Midori Yamamura


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Midori Yamamura’s monograph on Yayoi Kusama represents a profound critical intervention in the scholarship on one of the most controversial and significant artists to emerge from postwar Japan. Kusama began exhibiting alongside major US Pop artists shortly after her arrival in New York in 1958. These early exhibitions included her landmark series of monochrome *Infinity Net* paintings as well as installations of objects covered with her hand-painted nets and stuffed phallic forms. Yet as Yamamura demonstrates, when dealers began marketing Pop art internationally as a US development, they focused on male American artists to the exclusion of oppositional figures such as Kusama. Returning to Japan in 1973, she was virtually forgotten in the US until her retrospective at the Center for International Contemporary Arts in New York in 1989. Kusama’s personal revelations of a history of mental illness starting in the late 1960s (involving reported hallucinations she links to her trademark “dot” and “net” forms) led her to move into a psychiatric facility in 1977 in Japan where she still resides today. This personal story has contributed to her status as a significant (but in many ways outsider) artist of the 1960s.

A New York-based art historian, Yamamura’s involvement in two recent significant retrospective touring exhibitions—*Yayoi Kusama, Mirrored Years* (2008–2009) in Rotterdam and Sydney, and *Yayoi Kusama* (2011–2012) in Madrid, London, and New York—have helped make Kusama’s work more prominent among both scholars and the public. Originally from Japan with family ties to the town of Kusama’s birth, Matsumoto City, Yamamura is uniquely positioned to investigate Kusama’s history and reception both in Japan and the US. Initially she worked very closely with the artist, discovering aspects of Kusama’s early history that had never before been published. In the end however, the book was published without the authorization of the artist who had insisted on reading the entire draft ahead of time. This is a positive development; Kusama’s formidable persona has dominated nearly all discussions of her work, and a critical analysis that historicizes the artist’s perspective on her own work has been long overdue. Equally important, Yamamura’s methodology provides new insight by avoiding excessive biographical or formal analyses in favour of an examination of the social and political contexts from which the artist’s work emerged. The study “consider[s] Kusama’s art in light of her social encounters, and position[s] her breakthrough work against the backdrop of her milieu (...) addressing the roles played by government, institutions, art dealers, critics, and her artist peers” (5–6). This approach is key in evaluating the artist’s significance.

The book is divided into four chapters to address Kusama’s relationship to postwar Japan, her social engagement with the 1950s Zero artists in Europe, her relationship to US Pop and Minimalist artists, and her embrace of psychedelic