



YAYOI KUSAMA

Art Appreciation, Fall 2019

TALKING
POINTS



- **Who is Yayoi Kusama (Ya-yoi Ku-sama)?**
- **Have you heard of her before?**

She is one of the world's most famous living artists! Yayoi Kusama was born in Japan in 1929. As a child, whenever she felt anxious or sad, she realized that drawing and painting made her feel better. Even today, at 90 years old, Kusama says:

"I am always happiest when I am making my art."

Kusama began her art career studying traditional Japanese painting. She didn't feel like she fit in with other Japanese artists and wanted to make something different. In 1958 she moved to New York, where lots of artists were experimenting with unusual new ways of making art. She explains:

"I am in my heart an outsider."

Kusama didn't want to paint what she could see in real life. She wanted to paint what she could see inside her mind. She realized that being different to everyone else was her greatest strength as an artist because no one else saw the world quite the same way she did.

- **Look at these two portraits of Kusama, taken in 1967 and 2010. Can you 'SPOT' what they have in common?**



EARLY DRAWINGS AND PAINTINGS

“Since childhood, I have been painting, for no special reason, numerous dots and nets, drawing from the hallucinations that seem to appear endlessly.”

“Untitled”
1939

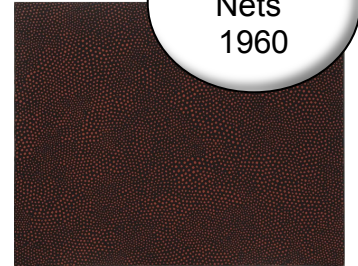


Kusama says she has seen polka dots everywhere she looks since she was a little girl. She drew this picture of her mother covered in dots when she was 10 years old.

She says that by painting as many polka dots as she can, she feels like she can empty them out of her mind and into the world. This makes her feel like she's a part of the world, rather than an outsider looking in.

Looking at these paintings gives us the opportunity to see the world in the very unusual way that she sees it.

“Infinity
Nets”
1960



○ How does Kusama make her polka dots look different in each of these pictures?

(look at the different colors she uses, different sizes of her marks and the different patterns she creates)

○ Do you have one favorite thing you love to draw?

○ Why is that your favorite thing to draw?

○ Does it trigger a good memory?

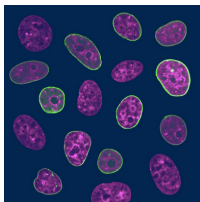
○ Have you got better at drawing the things you draw the most?

POLKA DOTS IN NATURE

○ **Do these photographs remind you of the paintings we just looked at?**

Many of Kusama's dot paintings look like patterns that we can find in nature.

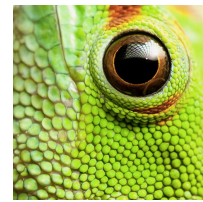
○ **Do you recognize what any of these polka dot patterns are pictures of?**



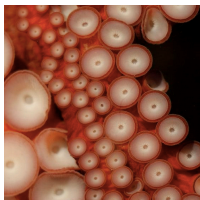
1. Human Cells



2. Ladybugs



3. Lizard skin



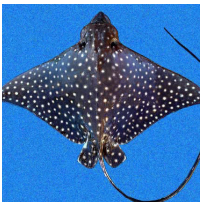
4. Octopus tentacle



5. Solar system



6. Sea urchins



7. Sting ray



8. Desert rocks



9. Plant leaves

○ **Can think of any other animals or places in nature that have a polka dot pattern?**

(leopards, butterflies, pebbles, corals)

○ **Do you always think of art as being a picture or sculpture?**

○ **Look at this big room. Where is the artwork inside this room?**
(the entire room is the artwork!)



○ **What's the first thing you notice about this room?**
(the brightly-colored polka dots?)

Kusama didn't just draw polka dots. She painted polka dots on her body, her clothes, and on sculptures. She even created entire rooms for people to walk into, so they could fully disappear inside her world of dots.

This room is an installation called the "Obliteration Room". When you obliterate something you make it disappear. Everyone who goes inside can stick a dot somewhere. As more dots appear, it gets harder to see the furniture and walls – they start to disappear!

○ **What color is everything in this room if you took out all the dots?** (white)

○ **If this room had no dots in it, would it be more, or less, interesting to look at?**

○ **Have you ever stepped INSIDE a piece of art?**

○ **How do you think this room would make you feel?**
(calm? relaxed? excited? energized?)

○ **Does the pattern remind you of anything?**
(candy? Ice cream sprinkles?)

INFINITY MIRROR ROOMS

The dots in Kusama's mind went on forever, like the stars in the universe. She wanted to find a way to show that in her art. By placing mirrors on the walls, floors and ceilings of her room installations, she was able create endless reflections of everything in the room.



"Phalli's Field"
1965

- **What effect do you think the reflections have?** (the room looks like it goes on forever – for "infinity")
- **Kusama makes everything you can see in these rooms. She sewed each one of the cotton stuffies here in "Phalli's Field". How long do you think it took her?**

Some of her rooms are filled with tiny LED lights. The lights reflect, so they look like millions of bright stars.



"The Souls of Millions of Light Years Away"
2013

- **How do you think it would feel to be inside this room?** (like you're floating in space)

Kusama's magical rooms pop up for a few months in cities all over the world. They have become so popular that thousands of people line up for hours for the opportunity to step inside them.



"Love Is Calling"
2013

- **What do the big polka dot sculptures in this room, "Love is Calling" remind you of?** (tentacles, or stalagmites and stalactites in a cave)
- **How do you think she made these?** (they are vinyl sleeves inflated with air blowers, like a bounce house!)

PUMPKINS

○ **What can you see in all of these pictures?**

Polka dots and mirrors aren't the only things that Kusama uses a lot in her art.

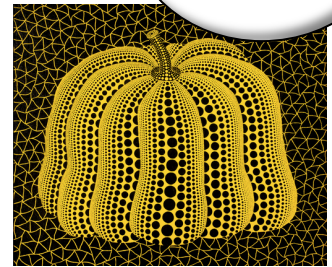
She also loves pumpkins, and uses all kinds of materials to make them, including paint, metal, fiberglass, paper and ceramics.



“Kusama with Pumpkin”
2010

The word for pumpkin in Japanese is “*Kabocha*”

Kusama grew up in the countryside in Japan during World War II. Food was in short supply, so her family relied on locally-grown produce. She still has good memories of eating lots of pumpkins and studying their unusual shapes and colors. She describes them as “*such tender things to touch, so appealing in color and form.*”



“Pumpkin”
2018

“Pumpkins have been a great comfort to me since my childhood. They speak to me of the joy of living.

They are humble and amusing at the same time, and I have and always will celebrate them in my art.”

– Kusama

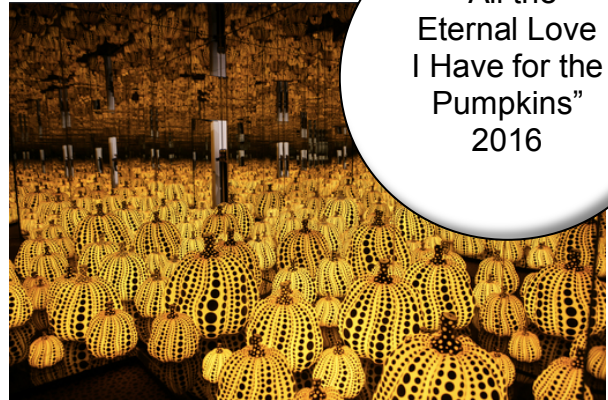
○ **Do pumpkins remind you of a special memory, or a certain time of year?**



“Pumpkins”
2014

○ **Take a close look at this room. What can you see in here that you know Kusama loves to put into her artwork?**

(pumpkins, dots, mirrors)



“All the
Eternal Love
I Have for the
Pumpkins”
2016

Kusama dedicated this 2016 infinity mirror room to her beloved pumpkins, calling it “All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins”.

○ **What does it remind you of?**

(a warm, glowing never-ending pumpkin patch!)

Kusama was 88 years old when she made this.

○ **Do you think this took too her a long time? Why?**

(Yes! Each pumpkin is a different shape, has a light inside, and is hand-painted with an intricate polka dot pattern)

She is 90 years old now, but has no intention of slowing down or retiring. She says:

“I’m old now, but I am still going to create more work and better work. More than I have in the past. My mind is full of paintings.”

And just like when she was a little girl, she still sometimes feels anxious and sad.

“I fight pain, anxiety, and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art.”

WORLD-FAMOUS WORK

A lifetime of hard work has made Yayoi Kusama the world's most successful living female artist!

○ **Do these sculptures look serious or fun?**
(fun – like giant cartoons!)

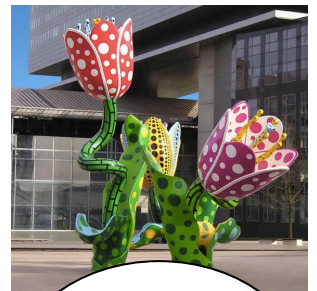
○ **Why do you think her work is so popular?**
(entertaining, playful, easy to enjoy?)

○ **What do you like about her work?**
(bright colors, patterns, fun, eye-catching)

Her artwork now sells for millions of dollars, but she's also worked with fashion and beauty brands to make all kinds of things that people love to wear, like these bags, T-shirts, sunglasses, lip-glosses and perfume.

You don't have to pay to enjoy her work, though. Lots of her most beautiful sculptures can be enjoyed for free, in public spaces all over the world, like these in France, Japan and Norway. She says:

“More and more I think about the role of the arts, and as an artist, I think that it's important that I share the love and peace.”



FRANCE
“Tulipes de Shangri-La”
2003



JAPAN
“Pumpkin”
1994



NORWAY
“Shine of Life”
2019