

KANTOR GALLERY
PRESS



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Art Attack

by Stephen Lemons

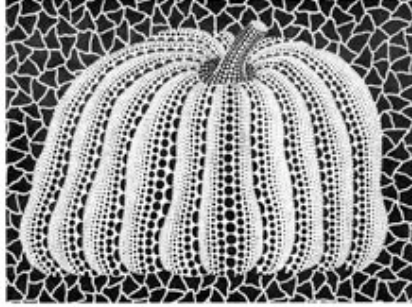
Yayoi Kusama, "Now" Kantor Gallery

A little bit of Yayoi Kusama goes a long way. That's the lesson taught by the Kantor Gallery's impressive small exhibition of some of the Japanese artist's recent paintings and sculpture. The show, entitled "Now," ends Saturday, Feb. 20, and those interested in the work of the almost mythical creative force known as Kusama should make the time to get down to the Kantor Gallery's snug niche on Melrose across from the Pacific Design Center before the exhibit takes its leave.

Kantor's "Now" offers an interesting counterpoint to last year's massive "Yayoi Kusama: Love Forever" extravaganza at LACMA, a show which wowed so many and reintroduced Kusama's polka-dot obsessions to a new generation of art fans. The LACMA exhibition, which is now on display at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, surveyed Kusama's groundbreaking work from her time in 1960s New York — a decade when

Kusama's renown rivaled that of Andy Warhol. Kusama, at that time a small, demure Japanese expatriate, created vast, dizzying installations of repetitive, polka-dotted imagery, bizarre sculptures apparently overtaken by disease-like protrusions and canvases plagued with multi-colored measles. The pieces from "Love Forever" seemed both the product of a unique, gifted vision and relics from an era of psychedelic excess. Across the gap of three decades, they afforded viewers a shock to the system few contemporary artists can replicate in this, our highly jaded age.

The Kantor Gallery's presentation of Kusama's latter-day efforts contains none of the overwhelming, awe-inspiring manifestations which enveloped one from beginning to end of "Love Forever." Whereas LACMA's show was an almost totalitarian imposition of Kusama's fetishistic dream-world upon the visitor, Kantor's "Now" is a far less threatening window onto many of the same themes which fueled the LACMA exhibit. Kusama's



"An image of strange power...": Kusama's polka-dotted "Squash"

passion for polka-dots is once more front and center, but this time they have not attacked whole rooms of phallic shapes, as in "Love Forever." Instead, the common Japanese kabocha, or pumpkin, is the target of Kusama's magical eye.

Throughout "Now," Kusama mercilessly attacks the simple imagery of these squat, little pumpkins with visual blankets of the small, colored spheres. Acrylic paintings of pumpkins in red, green and yellow fill the white walls of the Kantor galleries. Small sculptures of kabocha in wood and ceramics fill shelves, and shadowboxes of the polka-dotted squash populate tables. All are overlain with monotonous patterns of circles, and


they are usually placed upon backdrops of the same color in a broken-leaf pattern. The effect, as one might expect, is vertiginous, and one looks too long at one painting or sculpture with the risk of growing faint.

Thus Kusama transforms the innocuous, almost funny-looking Japanese squash into an image of strange power. Indeed, one large, black-and-white painting of a kabocha in particular (titled simply "Squash," as are many of the pieces) might be labeled a hazard were it placed roadside instead of in a gallery. The simple form of a vine-produced fruit is obliterated by the pattern Kusama throws over it. It is absorbed into this end-

The return of polka dot queen Yayoi Kusama

less repetition — devoured by it, if you will — with the same comic energy Kusama utilizes to dissolve larger objects, human beings and whole worlds. Like the symptom of a universal virus that strikes all corners, Kusama's polka dots are the great equalizer, reducing all things great and small to the level of a kabocha.

As if to drive home the point, the Kantor Gallery offers a few non-pumpkin examples. A small fish gets a multi-colored Kusama treatment, making it far more varied and pleasing to the eye than her monochrome squash. There's also a flowerpot and a large glass of tea with a slice of lemon. In addition, a few of the paintings are simply of the repetitive blotches of color of which Kusama is so fond, and one feels that to touch them might mean acquiring the Kusama disease over one's entire body. Despite these notable exceptions, the Kantor Gallery could have easily changed the name of the show to "Squash" or "Pumpkin," without any false advertising. One wonders if Kusama really has a thing for this squishy fruit, or if it was just the form du jour. In any case, Kusama's focus on even the most insignificant of objects touches them with the sublime power of infinity. She is perhaps the most important artist now alive, and the Kantor Gallery's "Now" show yields some unique proof of this statement.

"Yayoi Kusama: No. 1," continues at Kantor Gallery, 8642 Melrose Ave. through Feb. 20. Call (310) 639-5388. 

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