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YAYOI KUSAMA’S DEPICTIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

This paper examines Yayoi Kusama’s usage of art as a coping mechanism for her mental illness, particularly through her pumpkins and “nets” motifs. It involves a close analysis of three artworks to emphasize this motif: her first depiction of pumpkins; “nets”; and, finally, her combination of both pumpkins and “nets” into one artwork. Her theme of repetitions as meditative force is evident in each of these works. As such, this paper posits that the goal of her art is not to heal from her mental illness but to better cope and adapt. This research draws on various primary sources, including Yayoi Kusama’s autobiography, Infinity Net, and intertwines three artworks that have not yet been discussed together. It also has broader implications for other artists because Kusama paved the way for a more open discussion about mental health in contrast to the trope of the suffering artist.

For an aspiring artist like myself, to triumph over an unjust environment is to triumph over the pain of feeling cornered and trapped. I see it as a trial or test attendant upon having been born a human being, which is why I continue to fight with every fibre of my being. This is my own peculiar karma and destiny in this world.

Yayoi Kusama

In more recent decades, the impact of mental health on an individual’s life and career has moved more to the forefront. Given the relevance of this discussion, it is important to see an artist in terms of not just their mental health struggles but also their coping mechanisms. Generally, when we think of the mental health of artists, we first think of the narrative of the tortured artist. Artists such as Vincent van Gogh and Mark Rothko are often lauded and their struggle considered “beautiful” and “necessary” for the creation of their works. Although discussing the reality of artists’ struggles is important, the narrative of artists who have continued to fight their battles with mental illness is often overlooked. Artists such as Tracey Emin (Figure A1) and Yayoi Kusama (Figure A2) have found healthier ways to cope and survive with their mental illnesses, all while including in their art practices the truth of their struggles and their methods of management.
In this paper, I will be examining how Yayoi Kusama, an artist who has been and continues to be very open about her struggles with her mental health, has used her practice to cope with her obsessions, compulsions, and hallucinations. In particular, I will analyze specific themes in Yayoi Kusama’s art, especially her depictions of pumpkins as representations of her hallucinations, her use of nets as a form of meditation, and the instances when she combines the two as markers of her mental health journey.

Yayoi Kusama was born March 22, 1929, in Matsumoto, Nagano, Japan, to a family of merchants (Figure A3). She was the youngest of four children and demonstrated an interest in art from an early age. Her mother discouraged Kusama from painting and pushed for her to be a traditional housewife, but her father was very supportive of her art and continuously bought her supplies. While the trauma of World War II and various family issues made her artistic training more difficult, at the age of twenty-nine, Kusama was able to formally pursue art and train at the Kyoto City Specialist School of Arts.

Kyoto was not far enough away from her family, and Kusama continued to feel stifled by her mother’s expectations that she adhere to the demands of a traditional and conservative Japanese woman. In her autobiography, Yayoi Kusama talks about leaving Japan:

Staying in Japan was out of the question. My parents, the house, the land, the shackles, the conventions, the prejudice. . . . For art like mine—art that does battle the boundary between life and death, questioning what we are and what it means to live and die—this country was too small, too servile, too feudalistic, and too scornful of women. My art needed a more unlimited freedom, and a wider world.

After eight years of attempting to convince her family to allow her to leave Japan and study art abroad, Yayoi Kusama finally made her artistic journey to America on November 17, 1957. In 1958, she moved to New York and began to freely practice her art, continuing to do so until 1973, at which point she returned to Japan to seek treatment for ongoing mental health struggles. She has remained in Japan ever since.

Although Kusama started seeking treatment in 1973, her mental health struggles began long before then. Kusama had a rather traumatic childhood. Her parents had a strained relationship, and Kusama’s mother was physically and verbally abusive toward her, including forcing her to spy on her father when her mother suspected him of womanizing. Her mother also restricted Kusama’s access to art supplies and initially prevented her from traveling abroad to pursue her career as an artist. This led to Kusama feeling like she had to escape her home and family, although
running away from these experiences proved to be inadequate for remediing the struggles she felt as a result of them.

In addition to Kusama’s multiple adverse childhood experiences in her home life, World War II ruined any remaining semblance of her childhood. The war left a mark on Japan, which lost “approximately three percent of the Japanese population, [or] more than 2 million people” by the war’s end in 1945. For civilians, life in Japan became very difficult: “During the war, more than 1 million Japanese children were evacuated from cities to the relative safety of the countryside, splitting up families in the process. Rationing and food shortages were rampant throughout the country, beginning as early as 1940.” In addition to evacuations, millions of women and children, including Kusama, were enlisted to work in factories to help the war effort. At this time, Kusama—who was about 11 years old—began working twelve-hour days in a factory, making uniforms and parachutes for the war with other kids her age. According to Judith Rodenbeck, “The people of Japan were living under starvation conditions, sharing recipes for insects and grass while being bombarded with martial propaganda from their own government and with a rain of fire from Allied air forces.” Despite these excruciatingly long days, Kusama continued to practice art on the side, proving how important it was to her.

In addition to these traumas, in 1936, at the age of seven, Kusama began to experience hallucinations. It is important to note that her hallucinations may have occurred without the impacts of the war or family trauma, but the existence of these events likely exacerbated her symptoms. According to Aleandra Munroe, Kusama was diagnosed with “an obsessive-compulsive and hysterical condition . . . attributes her manic obsession with themes of repetition, aggregation, and accumulation to a recurring hallucination.” Her hallucinations included an instance when flowers from the tablecloth appeared to cover the entire room in which she was standing. More frequently, her hallucinations have consisted of flowers and flashes of light, but, of course, the aspect of her hallucinations that affected her the most was the pumpkins that spoke to her, as proven by the multitudes of pumpkins in her art.

These symptoms continue to plague Kusama to this very day. In her autobiography, Infinity Net, Kusama says, “I fight pain, anxiety, and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art. . . . I followed the thread of art and somehow discovered a path that would allow me to live. If I had not found that path, I am sure I would have committed suicide early on, unable to bear the situation in which I found myself.” Kusama has made it clear throughout her life that art has been a constant therapeutic outlet without which she would not be able to manage her mental health.

It is important to note that Kusama’s goal is never to be completely healed from these issues, as that is impossible. Her only goal is to adapt, live, and work around her mental health. Her artistic practice has continued to develop, as have her coping
mechanisms, and the various themes in her work demonstrate the progress she has made in both arenas. In her autobiography, Kusama discusses managing her mental health using art: “The only way for me to elude these furtive apparitions is to recreate them visually with paint, pen, or pencil in attempt to decipher what they are; to gain control over them by remembering drawing each one that flashes through the haze.” Kusama believed that, by depicting what she saw, she was able to better manage and analyze her hallucinations.

In 1948, Kusama created her first representations derived from one of her hallucinations, that we know of (Figure A4). This painting depicts three almost white pumpkins on a checkered black and brown background. The background depicts the repetition that would become more prominent in her work throughout her career. The pumpkin on the far left is mostly white with some orange, is cracked on the top, and has a stem. The middle pumpkin is more orange than the other two but still has some white, with a stem that sticks straight up. The final pumpkin is depicted with cracks on the top and has some orange, though it is mostly white, with no stem, making it look more like an onion than a pumpkin. These pumpkins are far different than the animated ones we are used to seeing in her more contemporary works, but they still depict the cannon of repetition, given that she includes multiple pumpkins in this same painting.

Throughout Kusama’s life, pumpkins would remain a constant, no matter her mental state. She writes in her autobiography, “During my time in Kyoto I diligently painted pumpkins, which in later years would become an important theme in my art.” She notes, “It seems that pumpkins do not inspire much respect. But I was enchanted by their charming and winsome form. What appealed to me most was the pumpkin’s generous unpretentiousness. That and its solid spiritual balance.” She also recalls having consumed the vegetable endlessly to the point of nausea in her childhood years during and after the war; in spite of this, she retains a fond attachment to its organic bulbous form.

Additionally, the pumpkins are relevant because, she has said, they have repeatedly appeared in her hallucinations. In her autobiography, Kusama talks about the first time she saw a pumpkin and the hallucination that went along with it: “I parted a row of zinnias and reached in to pluck the pumpkin from its vine. It immediately began speaking to me in a most animated manner.” Her painting therefore acts as a form of therapy to process her traumas; thus, when she depicts them in her art, she is both making something that reminds her of the tumult of her upbringing and making something that appeared in her mind appear in the real world and to others. Bringing to life in a painting something that only she could see brought Kusama comfort, not only to try to control the vision, but also to share it with others.

In addition to depicting pumpkins, her first painting includes the geometric repetition that is so prominent in much of her work, through the checkered
background. As her practice developed, particularly after she moved to New York in 1958, Kusama began working on her “net motif.” According to Midori Yamamura’s review of *Infinity Net*, “She repeatedly has said that she suffers from hallucinatory visions where she sees ‘nets’ and ‘dots’ that profoundly affect her artist development and manifest themselves in her visual vocabulary.” Kusama’s “nets” (Figure A5) are simply a single brushstroke repeated over and over again, done in contrast to another color. She has created many different versions (Figure A6), but all of them hold the same basics of two colors, while some have more defined shapes and others more intense variation of color.

For Kusama, the “nets” are a deliberate act of meditation. She began working on them as her mental health took a rapid decline. She filled canvas after canvas with “nets.” According to her autobiography,

I often suffered episodes of severe neurosis. I would cover a canvas with nets, then continue painting them on the table, on the floor, and finally on my own body. As I repeated this process over and over again, the nets began to expand to infinity. I forgot about myself as they enveloped me, clinging to my arms and legs and clothes and filling the entire room.

This process continued for as long as she needed. The “nets” acted as a method to calm her and make her stop thinking of the panic she was feeling. This use of repetition as a form of self-soothing in her work is helpful to understand how her mental health has informed her process, especially since she includes it within almost all of her works.

Although her “nets” have helped to calm her in the moment, they did not prove to be a long-term solution for her to cope with her mental struggles. Throughout her time in New York, her mental health began to deteriorate. According to Midori Yamamura, “Donald Judd (Kusama’s upstairs neighbor) recalled that she had suddenly become ‘very paranoid about the New York art situation.’ Another neighbor . . . remembers that she suddenly became obsessed with the thought that her ideas might be appropriated, which compelled her to close all the curtains on the windows of her loft.” During this time, “Kusama almost surely suffered from anxiety, neurosis, and to calm herself . . . she mentions that she took Doriden (a prescription ‘minor tranquilizer”).” As these struggles increased, she made attempts to manage her symptoms both through her art and through some self-medication before ultimately realizing that she needed professional help.

In 1977, a few years after the death of her father, Kusama’s mental health deteriorated to the point where she was no longer able to care for herself. Kusama checked herself into a hospital for the mentally ill in Tokyo, where she continues to voluntarily reside. For her to check herself into a mental hospital in the 1970s means her mental health was deeply unmanageable, because seeking treatment for mental health was at the time, and somewhat remains, stigmatized. In the early 1960s, Japan
had begun moving in a more progressive direction with regard to the treatment of mental illness, having repealed acts that kept mentally ill people out of society and moving toward mental health care becoming more community-based. In 1964, however, the United States ambassador to Japan, Edwin O. Reischauer, was stabbed by a nineteen-year-old who was having a breakdown, causing a regression in policies toward mental health treatment and the revision of the Mental Hygiene Law in 1965. According to Tomoko Kanata, Professor of Intercultural Studies at Kobe College Japan, “It was quite obvious that its main concern was to safeguard the public from people with ‘dangerous mental disorders.’ In order to do so, people considered to be a danger to the public because of their mental condition needed to be cared for and monitored in communities as well as in hospitals so that they would not be able to harm others.” Given that people with mental illness were considered dangerous in Japan at that moment, Kusama’s decision to return home and receive in-patient care was a testament to the profoundness of her mental health struggles and her determination to get help.

None of this stopped her from continuing her artistic journey. At the inpatient facility, she has continued to create art and even wrote and published her autobiography. She is able to maintain and work in her own studio, and she has created new works that have gone to galleries, exhibits, and museums across the world. She has created her exceptionally famous infinity rooms, and a museum dedicated to her opened in 2014. This has worked so well that she still lives in the facility today, at 94, making it so far a total of forty-six years she has had the same lifestyle.

In the many years that Kusama has been receiving treatment, she has continued to make works that involve elements of her struggles with her mental health as well as techniques that she has used to cope with them. Pumpkins remain a prominent theme in her work, but in the majority of Kusama’s depictions of them, she overlaps her pumpkins with her “nets” (Figure A7). This is true for both her paintings and sculptures. Her more recent depictions of pumpkins combined with “nets” are very stylized and in some instances almost abstract, which is starkly different from her earlier portrayals of pumpkins. In these works, the “nets” appear more as a series of polka dots, as opposed to a web pattern. Additionally, her earlier depictions of pumpkins were muted in color, whereas the pumpkins combined with the “nets” use brighter colors. These transformations in her portrayals of pumpkins and “nets” reflect the progress of her artistic development and in her struggles with mental health.

Together, they not only combine common motifs in her work but also, specifically, align the object of her hallucinations with the meditative practice she has developed to cope with them. In creating this, she transforms her pumpkins from a symbol of her disorder into something of peace and calm. As such, “The pumpkin stands as a symbol of triumph for the artist’s personal as well as artistic rebirth,
representing a mediation of the artist’s psychiatric illness that went hand-in-hand with the ever-increasing sophistication, dexterity and creativity of her creations.” That she has become known for these bright, spotted pumpkins demonstrates that she has transformed her struggle into meditation and that meditation into a career.

Yayoi Kusama’s portrayals of her hallucinations and her methods of coping offer a counternarrative to the myth of the tortured artist, particularly that of figures like Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh and his work are generally looked at through the lens of a beautiful tragedy because of the way his life ended, rather than through a lens recognizing the truth of his keen eye and appreciation of beauty. The myth of the tortured artist is deeply toxic because it glorifies suffering as central to the creation of great art and in turn promotes the idea that seeking treatment or getting help will diminish that work. All of this works to elevate suffering over survival.

The myth of the tortured artist is so heavily intertwined with van Gogh that even Kusama has commented on it. At the end of her autobiography, she writes,

Many people seem to imagine that Vincent van Gogh must have been great because his paintings now fetch enormously high prices or because he was mentally ill. But such people have not really seen van Gogh. . . . My view is that in spite of whatever illness he may have had, van Gogh’s art overflows with humanity, tenacious beauty, and the search for truth. His real greatness lies in these qualities, and in his fiery and passionate approach to life.

Kusama thus acknowledges the mythologizing of van Gogh’s struggles but notes that his work contains many other points of connection, ones that are often overlooked in favor of focusing on how his work reflects his suffering.

In opening up about her mental health, Kusama has likely shifted the discussion of mental health within the art world. Through the repetition and meditation of Kusama’s “nets” and pumpkins, she redefines her mental health from a setback into a strength. In creating pumpkins and “nets,” she brings her hallucinations to the real world while layering on top the meditative process that keeps them at bay. In doing this, she has changed the narrative in which we see and discuss mental health struggles, particularly when represented in an artist’s work.
References


Appendix

Figure A1. Tracey Emin, *It was all too Much* (2018)

Figure A2. Yayoi Kusama, the Artist in Her Custom Dots Obsession BMW Mini Car (2004)
Figure A3. Kusama with Her Family (approx. 1930s)

Figure A4. First Known Painting by Yayoi Kusama (1948)

Figure A5. Yayoi Kusama, \textit{NO. F} (1959)
Figure A6. Yayoi Kusama, *NO. Red B* (1960)

Figure A7. Installation View of Yayoi Kusama: *THE MOVING MOMENT WHEN I WENT TO THE UNIVERSE*, a Victoria Miro Gallery (2018)