

Gilda Williams

However much Yayoi Kusama – widely considered to be the most important artist to have emerged from Japan in the post-war period – can be associated with key twentieth-century avant-gardes (Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop, Minimal Art, the Zero Group, and feminism, among others), this artist remains a unique and iconoclastic figure, pursuing an artistic vision entirely her own. One especially distinctive Kusama-ism is her spectacularly idiosyncratic, compulsively recurring, all-over pumpkin pattern: a repeated, striated spray of dots inspired by the natural markings on *kabocha*, or Japanese pumpkins. This yellow/black motif has proven spectacularly versatile for Kusama: painted ribbons of multi-sized spots slither over flat colourful canvases, or march across large abstract paintings in rigidly horizontal formation. Sometimes canvases of singular pumpkins are painted against tessellated backgrounds, each one seemingly proud of its bulbous and individually irregular shape – as if posing for an obscene 'full-frontal' portrait. Gallery-wide pumpkin-inspired installations play host to explosions of polka-dot patterns and are often occupied by superhuman, spotted sculptural forms which consume space and overpower the visitor. Sometimes life-sized pumpkins made from various materials are set on the gallery floor; on pedestals, or are 'boxed' one-by-one in an open, gridded wall-sculpture. And sometimes massive *kabocha* sculptures are permanently sited out of doors, suggesting a sort of impenetrable pumpkin-shaped fairy-tale house. In pursuing her chosen motif across multiple colours, scales and media, Kusama has spent almost four decades following to its extreme logic the obsessive pumpkin-based pattern that she first explored as a child, in her earliest meticulously drawn flora drawings.

Kusama has openly discussed her art-making as a necessary escape from a lifetime of mental illness, a particular condition marked by episodes of 'self-obliteration'. As a child, the artist experienced frightening hallucinations wherein the fields all around her home – in many of which *kabocha* grew – seemed to morph terrifyingly into an all-engulfing, speckled pattern stretching seamlessly from heaven to earth, threatening to swallow her up within it. Across her work, Kusama seems endlessly engaged in recreating – perhaps gaining control of – this overwhelming experience, and sharing with viewers

the sensation of our bodies fully integrated within our surroundings. We might observe this all-enveloping vision in her vast, meticulously painted *Infinity Net* paintings starting in the 1950s; her mesmerizing *Infinity Mirror Rooms* which immerse viewers in a limitless landscape of flickering lights; or her group performances in late-60s New York City, where performers and their setting were showered in a flurry of paper or painted Kusama dots.

It was only after her return in the 1970s to Japan, where she eventually committed herself voluntarily to a Tokyo psychiatric hospital (where she continues to live), that Kusama began to revisit her all-important pumpkins, experimenting with a form so familiar to her since birth. Kusama's family is said to have survived the Second World War in part by feeding off the acres of pumpkins surrounding them: thus, the potentially menacing fields of home could also turn benign and nurturing. 'Pumpkins talk to me', she asserts, and indeed each pumpkin – despite some recognizable consistencies – carries its own distinct mood and 'personality'. Some appear almost child-like and clowning, such as the giant, bright yellow wall-relief pumpkin suggestive of 1960s Pop art. Others feel decidedly darker and almost menacing, like the painting of a ghostly, misshapen bronze/black pumpkin which, like a vampire, casts no shadow. In some ways the pumpkin – which the artist has described as her 'spiritual home since childhood' – functions as her alter ego: an abstracted and mute stand-in for Kusama herself. Indeed in one performance the artist created and wore a kind of pumpkin-shell headdress – almost like a helmet or stiff Lego-style wig – and literally inhabited or embodied the *kabocha*.

During the 1980s Kusama first set off exploring variations on her characteristic pumpkin-pattern in two-dimensional paintings, drawings and prints. In 1993 she was invited as the first solo artist and first woman ever to grace the Japanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and it was with pumpkins in mind that she set about creating a new work for the occasion. *Mirror Room (Pumpkin)* was an all-over black-on-yellow polka-dot extravaganza, consuming floor-to-ceiling the interior of the pavilion: the overall sensation was of entering a vast, hollowed pumpkin shell. At its centre was a mirrored room, echoing her 1966 *Infinity Mirror Room: Love*



Forever, peering inside, visitors encountered an endless expanse of psychedelically decorated pumpkins – like some bizarrely incubated, limitless pumpkin patch. The artist herself could also often be found in the installation, dressed head-to-foot in a confection of the same yellow/black print, almost merging into her surroundings. It was as if, having once consumed the vegetable in great quantity as a child, the *kabocha* was now consuming her.

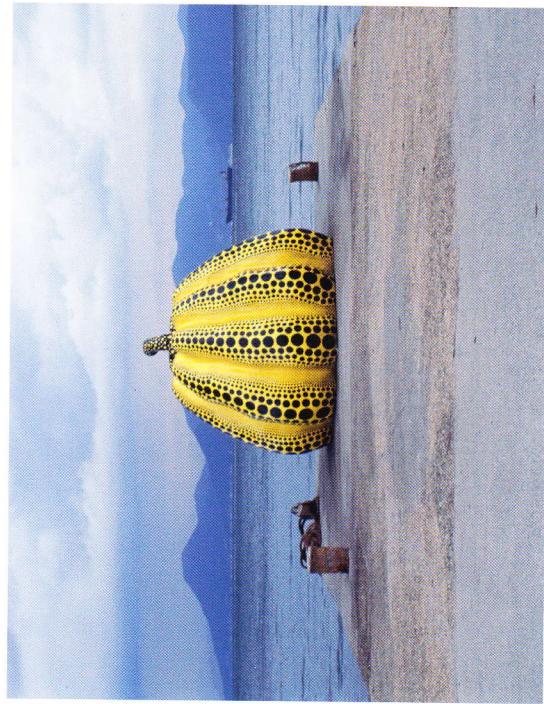
Over the decades, Kusama's rendering of pumpkin 'skin' has grown ever more stylized. The lines of dots advancing rhythmically up the pumpkins' edges increasingly twist into elongated vertical vines, as if able to stretch from earth to sky and back again. Looking closely at the painted surfaces, we realize that the dots hyperactively fill the surface edge-to-edge. Even the seemingly 'undotted' sections along the pattern's ridges are actually covered in a mind-boggling flurry of the minutest specks: an intensely laborious expanse of tiny marks which may account for the pulsating energy that radiates from these Op-art-like paintings. At times the paintings recall swarms of slithering, almost reptilian shapes, crawling up and down her canvases as if seething with life. Elsewhere the patterns feel more liquid, like some gaseous test-tube mixture whose bubbles



float rhythmically and ceaselessly to the top. Sometimes the dots seem extracted from a flat background – like innumerable 'cut-out' white dots forming a veritable blizzard of tiny lights; and sometimes the mark-making seems reversed, as masses of black spots crowd onto the canvas in dark waves.

Her free-standing single pumpkin sculptures have recently been conceived and fabricated in bronze on a monumental scale for the first time. Even the smallest of these would be of sufficient size and volume for a person to enter inside and hide there in solitude; in this scenario, the curving stem protruding from the top might function like a magical periscope, offering an external view for the pumpkin's unseen inhabitant. The engineering of the dot pattern on these great, curvaceous bronze structures has evolved considerably since the earlier Fibreglass pieces; larger dots occupy central positions while smaller circles taper toward the bottom and top, creating a sophisticated geometry. These immense, natural forms don't just 'sit' on the ground but seem to emerge organically from it, squat to the earth: plump, pedestal-less sculptures oozing from the floor. Recently, colossal silver and gold mosaic pumpkins with circular inserts of colour seem to recreate in three-dimensional tiles the flat tessellated backgrounds found in her paintings. Tiny coloured squares wrap the undulating surface uninterrupted, like the multitude of brushstrokes that once spread across her *Infinity Nets*. These glittering, intensely crafted sculptures seem stylistically to cross Walt Disney with Byzantium, and occupy the gallery space like gargantuan foil-wrapped bonbons.

On Japanese farms, *kabocha* are harvested prior to full maturity and continue to ripen off the vine; perhaps for this





reason in Kusama's sculpture the broken stem always emphatically protrudes upwards, untethered to the earth below. Always the stem represents a colour reversal: for example, black-on-yellow pumpkin 'skin' will shift to yellow-on-black for the stem. Kusama seems keen to draw our attention to this special central point, where the infinity of dots gather at the top. (The dark triangular stem sits atop the pumpkin like a tiny witch's hat – and this association, coupled with her occasional orange/black palette and the hint of jack-o-lanterns, will inevitably prompt among Americans suggestions of Halloween – a holiday which, like Kusama's art, can be both child-like and scary.) Plainly severed from the vine, Kusama's balloon-like pumpkins appear more inflated than grown – like some strain of mutant growth, or preternaturally engorged, radioactive flora. Kusama's environments are willfully artificial and unfamiliar; we might be reminded of Piero Gilardi's 1960s' *Tappeti Natura* – metre-square 'carpets' of artificial nature – which similarly suggest an unfamiliar contrived natural landscape, one entirely distorted and re-imagined by human perception and desire: a landscape of the mind.

Kusama endures among the most emblematic of late twentieth-century artists and beyond; on one hand, as witnessed

in her extraordinarily imaginative and deeply personal re-workings of the *kabocha*, there is absolutely nobody like her. On the other hand, when we examine her long, sixty-year artistic practice, we are amazed by how many art-historical moments that she pre-empted. Kusama produced large-scale soft sculptures before Oldenburg; created *Accumulation* sculptures of repeated shapes prior to her friend Eva Hesse's *Repetitions*; made phallus-laden sculpture a few years before the mighty Louise Bourgeois; and concocted repeat-form wallpaper and a silver-sprayed universe before Andy Warhol. She continues to be of immense influence; echoes of her aesthetic return in Pipilotti Rist's floating hallucinatory videos, or Damien Hirst's colourful dot obsession. Although fully inserted within the course of twentieth- and twenty-first century art, Kusama remains outrageously true to herself: unshakeably committed to her own strain of art-making, her origins, and the lasting impression that certain natural forms – like the pumpkin – made on this artist some eighty years ago, when she was a very young girl. Kusama may have spent her life entrapped by these visions, but she has found a way to sweep everyone else up within them too, carrying us with her into her swirling, expanding, dizzying pumpkin cosmos.

