**Yayoi Kusama: Flower Obsession 2017**

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**Abstract:**

For over sixty years, Yayoi Kusama has worked obsessively on her paintings, drawings, sculptures, fashion, experimental films, installations, writing and ‘happenings’. *Flower obsession 2017*, is a new participatory artwork created by the eighty-eight year old artist especially for the NGV’s Triennial this summer.

There is no doubt that Kusama holds a significant place in the history of Abstraction, with her work influencing several generations of contemporary artists. However, there is also a great deal of interest in the psychology and biography of the artist.

On March 2 2018, participants in La Trobe’s Art Therapy Masterclass gained exclusive access to *Flower Obsession 2017* where they explored the immersive and expansive nature of Kusama’s participatory installation. Dr Karen Annett-Thomas of La Trobe Art Institute provided an insight into the artist’s impressive oeuvre.

YAYOI KUSAMA grew up surrounded by flowers. Since then, she has developed an expansive practice spanning almost seven decades. Her media is diverse; it includes (but is not limited to) painting, collage, photography, sculpture, installation, film, live performance and fashion design. No matter the media, a constant in her work has been a connection to nature and the cosmos.[[1]](#footnote-1) There is no division in her practice between the observable external world and her internal experience. The things that she can see intermingle with her memories, hopes and fears as she describes them verbally, in her spoken and written poetry or visually in paint, fabric or even through the repetitive application of colourful stickers.

Environments like *Flower Obsession, 2017* at National Gallery of Victoria are novel, playful and undeniably alien to most of us. For Kusama however, they are manifestations of experiences, very real to her:

One day I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth on a table, and when I looked up I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self-obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space, and be reduced to nothingness. As I realized it was actually happening and not just in my imagination, I was frightened. I knew I had to run away lest I should be deprived of my life by the spell of the red flowers. I ran desperately up the stairs. The steps below me began to fall apart and I fell down the stairs straining my ankle.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

Born in 1929 in a well to do family, Kusama grew up in mountainous Matsumoto in central Japan, the youngest child with two older brothers and a sister. The family forged their living through the business of cultivating plant seeds - in fact, the plant nursery remains on the site of her family’s house today. She had a conventional upbringing and was discouraged from making art, particularly by her mother who instead wanted her to be a traditional Japanese homemaker.

Yet, Kusama was insistent about her art-making and continuing to produce more and more work after her mother took it away and destroyed it. She worked despite her mother and used any materials that were available to her. Kusama’s early connection to flowers is abstractly present in the jute sacking from the seed nursery that served as the support for some of her artwork at the time.

In 1939 at the age of just ten years old, Kusama created her first drawing incorporating dots. The foreground and background of the drawing are covered in dots, effectively obliterating the *“Woman in a Kimono”* who is perhaps a portrait of the artist’s mother. Kusama has explained that this work, like many of her first drawings of figures shrouded in pattern are a direct reference to her childhood hallucinations. She “… remembers that her first drawings date from this period and this is significant because in Kusama’s own construction of her artistic genealogy, her mental illness is central to every aspect of her work, from her imagery to her working process.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While the artist acknowledges that her hallucinations permeated her practice she stops short of declaring her art as a mere product of her illness: “It is hard to say after all” she says, “whether these signature repetitions were caused by my disease or by my own intention.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The intense interest in the artist’s biography over the course of her career has been challenged in recent years, with the benefit of hindsight enabling historians to situate Kusama at the forefront of modern and contemporary art practices. While acknowledging that her illness, her gender and her culture have profoundly influenced her view of the world, it is also recognised that Kusama is one of world’s most influential living artists. As Museum of Modern Art, OMA curator Laura Hoptman succinctly stated, the “symptoms of Kusama’s disorder are helpful in our understanding of her imagery but they are not the subject of her work. They are the engine that drives it.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

At the outbreak of the pacific war, schoolchildren in Japan were made to work 12-hour days: Kusama worked in a parachute factory. Despite these long work days, Kusama continued to fill her sketchbooks. One of the books contains page after page of drawings and paintings of Peonies; the repetition of the flower motif was already present in her practice.

Despite her mother’s reservations, Kusama convinced her parents to allow her to study the Japanese Modernist Painting style of Nihonga. While a diligent student, she quickly tired of these conventional teachings and her first solo show in her home-town in the 1950s, revealed her defiant deviation from her teachers. Her experimental work moved away from the natural subject matter integral to Nihonga and instead celebrated more abstracted forms aligning her more closely with the modernist trends of the west.

It was shortly after this that Kusama reached out to American artist Georgia O’Keefe, seeking advice on making it in the tenacious American art scene. O’Keefe was puzzled by Kusama’s ambition, but offered her support and best wishes nonetheless.[[6]](#footnote-6) The correspondence between the two, demonstrates Kusama’s awareness of her peers and her desire to succeed among them. Perhaps in the context of this exhibition (*Flower Obsession 2017 at the NGV Triennial)* it is pertinent to point out the parallels in the practices of the two artists. O’Keefe, 42 years Kusama’s senior, had already forged a strong reputation, particularly for her bold enlarged flower paintings. The floral motif, when taken out of its conventional context and abstracted, became a symbol for feminine power and an acknowledgement of beauty at a time when it was shunned. The flower has been a persistent subject in Kusama’s career: from her early work on paper in Japan to her happenings in the 1960s, her writing throughout the 1970s to her paintings and polished fiberglass sculptures of the 1990s - 2000s and now, in *Flower Obliteration 2017*.

The desire to connect with artists like O’Keefe, and ultimately move to the US were likely driven by Kusama’s sense that she was not accepted among her Japanese peers at this time. She felt that “the art world in Japan ostracised” her for her mental illness. That is why she “…decided to leave Japan and fight in New York.”[[7]](#footnote-7) However alienated she felt in her home country, she had received some recognition from the Japanese art community and two significant papers published by the psychiatric profession did *not* focus on her mental illness, but instead celebrated the quality and symbolic meaning of her paintings.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It was quite radical in the 1950s for a Japanese woman to pursue a career beyond the household, let alone travel abroad unaccompanied in order to do so.[[9]](#footnote-9) Nevertheless, Kusama moved to New York in 1958 at age 27. Here, her practice expanded as she embraced the bold scale of the American modernists. Adopting a cool monochromatic palette (in the fashion of the minimalists), Kusama produced paintings of monumental scale, soft sculptures, environmental installations (using mirrors and lights) and staged happenings. She took O’Keefe’s advice and quickly formed an esteemed network with artists including Lucio Fontana, Joseph Cornell, Donald Judd, Claes Oldenberg, Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, Barnet Newman, Marisol and Andy Warhol. She says that she had a particular connection with Cornell as “…he too was an outsider”.[[10]](#footnote-10) While indeed somewhat different, her acceptance within such circles suggests that she was no mere outsider.

Attempts to link Kusama to various modernist movements, fall short. Though she adopted the palette of the minimalists her *Infinity Net* paintings were not impersonal or ‘detached’; she describes her marks as mechanical, yet the paintings are gestural, lyrical and personal. Her application of paint in the 1960s is highly emotive and insistently handmade. These works have the all-overness of abstract expressionism and yet what was often read as her ‘abstraction’ was loaded with autobiographical detail and symbolism. [[11]](#footnote-11) Her use of found objects and repetitive use of postage stamps and airmail stickers have her aligned with Warhol and the pop movement and yet her assemblages were grungy and bore evidence of the artist’s hand.[[12]](#footnote-12) Visually, her soft sculptures connect with the surrealists, however she does not ascribe the label to her productions, instead she insists that she “… had nothing to do with surrealism. I only painted as I wished.” [[13]](#footnote-13)

*Flower Obsession 2017* is indeed surreal to us as we move through it as visitors today. Through the installation, Kusama creates something new and strange by juxtaposing elements of the ordinary: in this case, reproductions of flowers and a mass-produced IKEA apartment. Taking elements from the everyday, Kusama does indeed meet the requirements of Andre Breton’s 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, to "resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality".[[14]](#footnote-14)

At the same time, there is nothing surreal about *Flower Obsession 2017* at all. From Kusama’s perspective, the work is pure realism. It is a consciousattempt to represent something that she (as a child and possibly since) has seen and observed. The room is a truthful rendition of her experience that places the participant at its centre. Kusama invites you to confront her fear alongside her and to help her obliterate it. While art historians now shy away from therapeutic analysis of Kusama’s practice, she herself has never denied the healing value of her process. In her 1975 biographical essay *Waga Tamashii no Henreki to Tatakai (*Odyssey of My Struggling Soul) Yayoi Kusama details the hallucinations, anxiety and depression that began in her childhood. She is transparent about the way she can channel her suffering into her practice, creating ‘…an obsessive-compulsive continuum of endlessly repeated shapes’. The artist considers her work as both a ‘symptom and a cure’ for her obsessions.[[15]](#footnote-15) Just as her hallucination reached out into the cosmos and blanketed everything in its wake, *Flower Obliteration 2017*, along with the *Obliteration Rooms* that have come before, spread out into the universe through selfies on Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook. The performance has become bigger than Kusama, she has recruited hundreds of thousands of gallery-goers to overwhelm the environments she produces. One by one, the added flowers obliterate the single lonely bloom that is Kusama.

Despite her illness and personal struggles, Kusama’s status as a groundbreaking artist has never been questionable or as vulnerable as her public persona might suggest. While appearing to be an ‘outsider’ in 1960s New York, she was indeed moving in influential circles. She shared with her peers an ambition for critical and commercial success, was aware of the latest trends in the market and took advantage of this. Some suggest that Kusama took advantage of her otherness (her femininity, mental illness and ‘orientalism’) as she began to wear sumptuous kimonos and elaborately styled her hair for exhibition openings in the 1960s.[[16]](#footnote-16) She performed her exoticism and turned her disadvantage into her brand.

Today you stand amidst brand Kusama. Every snap taken in this space and shared on social media spreads her immediately recognisable iconography into our digital world. Art Historian Soojin Lee asserts that an artist’s persona can be employed as their medium and by consequence, their *other* output, (the actual, physical artworks) can become a by-product of their persona.[[17]](#footnote-17) At 88 years of age, performance is difficult for the artist and yet, through the vehicle of participatory installations such as this, she utilises the labour of participants to continue covering the physical and virtual world with her polka dots (or in this case flowers). While Kusama does use her persona as another vehicle through which she may ‘brand’ her creative output, it is unfair to suggest that her impressive oeuvre is a mere by-product of her persona. Instead, Brand Kusama has become yet another medium to add to her impressive repertoire.

The development of Kusama’s persona-as-medium started decades before the emergence of her 2002 *Obliteration Room* and indeed, the current installation of *Flower Obsession 2017*. In fact, the artist orchestrated the earliest documentation of her work in order that she herself be featured front and centre. Often the artist donned outfits of similar colour and tone to the work that she positioned herself in front of. The paintings and environments appeared, in effect to consume the artist who according to curator Lynn Zelevansky “…often expressed the desire to be lost in her work”. Kusama’s photo-collages and painted photographs, according to Zelevansky, “…subsumed her own image in the patterns and objects”.

Her first nude image came about during the documentation of her 1963 installation *Aggregation: One Thousand Boats Show* at Gertrude Stein Gallery, New York. Kusama directed the photographer Rudolph Burkhardt to take her photograph as she posed naked inside her installation, performing erotically. She turned her*self* into the art-object and remained in control as the artist:

“Starting with this nude photograph, Kusama increasingly focused on staging herself in various environments, including urban streets, tabloid magazines and newspapers, and her own installations – which are well documented in photographs. Thus she used her body as a medium of art and publicity.” [[18]](#footnote-18)

Performance therefore, has always been central to Kusama’s practice. A more introverted young Kusama, fresh to the United States performed through her process driven paintings (performing repetitive actions). Then she began posing in front of and within her work and later took to performing her frequent ‘Happenings’ across New York throughout the 1960’s. Despite the showy nature of her happenings and her willingness to put herself on display (even today, as she dons a vibrant red wig) her *Happenings* reflect a sense of displacement and otherness.[[19]](#footnote-19) No matter the medium, she has constantly manifested her sense of isolation through movement.

Donald Judd once noted after seeing an exhibition of Kusama’s in 1964 that “her paintings are a product of her performance.” Her paintings embody the energy with which she applied her paint and her compulsion for repetition. Judd determined that “to see a show by Kusama, is to see a result of Kusama’s work, not a work itself.”[[20]](#footnote-20) *Flower Obliteration 2017* exemplifies her process driven practice, although now it is the participant, undertaking the performance on the artist’s behalf. Kusama has set the stage on which you perform the prescribed action; the essence of the artwork is in the process of obliterating, not in the final obliteration.

In the case of *Flower Obliteration,* the performance is contained in a mock apartment. Her Happenings of the 1960s however, took her performative gestures beyond studio and gallery walls and into the New York Streets. The often-naked Kusama covered herself and her surroundings in polka dots or flowers, literally enveloping herself in her art. It was through these performances that popular media took notice and she developed a reputation for provocative exhibitionism that was widely criticised by the art world at the time. On reflection, however it is clear to see the thematic consistency that runs throughout the various art forms adopted by Kusama and her ongoing commitment to ‘self-obliteration’ through performance.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Kusama uses many words to define the motivation and meaning behind her *Infinity Net* paintings, her happenings and immersive installations: They allude to the cosmos, the universal, to eternity or the infinite, they make manifest her obsessions her fears and her desire for accumulation, repetition and self-obliteration. On several occasions, she has described herself as a single dot, a star among the universe, a bubble in the ocean or a flower in a field. Various motifs have been employed to this end: dots, flowers, pumpkins, mirrors and lights, “…The shapes and what they signify do not really matter” she says, “I paint polka dots on the bodies of people and with those polka dots, the people will self-obliterate and return to the nature of the universe”

While returning to the universe might have a measure of comfort for some, Kusama has described her sense of her own smallness, as an overwhelming source of fear. In an interview with poet and art critic Akira Tatehata in 2000, Kusama referred to her work as a kind of “self therapy”. Tatehata was puzzled that the artist might “…attempt to flee from psychic obsession by choosing to paint the very vision of fear, from which one would ordinarily avert ones eyes”.[[22]](#footnote-22) Kusama replied that by painting “them (her fears) in quantity; in doing so, I try to escape.”[[23]](#footnote-23) By placing her fears outside, making them visible in the external world, Kusama is able to communicate a very personal fear with universal resonance. Each of us can relate to the single dot among the mass, or the flower in the field – and in *Flower Obsession 2017*, you can see your individual contribution obliterated by the presence of the masses.

There is something particular though, about the domestic space of this installation. In its nude state, the room looked like any freshly built city apartment. Deviating from the crisp white blankness of the *Obliteration Room* before the placement of the first dots, this installation was kitted out ordinary furniture and décor in its banal glory. It is difficult to see that now, as the triennial enters its third month. Almost completely obliterated the space has flattened out as all the surfaces have become adorned in pink. Flower Obliteration, while slick in its production harks back to Kusama’s earliest interior installations. When quizzed about her phallus-covered interiors of the 1960s Kusama again referred to her sense of fear, she made them because she was“… afraid of them, It’s a sex obsession.” Here we have flowers instead of phalluses, the feminine has replaced the masculine and power may have overcome fear.

Shortly after her return to Japan and only one year after admitting herself permanently to a psychiatric hospital (where she still lives), Kusama penned a fearful poem Violet Obsession (1978):

*one day suddenly my voice*

*is the voice of a violet*

*calming my heart holding my breath*

*they’re all for real, aren’t they*

*all these things that happened today*

*violets came out of the tablecloth*

*crawled up and on to my body*

*one by one they stuck there*

*violets sumire flowers*

*they came to lay claim to this love of mine*

*full to the brim with danger*

*I stand petrified in the fragrance*

*just look even on the ceiling and pillars*

*violets adhere*

*youth is hard to hold on to*

*violets, please don’t talk to me*

*give me back my voice, now a violet voice*

*I don’t want to grow up yet*

*all I ask is one more year*

*just leave me alone that long [[24]](#footnote-24)*

Her *Violet Obsession* seems a world away from the vibrancy and optimism that is present in her current installation at the NGV. It is difficult to imagine that the impetus for the vibrant work of Kusama comes from such a dark place. While Kusama is adamant that her work is driven by her illness, she also expresses her joy in making. She is an artist of dualities: the ugliness of her hallucinations are described through beauty, her vulnerability is expressed as strength and her expression of isolation in her current work, is created through collective effort. In a 2008 Documentary *I Adore Myself* the artist does not shy away from self-praise, every work that she produces is her self-declared best. So while the artist describes works like *Flower Obsession 2017* as a means of self-annihilation, her work according to Hoptman is “… also a reaffirmation of her persona – a defiant ‘I exist’… The physical self is erased only to be reasserted in the artist’s signature patterns.” [[25]](#footnote-25)

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3. Hoptman, L (2000) ‘Yayoi Kusama: A Reckoning’ in Tatehara, A et al, *Yayoi Kusama.* Phaidon: New York, London, pp 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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5. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pollock, G (2008) ‘Yayoi Kusama between Abstraction and Pathology’ in *Psychoanalysis and the image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons: New York, pp135 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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13. Ibid, p8 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Breton, A (1924) *Manifesto of Surrealism* trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1969 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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18. Ibid p33 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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21. Hoptman, Laura (2000) ‘Yayoi Kusama: A Reckoning’ in Tatehara, A et al, *Yayoi Kusama.* Phaidon: New York, London, pp 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Tatehara, A et al, *Yayoi Kusama.* Phaidon: New York, London, pp 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Yayoi Kusama (1978) *Violet Obsession Poems* trans. Hisako Ifshin, Ralf McCarthy, Lizza Lowitz, 1989, Tokyo [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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