FONDATION **BEYELER**

YAYOI KUSAMA

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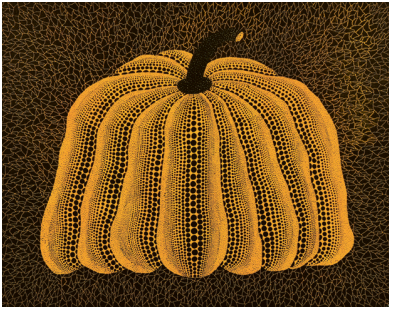

Yayoi Kusama
Pumpkin, 1991
Acrylic on canvas, 91 × 116.7 cm
Collection of the artist

The cover shows a detail of the work.

INTRODUCTION

The Fondation Beyeler presents the first comprehensive retrospective devoted to Yayoi Kusama (*1929, Matsumoto, Japan) in Switzerland, bringing together more than 300 works spanning over seventy years of her extraordinary career. The exhibition traces pivotal moments in Kusama's artistic journey, presenting her most iconic creations – such as the *Infinity Mirror Rooms* – alongside rarely seen works in a wide range of media including drawings, paintings, collages, installations, films and fashion. Early pieces, some shown in Europe for the very first time, are exhibited together with her most recent work, illustrating the evolution of her singular vision.

Kusama's distinctive visual language is characterised by polka dots, net-like patterns and organic forms, shaped through repetition and accumulation, and culminates in immersive environments. It reflects her lifelong exploration of the infinite and the dissolution of boundaries between artwork, space and viewer. This retrospective invites the audience to experience the full depth and complexity of Kusama's visionary world.

BIOGRAPHY

Yayoi Kusama is one of the most celebrated living artists, internationally renowned for her signature polka dots and iconic *Infinity Mirror Rooms*.
Born in 1929 in Matsumoto (Japan), Kusama began creating art when she was still a child. Around the age of 20, she studied traditional Japanese painting in Kyoto. A decade later, she left Japan for the United States. In New York, she emerged as a central figure of the 1960s avant-garde with her groundbreaking experimental work in a wide range of media.
After returning to Japan in 1973, she continued to expand her artistic practice, began publishing literary works, and rose to global prominence. Today, Kusama is still creating new works.
Kusama's remarkable body of work – spanning seven decades from her early postwar experiments to her most current creations – has had a lasting influence on contemporary art and the international art world, and has played a pivotal role in shaping art as an immersive experience.

ROOM 1

1 Untitled, 1939
Graphite on paper
Collection of the artist

This portrait shows a young woman with her eyes closed, looking inward. Her face is shrouded in a haze of dots, which spread out into the surrounding space as small, loosely drawn loops. Hidden on the other side of the sheet is another drawing: a vase with flowers is set within a space likewise dominated by dots and repeating patterns (catalogue, p.45). Both of these drawings, made by Yayoi Kusama when she was only ten years old, already display some of the motifs and stylistic elements that would become characteristic of her later work: flowers, polka dots and net-like patterns.
They also offer a glimpse into the young artist's inner life: from childhood onward, Kusama experienced visions and auditory hallucinations. To cope with these oftentimes difficult experiences, she expressed them in numerous drawings. As the artist emphasises, these phenomena are a key source of inspiration for her artistic practice.

ROOM 1

2 The Night, 1953
Pastel and gouache on paper
Collection of the artist

A vibrantly coloured oval shape gleams against a deep black background, reminiscent of fireworks in the night sky or a tiny organism viewed under the microscope. Its three-dimensional effect is achieved by layering several strongly contrasted colours using different techniques: set onto a veil of white, the blue colour is heightened by thickly applied flecks of pink. The shape is ringed by a haze of delicate orange dots that glow like sparks.
From 1952 to 1957, Yayoi Kusama produced a series of such small-format works on paper. They show the artist moving beyond the traditional Japanese painting technique she had studied, developing her own distinctive form of artistic expression. Using watercolours, she quickly translated inspirations found in nature into fluid, organic forms. Fast-drying media such as gouache and ink, or the combination of gouache and pastel seen in this image, allowed for spontaneous and gestural brushwork. These early explorations on paper laid the foundation for the motifs and themes that would define her much-celebrated later works.

ROOM 2

3 Corpses, 1950
Oil on canvas
Collection of the artist

This close-up view of a reddish-brown formation, painted to vivid three-dimensional effect, takes up almost the full surface of the canvas, its tangle appearing to our eye like part of a giant vine. Its sturdy and sinewy strands, reminiscent of ropes, plaits of hair or muscles, are coiled into inextricable knots. An empty space is suggested beyond the tangled mass, further heightening its monumental presence.
The titular corpses are not depicted, yet the painting conveys an eerie and ominous atmosphere. It appears to echo the violence of the war years, with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. More likely though, it reflects Yayoi Kusama's personal fears. And most clearly, it displays her fascination with plants and her interest in abstraction. Following her Kyoto-based training in the traditional art of Nihonga, which emphasises a meticulous depiction of the natural world, she developed an interest in contemporary Western painting, immersing herself in intense independent study.

ROOM 3

4 Untitled (No. White A.Z.), 1958–59
Oil on canvas
Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, Japan

This expansive canvas is entirely covered in a delicate pattern of countless small loops, traced onto a light grey background in shimmering shades of white. Unlike Yayoi Kusama's earlier works, this painting features neither traditional composition, nor spatial illusion, nor representational depiction – pure painting unfolds before us. After moving to the United States, Kusama took a studio in New York's East Village in the summer of 1958. In the following years, she worked tirelessly, filling countless, often monumental canvases with net-like structures, inspired by the view of the vast Pacific Ocean during her flight from Japan to the United States in 1957. Looking at the seemingly endless patterns of her *Infinity Net* paintings can bring about "a kind of dizzy, empty, hypnotic feeling", as the artist herself described it. When she exhibited the first of these paintings in a New York gallery in 1959, art critics reacted enthusiastically.

ROOM 4

5 Untitled (Chair), 1963
Chair, sewn stuffed fabric and paint
Collection of the artist

Except for its delicate legs, this chair is covered in protrusions of varying sizes and lengths. In the early 1960s, Yayoi Kusama began transforming everyday objects – furniture, dishware and items of clothing – by fitting them with organic shapes made from stuffed fabric and unifying these compositions with a layer of monochrome paint. She thus translated a central principle of her painting practice into sculpture: the seemingly endless accumulation of elements of similar form.
In this process, the objects' original function oftentimes recedes into the background. At the same time, they operate as an interface between art and life – for years, Kusama wore a dress covered in phallic shapes (Room 5) at her happenings as well as at events and photo shoots. Kusama's textile works also tell a story of emancipation: in her youth during World War II, she worked as a seamstress in a parachute factory. In the 1950s, she began making her own clothing. From the early 1960s, against a background of sexual liberation, she designed radical fashion pieces, later sold through her label *Kusama Fashion Incorporated*.

ROOM 5

6 Self-Obliteration (original design for poster), 1968
Collage with gouache and ink on paper
Collection of the artist

In the 1960s, Yayoi Kusama staged more than 200 performances and happenings in New York and in Europe, oftentimes in public spaces. Her film *Kusama's Self-Obliteration*, produced in 1967 with experimental film-maker Jud Yalkut, documents some of these events. This poster design for the film's screening combines a net pattern with collaged writing and her signature polka dots. Polka dots also played a key role in Kusama's performative work, where she often used them to cover the bodies of performers or participants. The concept of *Self-Obliteration* mentioned in the title was developed by Kusama to describe the dissolution of the self into its environment and ultimately into the entire universe. This idea finds one of its expressions in her practice of erasing all boundaries between the various media she used: she painted over drawings, reassembled them in collages, and combined paintings and sculptures to create full-scale environments.

ROOM 6

7 Self-Portrait, 1972
Collage with pastel, ballpoint pen and ink on paper
Collection of the artist

A pinky-red floral shape dominates the centre of the image, surrounded by pasted depictions of colourful butterflies and a caterpillar. The background features a nighttime winter landscape with a low horizon, endowing the scene with dramatic tension. The flower's evenly drawn net-like pattern is interrupted by a collaged interior view of an ant nest, whose lines align perfectly with those of the plant's structure.
Described as a self-portrait, this work is an early example from a series of surreal, mostly dark and atmospheric collages that Yayoi Kusama produced during a period of personal transition around her return to Japan. Two further works from the series are on display in this room. For these collages, Kusama combined drawing and painting with illustrations or photographs clipped from magazines – some of which she was given by the artist Joseph Cornell, with whom she shared a close emotional and creative bond until his death in 1972.

ROOM 7

8 Airship to the Cosmos, 1987
Acrylic on canvas
Collection of the artist

Against a black background, vivid greenish yellow shapes cluster into an almost psychedelic pattern. They could be the titular airships – yet their red eyes and rhombus-shaped beaks are more evocative of a swarm of birds, insects or even extraterrestrial beings. Amid curling clouds of blue, white and turquoise dots, they are given upward momentum by red and greenish yellow dots rising like bubbles. The rhythmic repetition of elements is cut off by the edges of the canvas, suggesting that the pattern could extend endlessly, like a textile design. This "all-over" approach links the painting to many of Yayoi Kusama's earlier works, particularly her *Infinity Nets*. In the late 1980s, the artist returned to painting alongside her continued writing and sculptural work, using bright acrylics to cover her canvases with patterns of vibrant luminosity. In many pieces from this series, those abstract forms resemble magnified views of living organisms. Most bear poetic titles such as *Necklace of the Sun* or *Hymn of Life*.

ROOM 7

9 Self-Portrait, 1995
Etching on paper
Collection of the artist

Printmaking plays a central role in Yayoi Kusama's practice. The artist views this process as an inexhaustible source of creative discovery and a means to channel her thoughts and emotions into straightforward and unmediated forms. Each of the etchings on display in this room is characterised by radical restraint, focusing on very few design elements. Viewed together, these works thus form a visual alphabet of patterns and motifs.
To the botanically trained eye, the potentially endlessly repeating patterns appear borrowed from plant structures. As a technique of reproduction, printmaking embodies these principles of repetition and infinity inherent to nature and the overall cosmos. For Kusama, it thus provides the ideal medium to spread her message of love and hope throughout the world.

ROOM 7

10 Black Flower, 1986
Sewn stuffed fabric, synthetic fibre, paint and metal
Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo, Japan

Pollen, 1986
Sewn stuffed fabric, synthetic fibre, paint and metal
Ota Fine Arts, Singapore

Black Flower and *Pollen* are two very large, organically shaped sculptures. With their numerous protuberances, they recall the vocabulary of Yayoi Kusama's works from the 1960s, in which she altered the surfaces of everyday objects through additions and accretions. Her transition from found objects to autonomous sculpture was already visible in her small, painted ceramics from the 1970s (Room 6). In these two textile works, the swollen bulges are covered in dots. They form sturdy stems, opening at the top like funnels to reveal a fuzzy filling. The two sculptures are reminiscent of plants – an interpretation encouraged by their titles – but also suggestive of human reproductive organs and pubic hair. Like Kusama's earlier images of flowers, they are far removed from the quaintly decorative, hinting rather at the immensely forceful life cycles of nature.

ROOM 7

11 Pumpkin, 1981
Acrylic and fabric on canvas
Private collection

In this depiction of a yellow pumpkin, volume is created solely by the subtle arrangement of black dots. This relation is reversed in the surrounding net pattern, where yellow lines structure a black expanse. The framing with zigzag-edged strips of fabric emphasises the motif's ornamental character.
Pumpkins hold a central place in Yayoi Kusama's universe. Next to drawing and painting them, she has produced small papier-mâché or ceramic sculptures. More recent larger versions, such as seen in this room, were made using fibre-reinforced plastic. All are covered in polka dots, linking them to the imagined infinite space of Kusama's pictorial world.
The artist's parents owned a plant nursery, and she traces her fascination with pumpkins back to early childhood experiences: "I was enchanted by their charming and winsome form. What appealed to me most was the pumpkin's generous unpretentiousness. That and its solid spiritual balance."

ROOM 8

12 My Eternal Soul, 2009–2021
Acrylic on canvas, 38 works of the series
Collection of the artist

Yayoi Kusama spent a total of twelve years working on this series of paintings. Her process was always the same: after stretching the canvas over a table, she worked on it from all sides while seated. She first primed the canvas with a dominant colour, on which she then applied other, contrasting colours to create a complex web of organic – and sometimes figurative – shapes that frequently appear as though hovering above the picture ground. She often worked on several canvases in parallel, guided entirely by intuition rather than pre-defined compositions. Hung edge to edge in this room, the paintings create an immersive visual experience.
From 2018 onward, Kusama continuously scaled down the formats as the pace of her ideas quickened. This process continues in her latest large series, *Every Day I Pray for Love*, displayed at the back of the room. Alongside the familiar motifs – dots, net-like structures, eyes, or faces often depicted in profile – these works feature words or entire poems. Written in English and Japanese, they echo the title of the series, highlighting a verbal dimension of the spirituality already expressed in *My Eternal Soul*.

ROOM 9

13 Infinity Mirrored Room – The Hope of the Polka Dots Buried in Infinity Will Eternally Cover the Universe, 2025
Inflatables, fans, plywood, glass mirrors, mirror-polished stainless steel, acrylic, steel, aluminium and LED lighting system
Collection of the artist

Covered in polka dots, giant biomorphic shapes wind their way through the entire room. Their repetition and non-hierarchical arrangement recall the fundamental principles governing botanical organisms and their communities. Multiplied into seeming infinity on the walls and ceiling, they create the labyrinthic atmosphere of an artificial primeval forest. In the centre of this installation, a mirrored space invites another, more intimate experience. Here, the colours appear inverted and the countless reflections seem to abolish the confines of the room.
Created especially for the exhibition, this monumental installation offers access to two distinct kinds of spatial perception by combining two different types of works developed by Yayoi Kusama over the course of her career: her balloon installations, whose effect is best experienced when moving through the space, and her contemplative *Infinity Mirror Rooms*, in which mirrors create the optical illusion of infinite replication.

PARK

14 Infinity Mirrored Room – Illusion Inside the Heart, 2025
Mirror-polished stainless steel with glass mirrors and coloured acrylic
Collection of the artist

Set within the museum park, this *Infinity Mirrored Room* literally merges with nature. Though it weighs several tonnes, its mirrored exterior gives it an airy, almost floating appearance. The work can only be entered by stooping through a door – head bowed, in a posture of humility. Inside, the space is dark, with coloured light filtering in through small openings, feeling at the same time intimate and unfathomable. Yayoi Kusama herself speaks of a "subtle planetarium", which invites us to reflect on human existence in relation to the infinity of the cosmos. Kusama has been conceiving such kaleidoscopic *Infinity Mirror Rooms* since the early 1960s. Here in the park, her work engages in a dialogue with Riehen's landscape and ecosystem. Depending on the weather, the time of day and the light conditions, each visit offers a new experience.

PARK

15 Narcissus Garden, 1966/2025
1200 stainless steel balls
Collection of the artist

Every one of these 1200 shiny silver spheres is perfectly formed. Viewed from afar, they look like giant dewdrops, reflecting the museum park around them. Yayoi Kusama first presented this outdoor installation in 1966 at the Venice Biennale – without an official invitation. At the time, 1500 mirror-plated balls were spread out on a lawn outside the Italian pavilion. Kusama stood among the silvery spheres and directly involved the public by greeting visitors as they walked by. She sold the spheres for two dollars each, thereby pointing to the commercialisation of the art world.
The title of the work alludes to an ancient myth recounted by the Roman poet Ovid: looking down into a pond, Narcissus falls in love with his own mirror image. In *Narcissus Garden*, Kusama addresses both vanity and self-reflection, while also exploring the relationship between the individual and the surrounding space.

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INFORMATION

Exhibition

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Exhibition guide

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We look forward to receiving your feedback on the exhibition guide at: kunstvermittlung@fondationbeyeler.ch

CATALOGUE

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Further publications on Yayoi Kusama are available from our Art Shop: shop.fondationbeyeler.ch

Upcoming exhibition:
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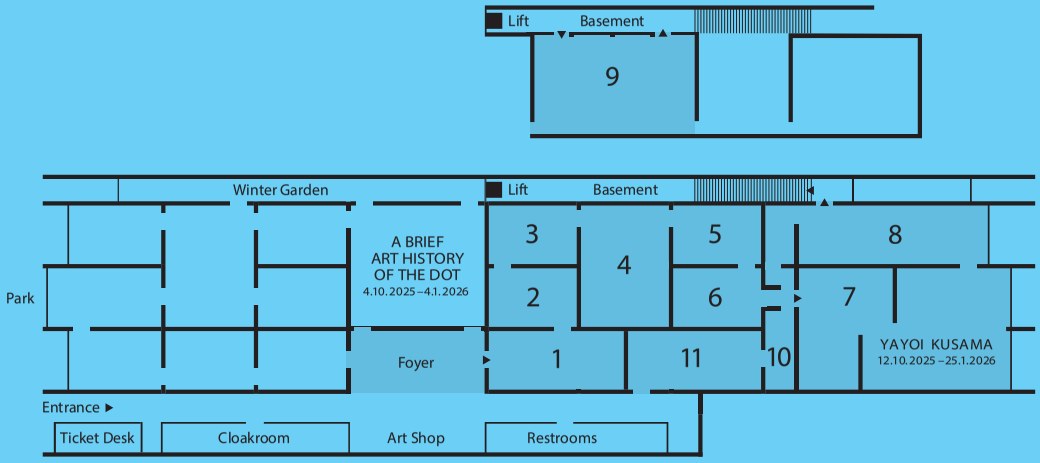

Please do not touch the artworks!