YAYOI KUSAMA

Most amazing women are not conventionally "perfect". What makes them special is that they take things other people might call problems and make those things work for them. Yayoi Kusama has been very open about the challenges she has with her mental health, but she doesn’t want to be “cured”. She likes the way she is, and she uses the way her mind sees the world to create extraordinary art.

Yayoi was born in Nagano, Japan, in 1929. She had an unhappy childhood; her parents were very conservative and abusive. She found solace in art, making pencil sketches and paint-spot patterns with the tips of her fingers. Later, polka dots became one of Yayoi’s many artistic themes.

Yayoi was taught Nihonga, a very classical style of Japanese painting, but she hated its rigid rules. She liked modern art styles such as Cubism and Surrealism, and she was a particular fan of Georgia O’Keeffe. She wrote to the artist, and Georgia’s friendly reply gave Yayoi the confidence to leave home and move to the United States. She arrived in 1957, but her money soon ran out. She had to sleep on an old door she found in the street and dig through a rubbish bin to find food. She couldn’t afford to heat her apartment, so she spent all night painting to keep warm.

Yayoi made all kinds of art, including lace-like paintings she called “Infinity Nets”. She sold them for whatever she could get. Fifty years later, in 2008, one sold for US $5.1 million, then a record for a living female artist.

As she became more confident, Yayoi began to experiment, though she still felt like an outsider. She made large paintings, soft sculptures and performance art events called “happenings”. She played with different media, from body painting to film and often used repeat patterns and mirrors. She explored different ways of expressing herself, writing books and holding solo exhibitions in France, New York, and England. In 1966, at the famous Venice Biennale, to which she wasn’t officially invited, Yayoi produced a dazzling room full of small silver spheres, which she sold for $2 each. People who bought them would see themselves reflected in them. She called it Narcissus Garden. Officials stopped her “padding” the spheres, saying it was cheapening art, but Yayoi was making a point about the sale of art and the people who buy it.

She returned to Japan in 1973 and did not stop working. She did, however, choose to check herself into a psychiatric institution in 1977, and still lives there today, aged 89.