show will be at Tate Modern, February 9 to June 5, supported by Louis Vuitton. Her new paintings will be at Victoria Miro, London, February 10 to April 5

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