Yayoi Kusama

Born 1929

Yayoi Kusama has been called ‘the princess of polka dots’. In 2014, her exhibitions were attended by more people than those of any other artist in the world. Perhaps you have seen her sculptures of dotty pumpkins, or her ‘infinity’ rooms made of mirrors and lights?

Kusama’s works are alive with colour and, as one of her works is titled, Filled with the Brilliance of Life. Yayoi sees the world differently from most people and has lived with mental illness since childhood. As a girl she had obsessive thoughts, and hallucinations where dots on a tablecloth would seem to multiply until they were all around her. This gave her a sense of disappearing into the infinite universe. Instead of holding her back, it has been the inspiration for her art all her life.

‘I fight pain, anxiety and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art.’

In the 1960s, Yayoi went to New York, where her avant-garde work influenced pop artists such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein (another fan of dots). She constantly experimented with new materials and new technologies to create paintings, sculptures, installations and performance art.

Today, Kusama lives and works in Tokyo, making a splash with her bright red hair and dot-covered clothes. Her art, born out of panic and anxiety, is perhaps so popular because it is suffused with wonder, love and joy.

Did you always know you wanted to be an artist?

Yes, I have been painting and making sculptures for as long as I can remember.

Who was your role model growing up?

When I was young there were certain painters whose work I admired. But my greatest role model has been the natural world, and I have always relied on my own vision for inspiration.

What inspires you to make your art?

My love for the world has always been the driving force and energy behind all that I do.

Why do you think making art is important?

I am compelled to produce works constantly to express my thoughts and feelings. Even in the middle of the night, if an idea comes to me I grab my sketchbook and draw. Art is my way of making sense of the world.

What is your favourite medium, and why?

I love working with all types of materials. For me the medium is less important than the process. I work with anything that allows me to express my vision.

What are your three top tips for becoming an artist?

Tell your truth. Enjoy the process. Make art for always.