



### Yayoi Kusama

Yayoi Kusama is remarkable. Even now, at seventy-seven, she is a font of energy. In Tokyo she moves with speed up and down the stairs of her two story studio and down the block to the building she erected for her archive. Over her long career she has produced enormous quantities of work in the visual and literary arts, and she is still at it, full throttle. In Japan today she is something of a national treasure, but that status was long in coming and hard won.

Kusama dates her interest in making art to the onset of mental illness in childhood. She had hallucinations in which she saw her environment enveloped in patterns - dots, nets, flowers -- and these motifs recur in her work from age ten until today. Her paintings are frequently titled "Infinity Nets" because, like the hallucinations, they have the capacity endlessly to repeat themselves. Her mirrored rooms, from the 1960s to the present, similarly envelope the viewer in a disorienting patterned space without apparent end. In an effort to overcome her sense of



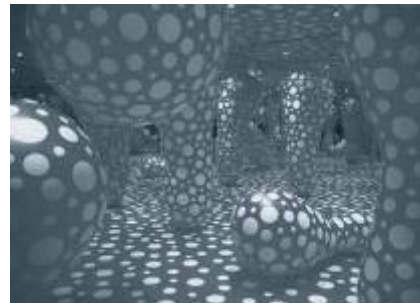
isolation, the 1950s, small in



she recreates her own experience for observer to share. In Japan in the 1950s, Kusama's works were relatively small. Most were abstract and contained multiple design elements.

They were produced in gouache,

in



watercolor, pastel and/or ink on paper. Inside of eighteen months after arriving in New York she was creating enormous, largely monochrome oil paintings of her "net" pattern, works unlike any she had made before. The new paintings, often heavily impastoed, exhibited a keen sense of art world trends, incorporating abstract expressionist scale and paint handling with the obsessive repetition characteristic of a still nascent minimalist.

1960s, which used mundane found objects as supports - old chairs, sofas, kitchen implements - were covered in stuffed phallic protrusions and, like the paintings, exhibited a strong sense of the artist's hand. By the mid-1960s she had added bright Pop colors to her work, and by the end of the decade her Dots Obsession 1998 Mixed Media Collection: Les Abattoirs, Toulouse, France dominate it. Many of her works from that time were ephemeral and took place in the streets.

In the 1980s, following her return to Japan, her style again changed dramatically. Her paintings became flat, more ordered, and less gestural. Her sculptures' phallic protrusions often morphed into more complex or more attenuated shapes. Also, after years of working between the abstraction of her paintings and the literalism of her three-dimensional objects, Kusama added to her repertoire overtly representational images and objects. In the last few years the image of a young girl has become prominent in Kusama's art. As sculptures these figures can be monumental in scale; in them adolescence becomes the powerful essence of potential. In a recent poem Kusama writes, "Adolescence is coming toward you/You know about this

extraordinary piece of performance, always an important of news?/Adolescence, carry-ing with it both life and death/Creeps up on you from behindwithout making a sound/I for-sake my dark previous life, willregenerate/ In the stillness oftime my destiny has granted me/I want to sing out the praises oflife from the bottom of myheart.” Kusama is finally fullyreclaiming the childhood innocence lost to her by illnessand circumstance. She haswritten of a lifelong, “dizzyinglyintense mental struggle” withloneliness. Today she is reaping the much-deserved rewards ofthat labor.

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