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Don't Call It a Comeback

by [Semmi W.](#) | Posted July 24, 2012

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Yayoi Kusama. Source: tohave2hold.com.

Dreams do not feed you. And in the case of [Yayoi Kusama](#), life-long hallucinations can almost destroy you. In 1973, 16 years after diving into the American arts scene, the famed Japanese artist had had enough of New York City. She was broke, tired and burnt out by the politics of avant-garde hobnobbing. Shunned by her contemporaries, the polka dot queen packed her bags and returned to her homeland of Japan with a fragile but, nonetheless, intact ego.



"Fireflies on the Water" installation.
Source: artboom.info.

Considering the plethora of dismissive critics, copycats and rejections of her past life, Kusama's nonchalant reaction to the Whitney Museum's recent [celebration](#) of her 60-year career comes as no surprise. She feels vindicated, not flattered. "What I've been doing was historically right," the 83-year-old told [New York Magazine](#) in regards to the exhibition, which also featured in London's [Tate Modern](#).

The exhibit features numerous iconic Kusama works, but at best, serves as a snap shot of Kusama's incredible artistic output. Rather than tell one big linear story, the paintings, drawings, films, sculptures,

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installations and performances surveyed by the Whitney Museum act as individual episodes. Each work functions like a reality TV show - indulgent, bold and forced out of sheer desire to be noticed. The wider message told to visitors is simple: Kusama is a star. And you are merely atmospheric matter in her universe.

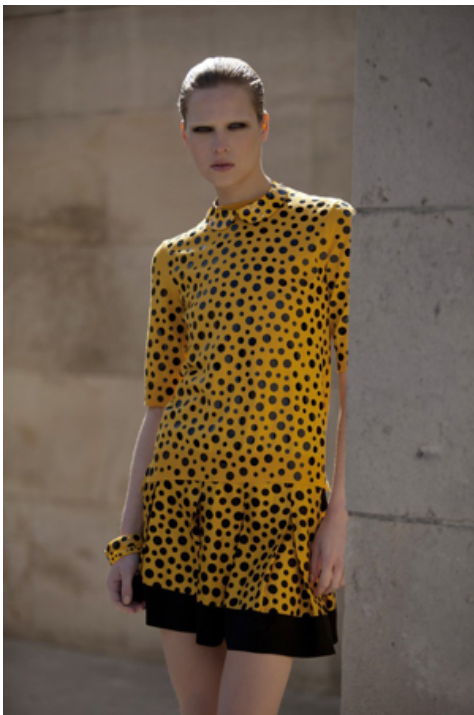
Viewing photographs of the young artist in Brooklyn wearing a long faux-fur coat or stepping into the installation "Fireflies on the Water," a mirrored room with coloured lights, gives you a sense of Kusama's magnetic personality. Each one of her creations beckons you to reimagine normality. She inflates tiny eccentricities that others might be too busy to notice - dots, zigzags and angular landscapes.

It is impossible to quantify and compartmentalise a woman who shared creative space with everyone from [Carolee Schneemann](#) to Andy Warhol. During the same interview with *New York Magazine*, Kusama boldly states, "I had already exceeded him [Warhol] during my stay in New York in the sixties. He lived near me and appropriated my ideas, only he was too late because I had already realized them. We don't hear his name now so much in Japan."

Kusama blazed a path for artists who deploy an untamed sense of self-obsession. Dots were a way for Kusama to mark her place in the world; each spot was an attempt to pin down obscurities that ran wildly in her mind.

Kusama's impenetrable gusto is responsible for both her early failures and later triumphs. She did not fit neatly into the stereotype of a docile, submissive Japanese woman. She was no American housewife. Raised in an era of GI war brides, Kusama was determined to bend the rules and become the exception. In preparation for her move to America, the young artist marched up to the American Embassy, and looked up [Georgia O'Keeffe's](#) address. She had no connection to the legendary American artist, but Kusama wrote her a letter anyway. Miraculously, O'Keeffe responded.

Amidst a kaleidoscope of colours, visitors can find O'Keeffe's 1955 reply to her letter on display: "It seems to me very odd that you are so ambitious to show your paintings here. But I wish the best for you."



Louis Vuitton x Yayoi Kusama.
Source: fashionista.com.

what on Earth she could be thinking next.

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The exhibit also coincides with the debut of Kusama's collaboration with [Louis Vuitton](#). In celebration of the partnership between Marc Jacobs and Kusama, the French fashion house covered their Fifth Avenue flagship with nothing but black spots. At the unveiling of the collection, Louis Vuitton CEO, Yves Carcelle is [reported](#) to have said: "The number of dots is so obsessive, no one can count them."

Both Jacobs and Kusama share a natural affinity for melding fashion and fine art. Since his appointment as Vuitton's artistic director in 1997, Jacobs has teamed up with Stephen Sprouse, Richard Prince and, of course, Takashi Murakami. Kusama, however, is the first female artist to collaborate with the brand.

Despite choosing to live in a mental hospital, Kusama has amassed a very large collection of clothing, or as she puts it, "accumulation" works, some of which are on display at the Whitney Museum; including her macaroni pants from 1968.

On Fifth Avenue, a wax display of Kusama stands firmly in a sea of red dots. Her twin is looking out from the Louis Vuitton window, gazing at bystanders, making sure each one stops and stares back. Despite her dark shades, she pulls you in, a hallucination no less, but one that makes you wonder

Yayoi Kusama runs at the Whitney Museum for American Art until September 30, 2012.