

**Yayoi Kusama: Seeing infinity in a polka dot**

**Yayoi Kusama: THE MOVING MOMENT I WENT TO THE UNIVERSE, Victoria Miro Gallery London N1 7RW, 3<sup>rd</sup> October to 21<sup>st</sup> December 2018**

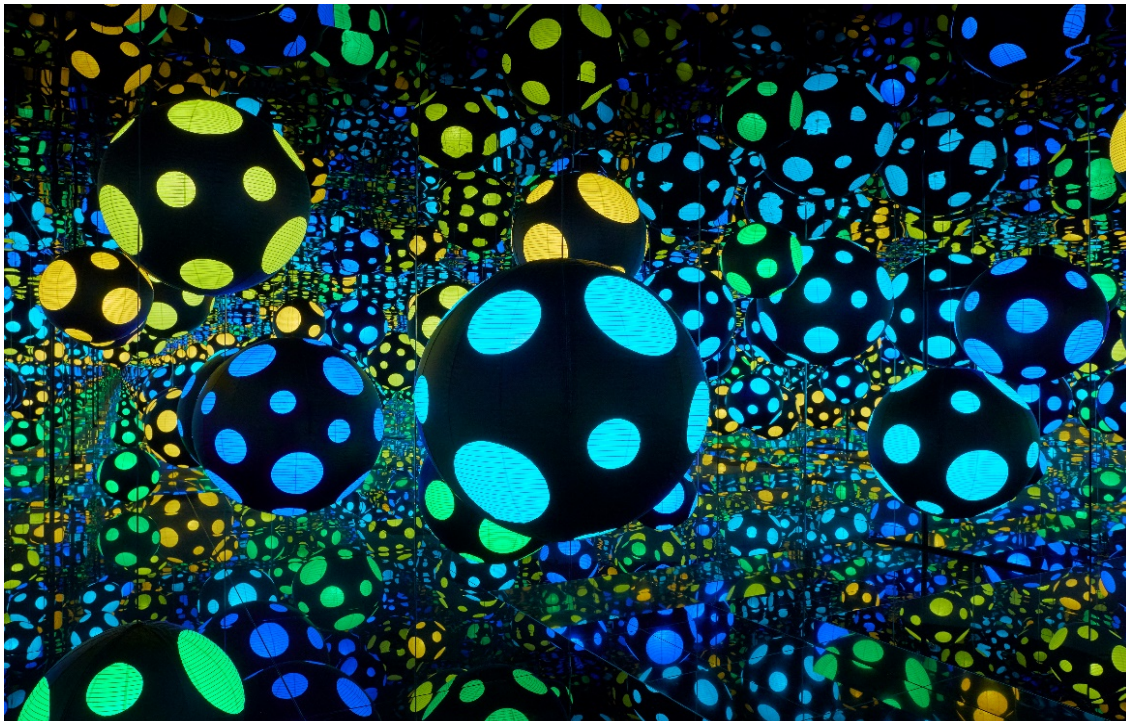
It's almost Christmas and another Yayoi Kusama exhibition has rolled into town at the Victoria Miro Gallery. But I can't decide whether to be the Spirit of Christmas in this review (*or Scrooge*).

If you're a fan of Kusama – and there are many; she's acknowledged as the world's favourite living artist – then Christmas has arrived early with this show.

*(That is, it would have done if you've managed to get hold of a ticket. The show has been booked out since it opened. If you haven't, there's always Instagram ...).*

The highlight of the show is one of Kusama's mirrored infinity rooms, *My Heart is Dancing to the Universe* (2018). In this iteration of Kusama's iconic concept, paper lanterns hang down at different heights in the darkness, their glowing colours gently modulating. Reflected ad infinitum by the mirrored walls, the effect is like standing in a blissful psychedelic bubble, surprisingly calm and surreal.

*(Or at least it is for the 60 seconds you get to enjoy the room, because this is a strictly managed version of infinity, in which perversely you're only allowed to linger briefly in the company of others, all taking the obligatory selfies. It's a little like walking through Santa's grotto – jolly enough while it lasts but you know it's not the real thing).*



Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrored Room, *MY HEART IS DANCING INTO THE UNIVERSE* (2018), Wood and glass mirrored room with paper lanterns, *THE MOVING MOMENT WHEN I WENT TO THE UNIVERSE*, Victoria Miro,

London N1 7RW, 3 October - 21 December 2018 Courtesy Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo/Singapore/Shanghai and Victoria Miro, London/Venice. © YAYOI KUSAMA

Downstairs all the motifs that Kusama regularly employs to explore her twin themes of limitless external space and private inner compulsion are present and correct. Prone to hallucinations and mental illness throughout her life, when Kusama first saw a pumpkin aged 11, it began to talk with her. Now almost eighty years later, pumpkins bring order to her obsessional mind. Pumpkins are always 'humble and amusing', she explains, 'I have and always will celebrate them in my art'. And three large bronze pumpkins in red, yellow and green and decorated with more polka dots duly dominate the first gallery, while on the walls are five vibrant new paintings that pulse with the repetition of the recurring polka dot theme.

*(On the other hand, this could all feel very manufactured, so narrow and distinctive is Kusama's artistic brand. Her endless exploration of such a small range of motifs smacks of the production line. After all, one giant pumpkin looks much like another; colourful and easy on the eye like oversized Christmas tree decorations but maybe not deep and meaningful, while the polka dot paintings resemble expensive Christmas wrapping paper.)*



Yayoi Kusama: Installation view, *THE MOVING MOMENT WHEN I WENT TO THE UNIVERSE*  
Victoria Miro, London N1 7RW 3 October - 21 December 2018

Outdoors in the waterside garden – which itself is a pleasant surprise in this most urban part of London – are three large bronze flower sculptures, painted in primary colours and decorated once more with

polka dots. These childlike organic forms celebrate the innocent joy to be found in life, while again playing with scale and forcing us to reassess our place in the natural order of things.

*(But too big, too gaudy, and inauthentic, they could easily be doodads from a theme park, a designer's simplistic version of childhood as something to be safely managed and curated, not experienced).*



Yayoi Kusama: Installation shot, *Flowers that speak all about my heart given to the sky* (2018) *THE MOVING MOMENT WHEN I WENT TO THE UNIVERSE*, Victoria Miro, London N1 7RW, 3 October - 21 December 2018, Courtesy Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo/Singapore/Shanghai and Victoria Miro, London/Venice. © YAYOI KUSAMA

In the upper gallery though, there's a change of tone. The recurrent motifs of pumpkins and polka dots largely disappear in the paintings that continue Kusama's *My Eternal Soul* series. These feel less obsessive and less branded. It is easy to imagine Kusama hunched over a table top painting out these organic symbols of faces and suns, pebbles and leaves, in a rough unfinished style.

And I'll be no Scrooge here either as these paintings are clearly collections of deeply significant symbols that allow Kusama to harness and work through her inner demons. I'm not sure they're great art, but there is something intensely personal to Kusama in these paintings that should be respected.



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*(But then you head back downstairs and have to weave your way through all the raised smartphones, their owners clicking away, posting instantly on Instagram, combining their stories with that of Kusama. With the thought that we're all curators now, any goodwill to all humankind left over from the upper floor rapidly disappears).*

So, one man's meat is another's poison. If you're already a Kusama fan, this small but perfectly formed show has all the ingredients you've come to expect – a mirrored infinity room, pumpkins, polka dots, a crowd of fellow instagrammers. But if you're not a Kusama convert, the very same ingredients will leave you wondering what all the fuss is about.

Chacun à son goût, mes amis. Happy Christmas *(or Bah Humbug)*.

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