

# YAYOI KUSAMA

LIFE IS THE HEART OF A RAINBOW



**GALLERY OF MODERN ART**  
4 NOV 2017 — 11 FEB 2018

**GALLERY 1.2 & GALLERY 1.3 ERIC & MARION TAYLOR GALLERY,  
GALLERY 1.4 | FREE**

**SCHOOL  
RESOURCE**

This resource is organised into three areas of focus from the *Australian Curriculum for Visual Arts: Representation, Viewpoints and Practices*. Further information about Yayoi Kusama is available at [www.gagoma.qld.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/yayoi-kusama](http://www.gagoma.qld.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/yayoi-kusama).

## INTRODUCTION

Yayoi Kusama (Japan, b.1929) is one of the most renowned and widely recognised artists working today. Her creations, with their characteristic **dots**, **nets** and **pumpkins**, have reached beyond the sphere of art and entered popular culture. She has been at the forefront of multimedia art, installation, soft sculpture, performance and public art for decades, influencing generations of artists.

'Yayoi Kusama: Life is the Heart of a Rainbow' is a focused overview of Kusama's vast body of work created since the 1950s. The exhibition addresses the development of Kusama's **iconic motifs**, as well as her exploration of the relationships between **mind, body and soul**, and her expansive conception of **space**.

### INFINITY NETS AND DOT PAINTINGS

A celebrated series of works, Kusama's 'Infinity nets' represented a new direction for the artist during her time in the United States. The paintings are without a focal point and avoid typical compositional conventions; instead, they position the canvas as an art object in and of itself.

Kusama's dot paintings have long been a source of therapy for the artist. She explores the dot as a point of connection with herself and her place in the universe. In her practice, Kusama has used dots extensively — in paintings and self-portraits, on soft and hard sculptures, in her obliteration and mirror rooms, and as a motif in her fashion lines.

### ICONIC MOTIFS: FLOWERS AND PUMPKINS

When Kusama returned to Japan in the mid 1970s, her practice underwent several shifts, most notably in terms of the scale of her works, which had expanded to encompass the viewer. It was during this time that pumpkins emerged as a major motif in her work. For Kusama, the pumpkin represents the comfort and security of her youth — Kusama's family owned a nursery and grew fields of pumpkins and flowers. The speckled skin and bright colouring of the *kabocha* ('pumpkin' in Japanese) inspired Kusama's distinctive yellow-and-black colour scheme.

### MIND, BODY AND SOUL

The human body was at the forefront of Kusama's art in the 1960s. She was frequently photographed posing with her artworks to signify the unity of art and artist.

What would become the artist's 'My Eternal Soul' series began as a personal challenge: to make a series of 100 canvases over an 18-month period in 2009–10. 'My Eternal Soul' exudes colour and dynamism, often making use of contrasts to create vibrant optical effects.



LET'S TALK ABOUT LOVE 2015 / Synthetic polymer paint on canvas / 194 x 194cm / Collection: The artist / Courtesy: The artist and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo/Singapore, Victoria Miro, London, David Zwirner, New York

### IMMERSIVE INSTALLATIONS AND MIRROR ROOMS

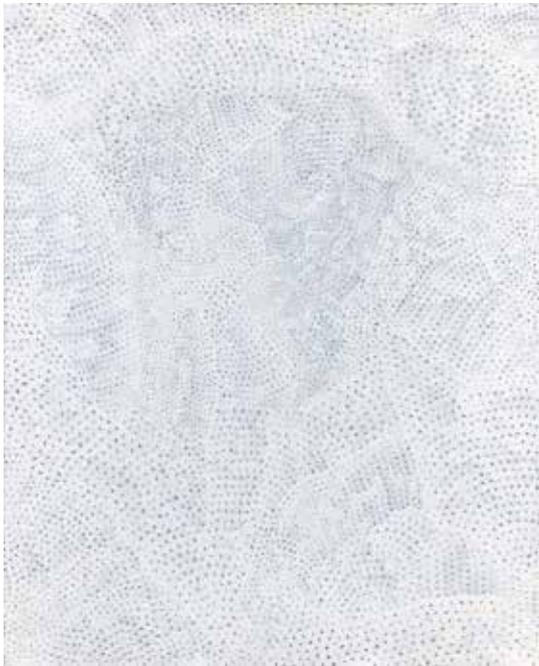
In 1966, having already exploited the potential of mirrors (to explore ideas of repetition, accumulation and infinity), the artist presented *Kusama's Peep Show*. A hexagonal structure that the viewer peered into rather than entering directly, it was filled with multicoloured flashing lights and a soundtrack of psychedelic rock music.

Kusama's most recent mirror room installation, *I WANT TO LOVE ON THE FESTIVAL NIGHT 2017* incorporates the faces of viewers.

Kusama manipulates subject matter through the use of symbolism and repetition.

## INFINITY NETS

KEY CONCEPTS: movement, rhythm, obsession



*Infinity nets 2000* / Synthetic polymer paint on canvas / 162 x 130cm / The Kenneth and Yasuko Myer Collection of Contemporary Asian Art. Purchased 2001 with funds from The Myer Foundation, a project of the Sidney Myer Centenary Celebration 1899–1999, through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / Photograph: Natasha Harth, QAGOMA

### BEFORE YOUR VISIT

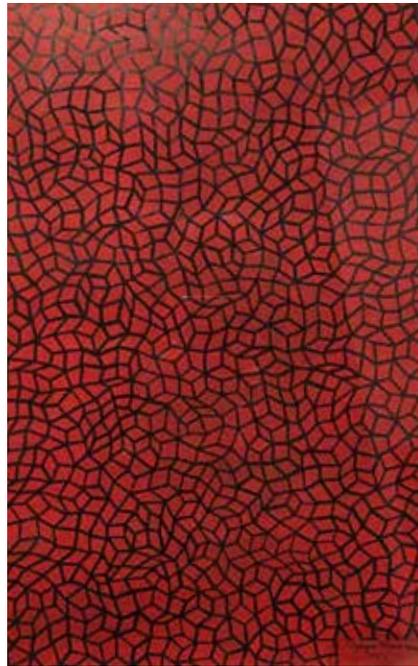
Consider how Kusama uses the dot in her artworks. How does she use it to make sense of her world and the world around her?

Compare one of the 'Net paintings' from the 1950s with one from this decade. List the similarities and differences. Which do you prefer and why?

What do these two paintings and this quote reveal about Kusama's practice? Record your responses in your visual diary.

'The red and green and yellow dots might represent the circle of the earth, or of the sun or moon, or whatever you like.'

Yayoi Kusama, 2002



*Infinity Nets 1952* / Gouache, pastel and ink on paper / 39.5 x 25.7cm / Private collection, Japan

### DURING YOUR VISIT

Consider the way movement and rhythm is created in the monochrome net paintings.

Draw a diagram of a section of one painting to show your understanding of the rhythm of the artwork.

What is the subject matter of the net paintings — the positive space or the negative space?

Record your observations in your visual diary.

### AFTER YOUR VISIT

Explore the way textured paint and various tools and techniques, such as sgraffito and printmaking, could be used to create net paintings. Consider how monochromatic or high-contrast colour schemes could be used to create a net painting.

Build a 3-D net using coloured wool, string or strips of fabric or plastic. Drape yourself in the net and take a series of selfies in which you wholly or partially obliterate your identity, just like Kusama.

Kusama manipulates subject matter through the use of symbolism and repetition.

## ICONIC MOTIFS: DOTS, FLOWERS AND PUMPKINS

KEY CONCEPTS: repetition of shape – the dot



*Flowers that bloom at midnight* 2011 / Fibreglass-reinforced plastic, urethane paint, metal frame / 181 x 181 x 268cm / Purchased 2012 with funds from the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Diversity Foundation through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / Photograph: Natasha Harth, QAGOMA

### BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Discuss the visual effect created by Kusama's application of dots in *Flowers that bloom at midnight* 2011, *Pumpkin* 1981 and *THE SUN WANTS TO GO ON A JOURNEY* 2012.

How would these works appear without the dots?

Find ten images of the environment where dots appear. Describe these patterns in your visual diary.

### DURING YOUR VISIT

Make a record of all of Kusama's patterns and motifs in the exhibition.

Think of all your interests, hobbies or obsessions. Are there shapes or patterns that could represent them? Record them in your visual diary.

Consider how *THE SUN WANTS TO GO ON A JOURNEY* 2012 could be translated into a design for another artwork.

Record your design and plans in your visual diary.



*THE SUN WANTS TO GO ON A JOURNEY* 2012 / Sewn stuffed fabric, paint, metal / 200 x 85 x 85cm / Collection: The artist / Courtesy: Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo/Singapore

### AFTER YOUR VISIT

Gather some pumpkins and flowers for a still-life arrangement.

Draw the objects as clearly defined forms. Use transparent coloured discs to cover aspects of your drawings. How does this technique modify your drawings or change the focal point?

Photograph your drawings and note the effect of the coloured discs on the images; for example, are your images partly distorted, blurred or obliterated?

Explore the interaction of dots and patterns with various objects and backgrounds. Make a soft or hard sculpture, using one of the shapes or patterns you created to represent your interests or hobbies.

## CURRICULUM FOCUS VIEWPOINTS

The concepts and contexts Kusama explores through her art-making.

# MIND, BODY AND SOUL: PHOTOGRAPHY, PERFORMANCE ART AND 'MY ETERNAL SOUL'

KEY CONCEPTS: eternity, soul, obliteration, art therapy

### PLEASE NOTE

The performance works featured in this part of the exhibition are not suitable for young audiences; signage in the space indicates these works.



*LOVE THAT WAS LOST* 2017 / Synthetic polymer paint on canvas / 194 x 194cm / Collection: The artist / Courtesy: The artist and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo/Singapore, Victoria Miro, London, David Zwirner, New York



*Self-obliteration by dots* (detail) 1968 / Black and white photographs / Four photographs: 44.7 x 44.7 x 2.3cm (each) / Collection: The artist / Courtesy: Yayoi Kusama Inc. / Photograph: Hal Reiff / © Hal Reiff

## BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Kusama refers to her art-making as 'art-medicine'. She makes art to make sense of the world and this has helped shape her identity.

'I wanted to examine the single dot that was my own life.'

Yayoi Kusama, 2002

What do you think Kusama means when she refers to her life being a single dot?

Think about how you reflect or unwind after a challenging experience. What do you do to refocus or relax?

What is the meaning of 'My Eternal Soul', Kusama's most recent series? How do you think this title reflects Kusama's practice and longevity as an artist?

## DURING YOUR VISIT

Find two works featuring Kusama herself. See how she has placed herself in the image. What is the purpose of the dots?

## AFTER YOUR VISIT

Explore ways of stylising a shape or form into a motif that represents you. Draw on your own experience to decide on a shape that you'd like to make your own. Ensure it can be repeated easily.

Practise repeating your motif, particularly at different scales. Use a complementary colour to highlight the negative space of your motif. Experiment with repeating your design on flat and 3-D surfaces.

Refer to Kusama's dot motif to experiment with a simple shape of your own, such as an 'X' or '+' symbol. In your journal, layer your own portrait with your chosen motif.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Develop a performance work, wearable artwork or photographic/projection work that features your motif — remember to obsessively repeat the design, just like Kusama.

Kusama uses space (indoor/outdoor) and employs skills (media) through process.

## IMMERSIVE INSTALLATIONS AND MIRROR ROOMS

KEY CONCEPTS: infinity, accumulation, mental health, well-being



*THE SPIRITS OF THE PUMPKINS DESCENDED INTO THE HEAVENS*  
2015 / Mixed media installation / 300 x 600 x 600cm / Collection: The artist / Courtesy: The artist and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo/Singapore, Victoria Miro, London, David Zwirner, New York

### BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Research three contemporary installation works from the last ten years.

Hint: Search for Anish Kapoor *Untitled* 2006–07 or Tomás Saraceno *Biosphere* 2009 via Collection Search: [collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au](http://collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au).

Kusama's mirror and obliteration rooms are complex artworks to install in an art gallery.

Make a list of materials and skills that might be required for one of these installations.

How much time do you think might be involved?

### DURING YOUR VISIT

List the components making up one of Kusama's installations, set against the connotations of each component (i.e. dot = self).

'It isn't always obvious where the artist ends and the artwork begins.'

Yayoi Kusama, 2002

Write a brief response to Kusama's quote above. How does the artist blur the line between her identity as creator and your experience of her works?



*Soul under the moon* 2002 / Mirrors, ultra violet lights, water, plastic, nylon thread, timber, synthetic polymer paint / 340 x 712.1 x 600cm (installed) / The Kenneth and Yasuko Myer Collection of Contemporary Asian Art. Purchased 2002 with funds from Michael Sidney Myer and The Myer Foundation, a project of the Sidney Myer Centenary Celebration 1899–1999, through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation and The Yayoi Kusama Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Appeal / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery / Photograph: Natasha Harth, QAGOMA

### AFTER YOUR VISIT

Create your own mirror room.

Explore the concept of infinity by building a maquette mirror room. Use the motif you recorded from your visit together with small mirrors.

Experiment with small objects and repeated symbols, such as ping-pong balls and coloured shapes and stickers, to create a composition built around a grid or radial pattern.

By 1941, as a 12-year-old, Kusama had begun to notate and paint her hallucinations, which she experienced as veils of dots. During the early 1950s, she recognised that these visual and aural hallucinations (which she continues to experience as an adult) were symptomatic of a condition known as *rijin'sho* (depersonalisation syndrome). Kusama's condition has never stopped her from maintaining a vigorous artistic practice. In 2002, at the age of 73, she created *Soul under the moon* especially for the Gallery's 'APT 2002' exhibition. Through experiencing this mesmerising environment, we can begin to understand the artist's experiential world.

## CURRICULUM INFORMATION

### VISUAL ARTS F–10

CURRICULUM FOCUS	REPRESENTATION	VIEWPOINTS	PRACTICES
<b>Description:</b>	<p>Kusama manipulates subject matter through the use of symbolism and repetition.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conceptualise and develop representations of themes, concepts or subject matter to experiment with their developing personal style, reflecting on the styles of artists.</li> <li>Develop and refine techniques and processes to represent ideas and subject matter.</li> <li>Plan and design artworks that represent artistic intention.</li> </ul>	<p>The concepts and contexts Kusama explores through art-making.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluate how representations communicate artistic intentions in artworks.</li> <li>Analyse a range of artworks from contemporary times to explore differing viewpoints.</li> </ul>	<p>Kusama uses space (indoor/outdoor), and employs skills (media) through process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manipulate materials, techniques, technologies and processes to develop and represent their own artistic intentions.</li> <li>Present ideas for displaying artworks.</li> </ul>

### GENERAL CAPABILITIES

<b>CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING</b>	<p><b>Typically, by the end of Year 3, students:</b></p> <p>Pose questions Identify and describe familiar information Organise and process information Imagine possibilities and connect ideas Transfer knowledge into new contexts Draw conclusions.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b></p> <p>Students learn to pose questions; to expand their knowledge about the world; identify main ideas and select and clarify information; collect, compare and categorise facts and opinions from sources; expand ideas to create new imaginative combinations; transfer and apply information to other settings; and use prior knowledge and evidence to choose actions and draw conclusions.</p>
<b>PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CAPABILITY</b>	<p><b>Typically, by the end of Year 6, students:</b></p> <p>Recognise emotions Recognise personal qualities and achievements Understand themselves as learners Develop reflective practice Express emotions appropriately Develop self-discipline and set goals Become confident, resilient and adaptable Appreciate diverse perspectives Communicative effectively.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b></p> <p>Students learn to empathise with the emotions, needs and situations of others; to appreciate diverse perspectives; and to understand and negotiate different types of relationships.</p>
<b>CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING</b>	<p><b>Typically, by the end of Year 10, students:</b></p> <p>Pose questions Imagine possibilities and connect ideas Transfer knowledge into new contexts Draw conclusions and design a course of action.</p>	<p><b>Description:</b></p> <p>Students pose questions to critically analyse complex issues and abstract ideas; create and connect complex ideas using imagery, analogies and symbolism; identify, plan and justify transference of knowledge to new contexts; and use logical and abstract thinking to analyse and synthesise complex information.</p>

## FURTHER READING

Anna Fifield, 'How Yayoi Kusama, the "Infinity Mirrors" visionary, channels mental illness into art', *The Washington Post*, 15 February 2017.

Jamie Robinson, 'Yayoi Kusama is opening her own museum in Tokyo', *The Spaces*, 14 August 2017.

'Yayoi Kusama: Infinity mirrors', *Seattle Art Museum*, June 2017.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

**ACARA: GENERAL CAPABILITIES**

**ACARA: VISUAL ARTS F-10**

**NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE**

**'LOOK NOW, SEE FOREVER'**

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This resource has been developed by QAGOMA Learning staff with assistance from Teacher Advisory Group members Jo-Anne Hine, Valerie Rogers and Leah Hamilton; and Reuben Keehan, Curator, Contemporary Asian Art, QAGOMA.

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