

INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

YAYOI KUSAMA IS THE MOST POPULAR ARTIST ON
EARTH. AND, PERHAPS, BEYOND. **BY CARRIE NIEMAN CULPEPPER**

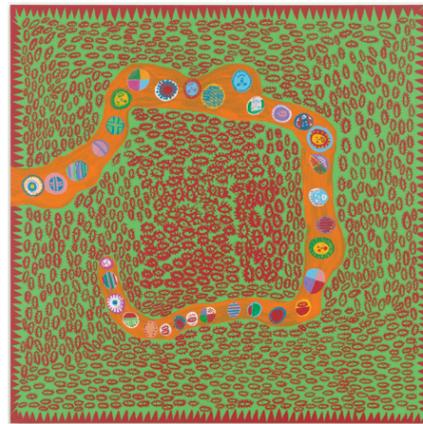
THE LONG VIEW Kusama's
Aftermath of Obliteration of Eternity,
2009. Wood, mirror, plastic, acrylic,
LED, black glass and aluminum.

I can't recall where I first spotted the work of Yayoi Kusama, but its cosmic imagery existed in my subconscious long before I was aware of it—or her. For the 87-year-old artist, I imagine, that might just be the point.

Yayoi Kusama is definitely having a moment—not least of all on social media, where her Infinity Mirrored Rooms, chambers lined with mirrors and lit with LEDs seemingly without end, to brilliant, dazzling effect—are catnip to Instagram feeds globally. So it's not surprising that a new survey of her work, partially targeted to that younger Insta-everything demographic, is underway: The Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden will bring an unprecedented collection of the artist's stunning room installations—along with

sculptures, paintings and drawings—to Washington, DC, for "Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors," which opens in February before moving on to Seattle, Los Angeles, Ontario and Cleveland through the end of 2018.

Ever since a retrospective of the Japanese-born artist's work toured European capitals, from 2011 to 2012, before wrapping up at Manhattan's Whitney Museum of American Art, curators have been avidly rediscovering her. The artist's two-year traveling show, "Yayoi Kusama: Infinite Obsession," sparked a major sensation throughout Central and South America, attracting a whopping two



DOTTING THE EYES (FROM LEFT) The artist in Tokyo in 2016, surrounded by recent works; A serpent-like form appears on a field of eyes in *Searching for Love*, a 2013 acrylic on canvas; The *obliteration room*, an ongoing collaboration begun in 2002 between Kusama and Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, Australia features furniture, white paint and dot stickers.



(PREVIOUS SPREAD) COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST, COURTESY OF OTA FINE ARTS, TOKYO/SINGAPORE; VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON; DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK. © YAYOI KUSAMA, (SEATED) IMAGE: TOMOAKI MAKINO, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST © YAYOI KUSAMA. (*SEARCHING FOR LOVE*) COLLECTION OF MIYOUNG LEE AND NEIL SIMPKINS. IMAGE © YAYOI KUSAMA. COURTESY OF DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK; OTA FINE ARTS, TOKYO/SINGAPORE; VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON. (*OBBLITERATION ROOM*) COMMISSIONED QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY, AUSTRALIA. GIFT OF THE ARTIST THROUGH THE QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY FOUNDATION 2012. COLLECTION: QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY, BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA. PHOTOGRAPH: QAGOMA PHOTOGRAPHY © YAYOI KUSAMA.



Kusama's Infinity Mirrors remain her most mind-altering works. The effect of stepping inside one of these intimate rooms is transformative and meditative: The mirrored floors take on the look of an ocean; the horizon evokes outer space.

INTERNATIONAL HOTSPOTS Kusama's *Pumpkin*, 2014, in plastic and polyurethane paint, installed at Benesse Art Site Naoshima, Kagawa, Japan; (OPPOSITE) the artist inside *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field*, 1965, an installation (sewn stuffed cotton fabric, board and mirrors) at "Floor Show," her exhibition at New York City's Castellane Gallery.

million visitors (by the time it hit Mexico City, clamoring visitors were camped out in front of the Museo Tamayo to get inside). In fact, the retrospective drew the most visitors of any museum show in 2014. That same year, a 1960 painting from Kusama's "Infinity Net" series sold at auction for a cool \$7.1 million, earning her another title, that of the world's most expensive living female artist.

Kusama's new superstar status seems long overdue. "Yayoi has been ahead of her time," Hirshhorn Assistant Curator Mika Yoshitake says of the artist's enduring career, which spans six decades. "She was criticized for many years for being too radical." Kusama started off as a pioneering avant-garde artist in New York City during the 1960s and early '70s. While she gained some buzz with her radical, feminist, often-nude performances, her peers, such as Andy Warhol, Donald Judd and Eva Hesse, garnered more popularity and acclaim. Then, in the early '70s, Kusama left the scene behind, returned to her native Japan and eventually

moved into a psychiatric hospital—by choice—where she continues to reside. Most days, the artist still leaves the hospital to work at her studio, just a stone's throw away.

Kusama's preferred motifs include polka dots, shining pumpkin sculptures and serpentine patterns repeated over and over. But her Infinity Mirrors remain her most mind-altering works. The effect of stepping inside one of these intimate rooms is transformative and meditative: The mirrored floors take on the look of an ocean; the horizon evokes outer space. There's a sense of being overcome with one's own smallness within a vast, infinite universe. That's, at least, how visitors described it, visitors who waited six hours in the frigid snow outside New York City's David Zwirner Gallery to stand in one of these chambers for 45 seconds—yes, 45 seconds.

Founding Director of LA's The Broad museum, Joanne Heyler, says the installation created a "cultural phenomenon" when it opened there last year. Katy Perry attended, snapping a selfie that quickly racked up 750,000 "likes" on Instagram. This, in turn, tipped off singer Adele, who went on to perform in one of Kusama's mirrored rooms (she was allotted a full hour), footage of which was later used as a backdrop for a televised performance.

Yoshitake believes that Kusama's universal themes of infinity and mortality have helped the work remain so very relevant. For the Hirshhorn show, she says the focus will be on "the impact of these mirror rooms as experiential spaces for the millennial generation. The idea of infinity is something that's very powerful and hard to grasp for anyone. I wondered, 'What does that mean in this day and age?'"

The artist, who, these days, uses a wheelchair and is rather frail, will, appropriately, appear at her own show at the Hirshhorn in an otherworldly way: via video link. **LD**

"Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors" opens February 23 at the Hirshhorn (hirshhorn.si.edu).

It continues on to the Seattle Art Museum and The Broad in 2017, and the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2018.

(PUMPKIN) COURTESY OF OITA FINE ARTS; TOKYO/SINGAPORE/VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON; DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK; © YAYOI KUSAMA. (PHALLI'S FIELD) COURTESY OF OITA FINE ARTS; TOKYO/SINGAPORE/VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON; DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK; © YAYOI KUSAMA. PHOTO: EIKOH HOSOE

