

# YAYOI KUSAMA

Early Works on Paper



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# Omer Tiroche Gallery

Essay by Astrid Bernadotte

## Yayoi Kusama's Early Works on Paper



Renowned and celebrated for her pioneering contributions to contemporary art, Yayoi Kusama is one of the most influential and recognisable artists of the 20th and 21st centuries. She has captivated the art world for decades with her distinctive aesthetic and compelling psychosomatic practice. Her radical and avant-garde approach places her at the forefront of multiple important art movements garnering her mainstream international stardom. Kusama's art is distinguished by her obsessive use of repetition which she uses as a means of managing her disorders. This has resulted in a prolific output and exploration in almost every medium imaginable.

While her later paintings, sculptures, installations and immersive environments have received widespread acclaim, it is in Kusama's early works on paper that the foundations of her iconic imagery, such as dots and nets, can be traced. Created in the early 1950s, before the artist's move to the United States, these intimate ink and gouache paintings illustrate a profound sense of psychological exploration and a desire to transcend the limitations of the physical world, as well as highlight Kusama's innovative approach to form and light. These formative pieces not only mark the genesis of her signature motifs but also provide insight into her troubled childhood and inner turbulence, shaping the unique vision that would become the hallmark of her celebrated later works.

## Childhood and the Onset of Hallucinations

Yayoi Kusama was born on 22nd March 1929, in Matsumoto, Japan, into an affluent and influential merchant family who dominated Japan's wholesale seed nursery industry. Their operation spanned vast tracts of land and was so advanced that it included six large, heated greenhouses, which were such a rare sight that local schools organised field trips for their students to visit them. Along with a heritage dating back many centuries, the family held a high social standing and fiercely adhered to traditional values.



The Kusama family, Yayoi is second from the right



Yayoi Kusama c.1939

Kusama, the youngest of four siblings, experienced a childhood marked by turmoil and constraint. Her grandfather was an ambitious man with strong views on business and politics, and had a fiery temperament that Kusama's mother inherited. Her parents had a turbulent marriage, fraught with frequent heated exchanges, which Kusama witnessed firsthand—an aspect of her childhood that greatly impacted her. One main point of contention between her parents was that her father, who also hailed from wealthy background, had married into the family and adopted the Kusama name. This caused such a degree of tension and pressure that it dominated the whole household. The oppressive atmosphere significantly shaped the artist's early life and personal development.



Yayoi Kusama c.1939

Another strong discord was her father's flamboyant and reckless extravagances, which included frequent visits to prostitutes and geishas. His escapades were a great source of suffering for young Kusama, as her mother would fly into explosive rages and order her to follow her father and report back. Even on freezing winter nights, she was forced out to spy, but as she was just a child, her father usually easily evaded her. On the occasions he didn't, she

had to relay in detail her father's actions to her mother. Kusama later attributes her profound fear of sex to these perverted excursions. Relentless womanising was a sport that was not only limited to her father. She recalls that her grandfather too chased after women and at times it appeared to be a competition between the pair.

Kusama's relationship with her mother was volatile to say the least, at points both physically and mentally abusive. All her childhood memories of her mother are of beatings or scoldings, purposely berating and punishing her in front of the household staff to further increase her shame. Things were exacerbated even more as Kusama's interest in art developed. Despite the fact that her family were leading members of their community and art patrons themselves who often supported local artists, Kusama's mother was vehemently against the idea of her own daughter pursuing a career as an artist. Instead, she was adamant that she would marry into a suitable and wealthy family and become a traditional Japanese housewife. So aggressive was her responses to Kusama's practice, the artist recalls how her mother would often creep up behind her whilst she was drawing and snatch the paper from out of her hands. This led her to work at break-neck speed out of sheer anxiety to complete a piece before it could get destroyed. A practise she says, that has stayed with her throughout her career.



Kusama with her mother, 1932

Fearing the violence of her mother and longing for her absent father, Kusama felt isolated from the world and as a consequence she experienced bouts of severe delusions. The concept of mental health in Japan in those days was non-existent

and attitudes towards psychological struggles were extremely poor, and certainly not something that was openly discussed. Feeling ashamed and alone, Kusama withdrew further from reality.

Having already experienced some psychotic episodes a couple of years earlier, it was in 1941, around the age of twelve, that Kusama started to have regular hallucinations. These included seeing auras around objects or hearing speech from flora and fauna. Even from a young age Kusama would take a sketchbook down to the seed-harvesting grounds and sit amongst the beds of violet and zinnias. Perhaps as an act of rebellion against her mother, she would draw there for hours, until one day she was astonished to find that the violets had started talking to her. Each flower had a different human-like facial expression. Soon the voices crescendoed into a nightmarish cacophony of chatter. Petrified, Kusama started to run as fast as she could back to the house. Before she could reach home, a dog took up chase alongside her but instead of barking at her, the dog began speaking to her as the flowers had done. When Kusama opened her mouth to respond she could only bark back. Panicked even further, Kusama fled into the house and up the stairs, straight into a small cupboard to hide. It was there in the safety of a pitch-black room she was able to finally breathe. Kusama later in her drawings would often create compositions of forms emerging from the darkness. Colourful nets, columns and organic shapes would sprout from a black background as if being luminated by a lit match in the dark.



A Flower Field in the Nakatsutaya Seed Nursery owned by the Kusama Family

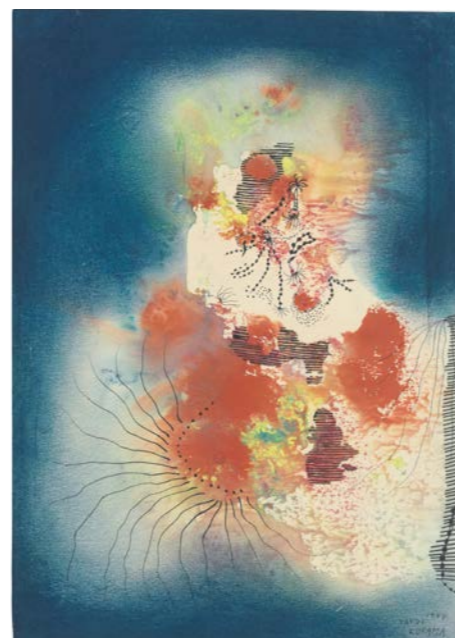


Yayoi Kusama, Infinity Mirrors, 2018

Another early memorable hallucination that shocked her greatly was when she was walking through the fields at dusk. Suddenly, bursts of radiant light sprouted out among the jagged mountainous skyline, followed by great flashes of light that made everything around her glitter. At first, the realisation that her visions were not dreams but instead her new reality, had such an effect that her body

would shake uncontrollably. The stigma attached to psychological episodes resulted in Kusama's inability to speak about what was happening to her which in turn fed her anxieties and struggles further. So strong was her fear of being discovered that she became partially deaf.

After suffering from these severe distortions of reality, a period that Kusama referred to as her "era of mental breakdown", she started a course of treatments and was encouraged by her doctor to express her anxieties and visions through art. With a growing sense of being fervently pursued, a great overwhelming panic would set in each time a vision started to emerge. Her only way of finding solace and gaining some control over the situation was to depict what she saw in any medium she could. Soon, otherworldly, cosmic forms and patterns were rendered through delicate ink and gouaches. Plagued by daily visions, Kusama became prolific and would create thousands of pieces in a mere couple of years. The seed of her artistic foundations had been sown.



Yayoi Kusama, The Castle, 1954

## Early Works on Paper: Themes and Techniques



Yayoi Kusama, Untitled, 1952

Desperate to escape her oppressive family life at home, after many pleas and much arguing with her mother, in 1948 Kusama enrolled at the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts and Crafts. Believing that Kyoto would be the best place for her daughter to learn comportment and proper social etiquettes, she finally relented. At school Kusama was trained in the traditional nihonga style of painting; a technique that uses mineral pigments and ink together on silk or paper.

However, finding this conventional Japanese style "unbearable", she rarely attended classes. Instead, she would stay alone in her room and continued to work on developing her practice. Coming close to expulsion due to her lack of

participation Kusama had to return but she found the traditional and ubiquitous master-disciple system stifling

During the 1950s Kusama's output was relentless, ambitiously experimenting with her lyrical interpretations of her hallucinations in a style that was far removed from the Japanese realistic tradition. For Kusama, the exploration of her inner psyche allowed her to externalize her obsessions and fears onto paper and are reflective of her struggles with mental health as well as her need for control. Although Kusama wasn't diagnosed with OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder, until some two decades later, it is clear that her passionate fixations were a driving force from the very beginning. These early gouache and ink drawings are characterized by repetitive patterns and organic forms, creating a visual language that has since become emblematic of her artistic oeuvre.

Small in scale, they are deeply intimate and delicate yet evoke a powerful and alluring effect. With vibrant, mesmerising colours and remarkable depth, each one a microcosm that captivates the viewer pulling them into one of Kusama's own distorted realities. Devoid of any of the direct Western influences that she would later be exposed to, these works on paper are a pure expression of her unique vision.

## Dots & Self-Obliteration

*“Our earth is only one polka dot among a million stars in the cosmos. Polka dots are a way to infinity. When we obliterate nature and our bodies with polka dots, we become part of the unity of our environment.”*

- Yayoi Kusama

One of the most striking motifs in Kusama’s early drawings are her dots. Nicknamed the ‘Polka Dot Princess’ due to her obsession with covering everything in dots, these patterns are deeply symbolic and multifaceted. They represent her exploration of infinity and the sublime, reflecting her fascination with boundlessness and self-obliteration. For instance, in a 1967 performance piece at Woodstock, she covered both herself and a horse in polka dot cutouts. For Kusama, to achieve a state of complete self-obliteration involves enveloping herself with dots, causing both her form and the mass of the horse to dissolve and merge into the circular shapes. Through this transformation, dots elevate the mundane into the transcendent, creating immersive environments that challenge perceptions and invite viewers to confront the infinite.

Kusama started to explore this concept as early as ten years old, evidence of which can be found in a portrait that she made of her mother, *Untitled*, 1939 where dots pepper the entire page, so much so that the face and background receded into obscurity. Perhaps this notion of obliteration emerged as a way of escaping her mother’s cruel and controlling behaviour.



Yayoi Kusama, *Untitled*, 1938



Yayoi Kusama, *Horse Play*, Woodstock, 1967



Yayoi Kusama, 1960

As Kusama continued to explore the theme of dots throughout her career, it is in *Incomplete Proliferation No. 81*, 1951 that we see the formation of a meticulous and densely packed composition, creating a sense of depth and movement resulting in a hypnotic effect. This compulsive repetition can be seen as a manifestation of her psychological state, where the reiteration serves as both a coping mechanism and a means of exploring the boundless nature of the universe.

## Infinity Nets and Beyond

*“Painting was a fever born of desperation, the only way for me to go on living in this world.”*

- Yayoi Kusama



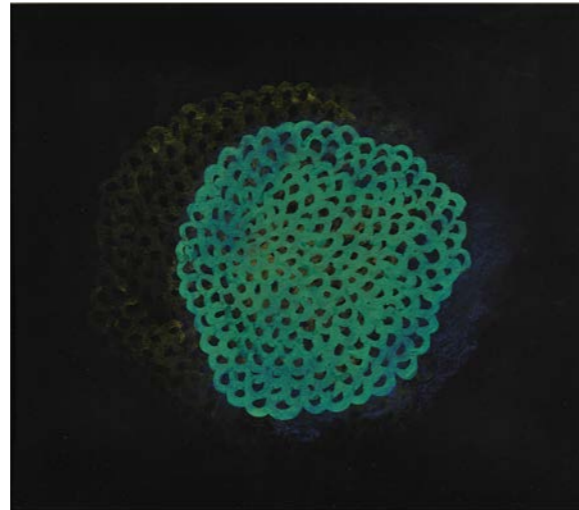
Yayoi Kusama in her studio, c. 1958

In the same vein as her dots, Kusama’s use of repetition was a key factor in her renowned *Infinity Nets* series. Sometimes to such a degree that she would painstakingly work herself to the point of physical and mental exhaustion. Not long after she arrived in New York in 1958, Kusama who at the time was living in abject poverty, threw herself into her painting, spending what little she had only on paints and canvases, often forgoing food in order to work. During that period, she was suffering from episodes of severe neurosis. She recalls a time when she was half starved and in the midst of painting a canvas with nets, that she was suddenly compelled to paint on the table, on the floor and windows, and then finally over her whole body. As she repeated this process over and over again, the nets began to expand to what she called “infinity.” Filling the entire room, she felt a sense of annihilation and then collapsed

from exhaustion. When she awoke the next morning, she found that the nets had come alive and had started to crawl from the floor onto her hands, clinging to her arms and legs. Panic stricken she called an ambulance which took her to a local hospital. These episodes began to become a regular occurrence so much so that according to Kusama the doctors at the hospital would “roll their eyes as if to say,

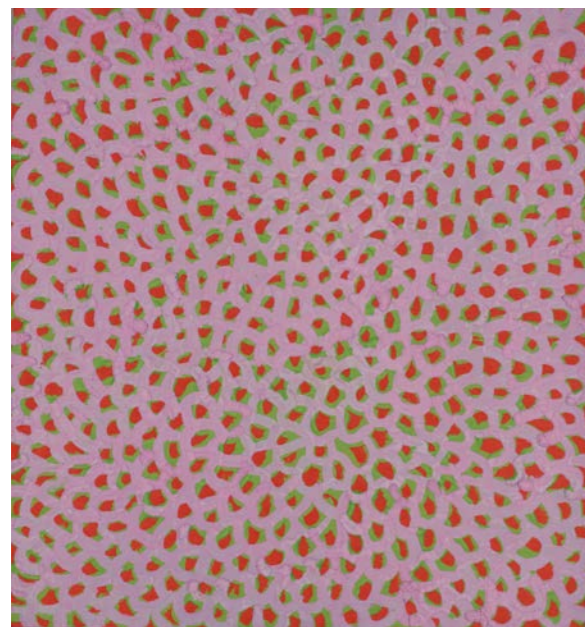
you again!” Later she was warned that she must be treated at a psychiatric facility. Ignoring this advice, Kusama simply carried on painting.

The nets in her early works on paper show a clear evolution within this series. Untitled, 1953 likely to be one of her earliest examples, depicts a cluster of emerald green loops that form half-moon patterns in the foreground, illuminated against the stark black backdrop. Hints of a further yellow net emerge shadowed beneath. Along with red and white, the three colours yellow, green and black later become synonymous with the artist’s colour palette.



Yayoi Kusama, Untitled 1953

The progression of her nets is illustrated within An Island (13), which Kusama created just two years later in 1955. Here Kusama’s nets have progressed to cover the entirety of the paper, seemingly stretching beyond the picture plane. Rings of gouache are now overlapping instead of just partially as we saw in the earlier piece. There is a transition from simple, small repetitive patterns to increasingly complex and immersive compositions that prefigure the more expansive canvases of her later Infinity Net series. For Kusama the use of her nets are not merely visual artifacts but also manifestations of her existential exploration, where each net



Yayoi Kusama c.1939

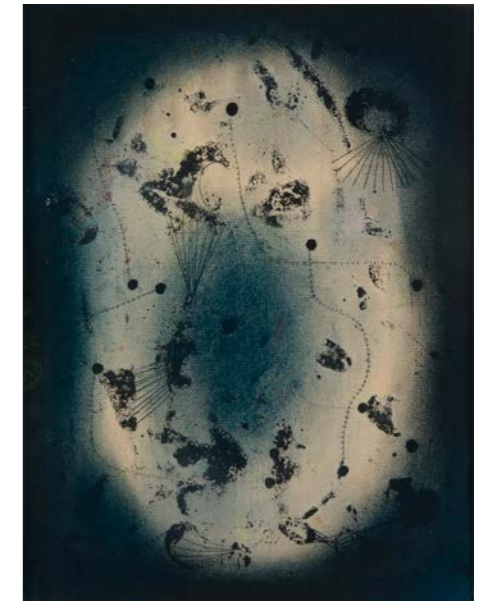
serves as a visual metaphor for infinity and an embodiment of her artistic and personal trials.

Kusama’s abstract Infinity Net paintings have at times often been compared to Action Painting that had become popular in the 1950s & 60s in New York. However, her works were the polar opposite in terms of their concept. Action Painting is typically defined by the application of paint through spontaneous and vigorous sweeping brushstrokes. Pioneers of this movement are artists such as Joan Mitchell, Jackson Pollock and

Willem de Kooning. Kusama’s work however, holds a different intent completely, one that centres around the notion of infinity and obliteration through obsessive repetition. Furthermore, Kusama’s source of painting comes from a necessity to survive, a form to manage the trauma of her hallucinations. As she states herself, “Painting was a fever born of desperation, the only way for me to go on living in this world.” Her nets would later become her most acclaimed and coveted series.

## The Natural World

Kusama also drew heavily on the natural world as a deep source of inspiration. Growing up in the rural countryside approximately 130 miles from Tokyo, she was surrounded by plants, insects, and other botanical elements. Given her family’s reliance on agriculture, it is unsurprising that flowers, butterflies, and mushrooms permeate her work. Kusama’s profound attachment to nature is so evident that her name has become synonymous with pumpkins—one of the most iconic motifs in her oeuvre. However, her fascination extends to a wide range of flora, fauna, and aspects of creation.



Yayoi Kusama, Untitled, 1953

In Untitled, 1953, Kusama features delicate markings resembling micro-organisms, arranged as if swimming under a microscope. Organic forms appear to dart across the paper, coming in and out of focus, creating an intricate, almost otherworldly scene. Her exploration of these natural motifs allow her to delve deeper into her hallucinations, guiding her to explore surreal dimensions where spaces teem with translucent webs and dividing cells.



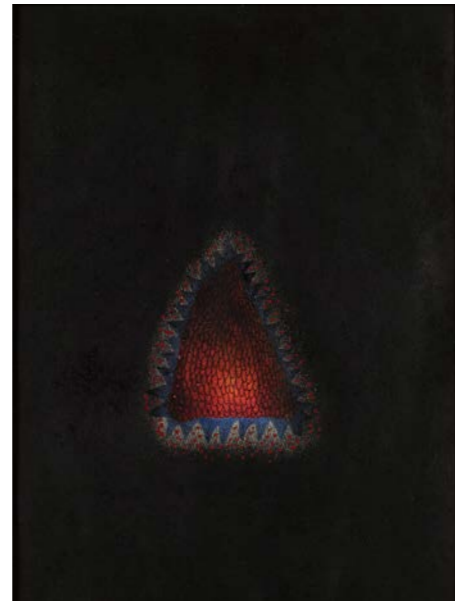
Yayoi Kusama, The Configuration of Desire, 1954

Similarly, The Configuration of Desire, 1954 showcases Kusama’s surrealist and abstract tendencies, with identifiable imagery such as trees set against a milky backdrop, reminiscent of a landscape. Ethereal forms rain down, swarming across the sky, blending the familiar with the fantastical.

Kusama's renderings of nature are characterised by their intricate detail and delicate linework, reflecting her keen observation and deep appreciation of the natural environment. Her early depictions of natural forms not only capture the beauty and complexity of nature but also foreshadow her later explorations of repetition and pattern. These works show her remarkable ability to translate the richness of the natural world into compelling, imaginative compositions.

## Evolution of Light

Another aspect revealed by these early works on paper is Kusama's extraordinary mastery of depicting light and how it became a crucial element in her work. Having no specific training in the technique of chiaroscuro, works such as *The Woman*, 1953 illustrated how Kusama's skilful manipulation of light and dark resulted in the creation of dense and captivating atmospheres. As if dimly lit from behind, an ominous triangular shape emerges from the pitch black, armed with sharp teeth and covered in small red polka dots protecting the ruby red and black net at the center. The tension that emulated from this small painting is hypnotic.



Yayoi Kusama, *The Woman*, 1953



Yayoi Kusama, *Days*, 1953

Kusama also sources light through her innovative use of colour. *Days*, 1953 depicts thick and compact versions of her nets, clustered together. As small splashes of colour touch the tip of each net, Kusama adds not only a warm glowing heat to the work but also a sense of movement, almost as if the hive of nets is alive and breathing, exhaling in and out.

It is from this experimentation with light in these early works that Kusama later evolved to expand her oeuvre to include her much revered Infinity Mirror Rooms. These installations use mirrors and strategically placed lights arranged in patterns to create an illusion of endless space, blurring the boundaries between the physical

space and the viewer and immersing them in a seemingly infinite expanse of illuminated dots or shapes. Kusama found a way to bring to life her two-dimensional works into three-dimensional spaces where viewers can physically step into and experience her world.

The 1950s marked an important formation in Kusama's artistic practice. Her early gouaches remain a rare and captivating body of work, illustrating the early source of her iconic motifs. Kusama's initial experiments with polka dots and repetitive patterns in her ink and gouache works on paper, laid groundwork for her future masterpieces, establishing the core visual language that she would continue to explore throughout her career.

## Going to America

Despite lasting only a year at art school, Kusama participated in several group exhibitions in both Matsumoto and Kyoto, as she continued to develop her own distinct style of abstraction mixed with natural forms. Her debut solo show was in 1952 at the First Community Centre in Matsumoto, where in keeping with her prolific output and obsessive compulsion she exhibited some 270 works.

In 1955, Kusama emerged onto the global art stage for the first time by participating in International Watercolor Exhibition: 18th Biennial at Brooklyn Museum in New York.

Inspired by the free artistic environment in the US and eager to escape her family's and Japan's conservative constraints, Kusama began to long for America and what it represented: a stark contrast to Japan. Not knowing where or how she could infiltrate properly, Kusama reached out to the American artist Georgia O'Keeffe, a leading modernist painter whose dreamlike depictions of nature Kusama admired greatly. Nicknamed the "Mother of American modernism" O'Keeffe was one of the first female painters to achieve worldwide acclaim from critics and the general public. To Kusama's complete astonishment, her idol wrote back! The two



Yayoi Kusama at her family home in Matsumoto, 1957



Yayoi Kusama on the Staten Island Ferry c. 1958

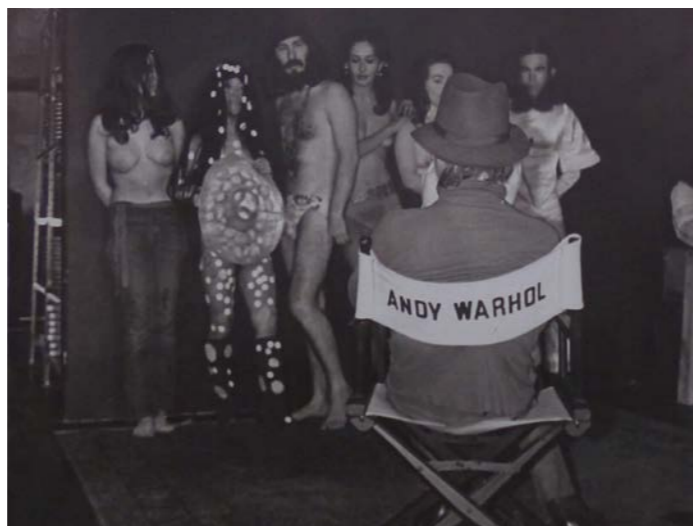
started a correspondence that lasted some years, with Kusama sending her dozens of her works on paper, asking if O’Keeffe would share them with her dealer and anyone else who might be interested. Now Kusama had a friend on the inside and along with O’Keeffe’s support and her doctor’s strong encouragement, the ambitious twenty-seven-year-old Kusama was moving to America.

The decision to leave Japan was one that Kusama had dreamt of for almost a decade. It had taken her eight full years to persuade her mother to let her

go. The move would change her life completely. She often credits America for having saved her from her stifled life and provided her with opportunities that she would have never been afforded to her at home.

Before she embarked on her transformative adventure in 1957, Kusama took an axe to hundreds of works, some four or five feet tall, and made a bonfire next to the river bank behind her house. She wanted a fresh start and to make new and “better” works when she got to the US. Furthermore, she didn’t want to leave any pieces behind that her mother could give away to unfriendly relatives. She did however, along with 60 silk kimonos, keep roughly two-thousand drawings and paintings to take with her in order to sell when she arrived, hoping that they would provide for her a source of income whilst she settled into her new home.

Kusama arrived first in Ann Arbor in 1957 and then moved to New York a year later. There she managed to install herself and become an important fixture of the city’s avant-garde art scene.



Yayoi Kusama with friend, Andy Warhol working on a body art performance in his Factory, 1968

It wasn’t long before she counted the likes of Claes Oldenburg, Larry Rivers, Andy Warhol, Donald Judd, Sam Francis, and Joseph Cornell as close friends. She would remain in America for the next fifteen years and during that period she not only expanded on her own artistic practices but contributed heavily to American Abstraction and the Pop Art movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Kusama returned to Japan in 1973. A few years later in 1977, struggling to cope, she voluntarily committed herself into a psychiatric asylum in Tokyo. She has remained there ever since, working daily from her studio a short distance away.

## Legacy

Today Yayoi Kusama is one of the most celebrated living artists worldwide. Starting with an art practice born out of necessity, she has made profound and diverse contributions to art history throughout her illustrious career, establishing herself as a visionary force in contemporary art. She has revolutionised the art world with her signature polka dot and Infinity Net paintings, which challenged traditional painting norms and influenced minimalism and conceptual art.

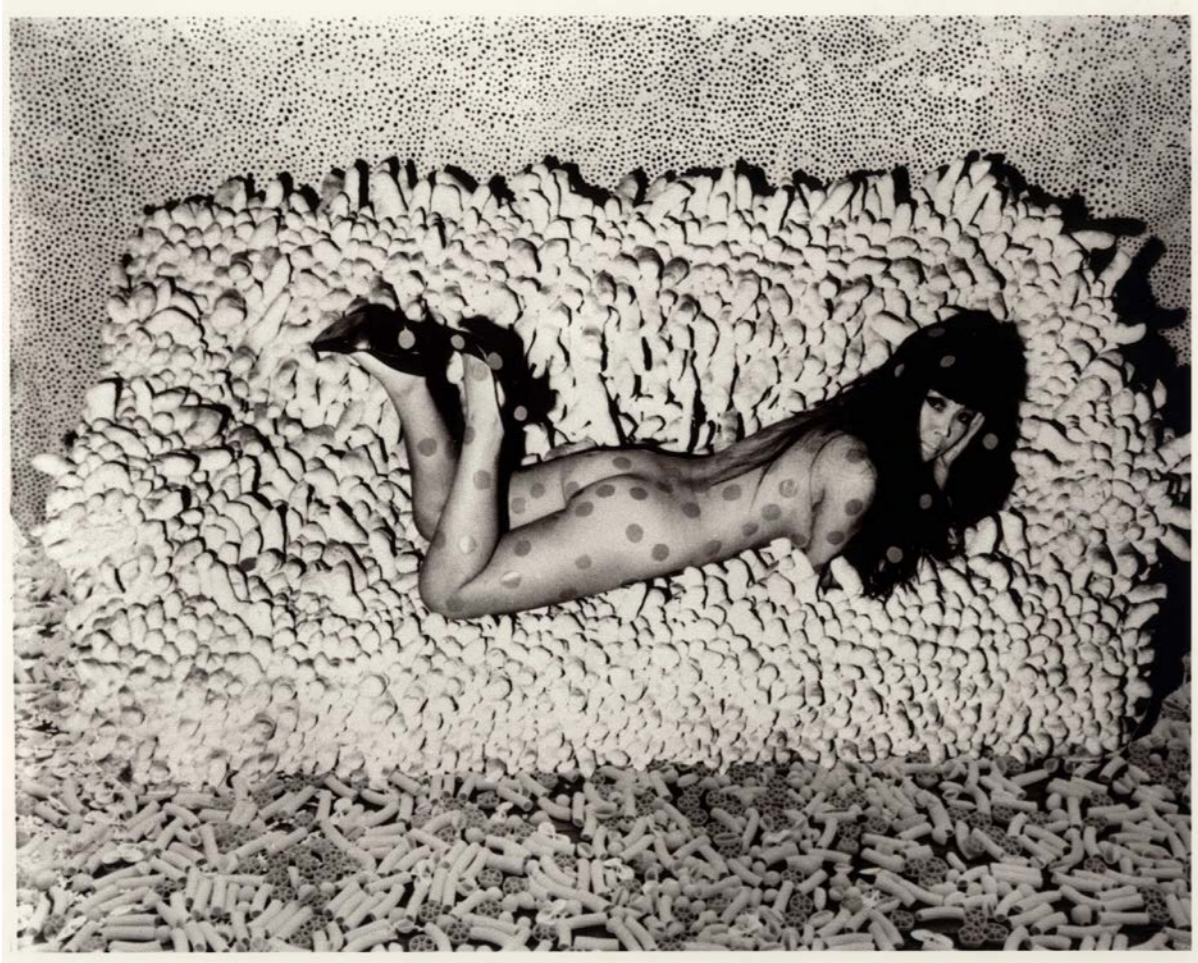


Infinity Mirrored Room – Love Forever, 1966/94

Equally pioneering are her installation works, particularly her immersive Infinity Rooms which redefined the possibilities of installation art. Her provocative “happenings” and performance art in the 1960s pushed social boundaries and became integral to the development of performance art. Kusama’s bold engagement with themes of identity, gender, and race resonated with feminist and countercultural movements, while her use of commercial motifs and vibrant patterns aligned her with Pop and psychedelic art.

When Kusama arrived in America she firmly set her sights on global domination and decades later she has achieved exactly that. Expanding into film, fashion, design and literature, seldom are there artists such as Kusama whose scope is so wide she has been able to cover a myriad of different mediums and also transcends beyond the artworld and into mainstream culture.

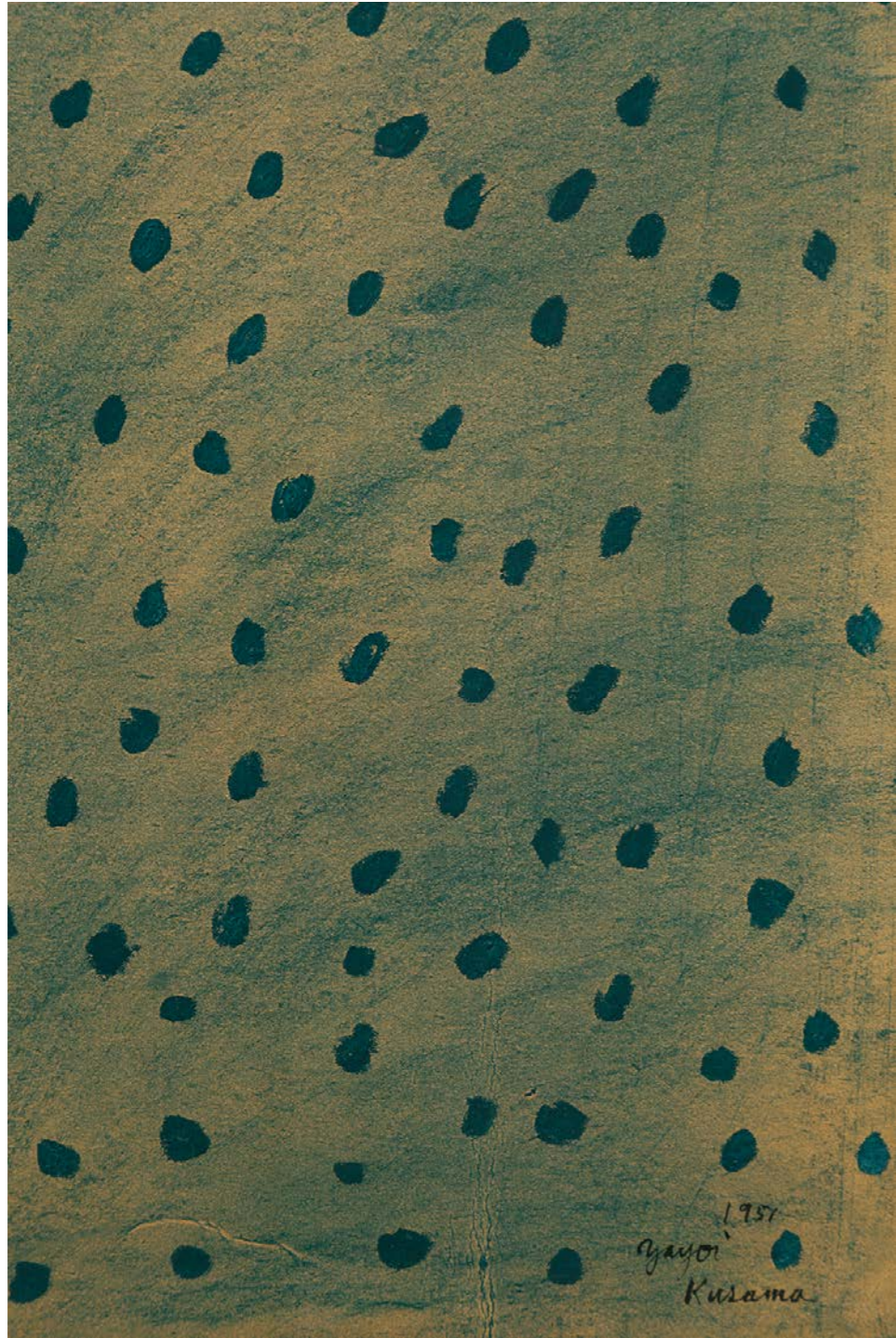
Despite her struggles with mental health, she has remained an enduring and influential figure, continually inspiring and challenging the art community with her innovative and provocative work. Whilst still suffering from hallucinations today, she describes them as “horrificing, wonderous and at times mysterious”. Her life is a poignant testament to the rehabilitating power of art as well as a study in human resilience. Kusama’s unyielding creativity and relentless pursuit of artistic innovation have solidified her as a true icon of contemporary art.



Yayoi Kusama reclining on Accumulation No.2 c.1966



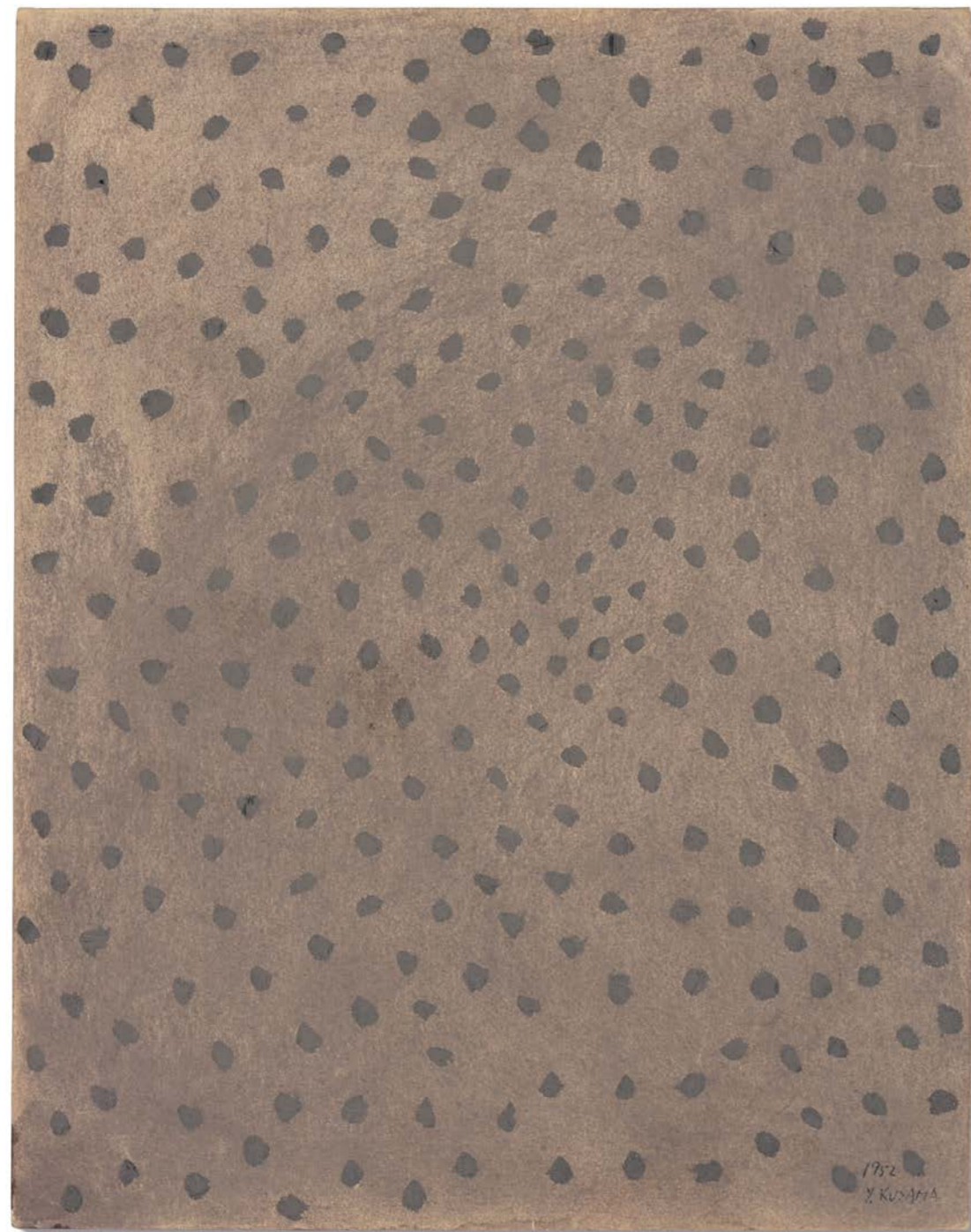
# List of Works



**Yayoi Kusama**

*Incomplete Proliferation No. 81*, 1951  
Ink and pastel on paper  
Dated and signed, lower right  
43 by 30 cm.





**Yayoi Kusama**

*Untitled*, 1952

Gouache and pastel on paper

Signed and dated lower right; signed again and dated again on the reverse:

'1952 y. kusama'

38 by 30 cm.





**Yayoi Kusama**

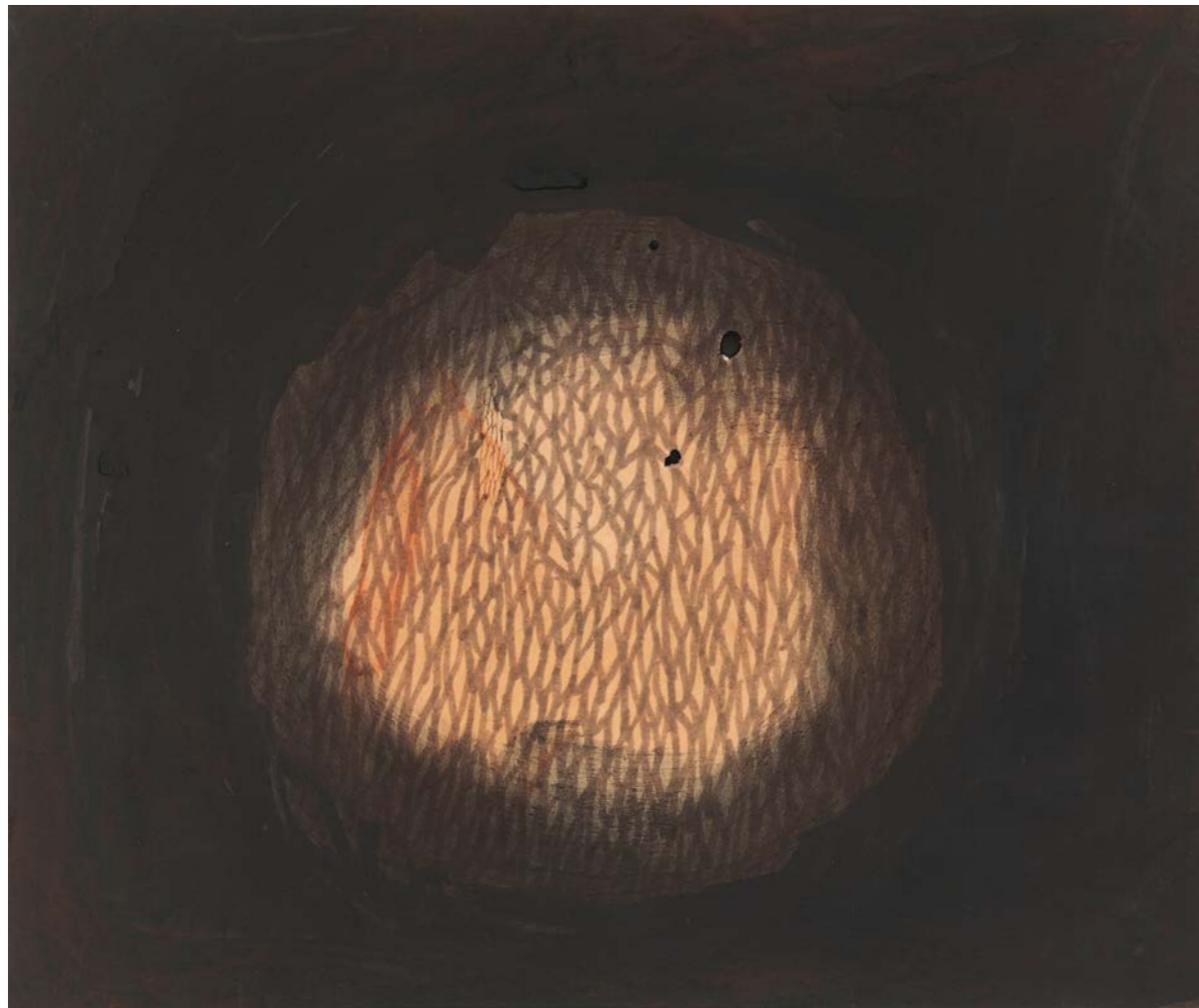
*The Configuration of Desire*, 1954

Gouache and ink on paper laid down on paperboard

Signed and dated lower right; signed again twice, titled and dated again on the backing board

51.4 by 45.7 cm.





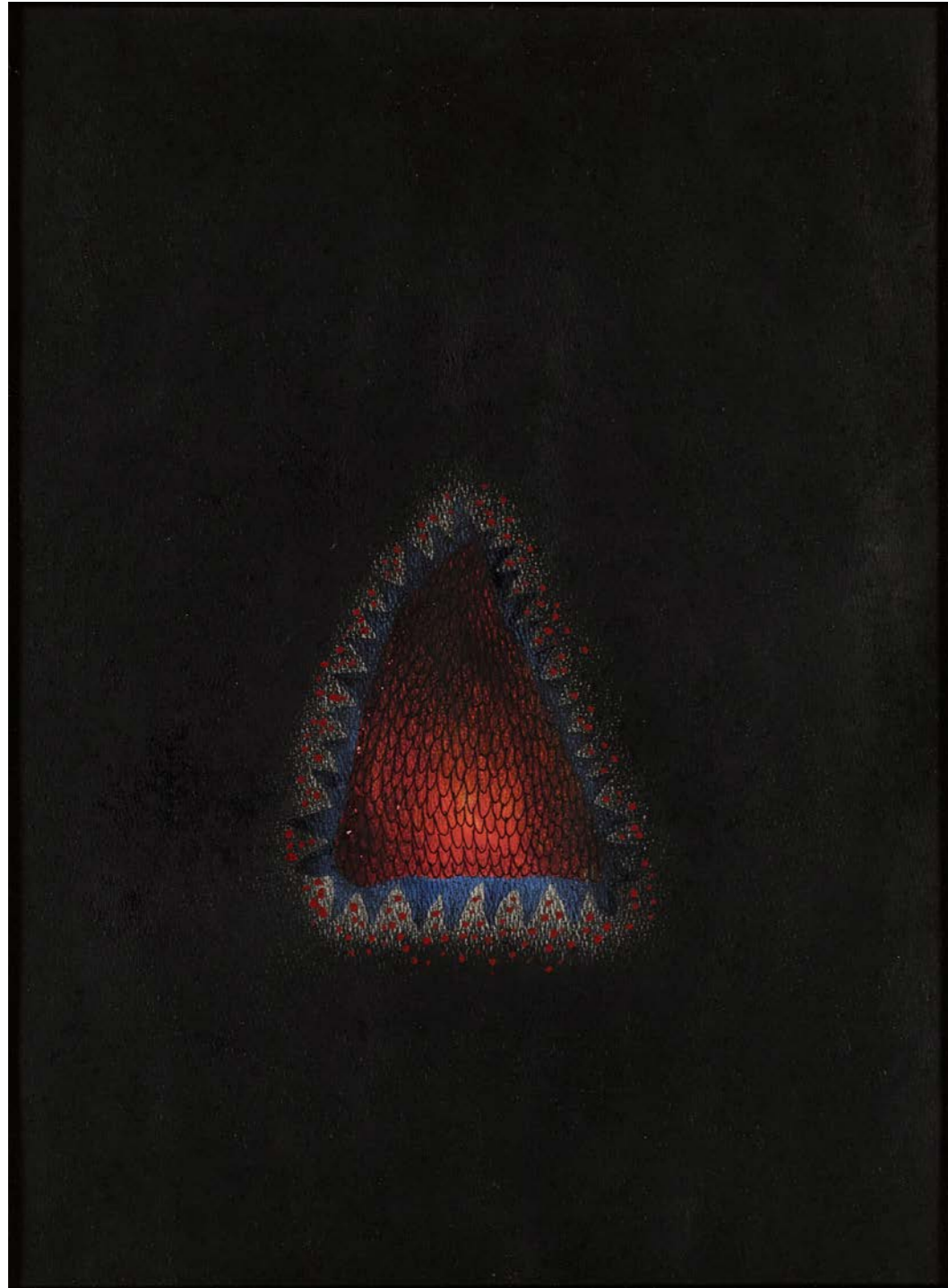
**Yayoi Kusama**

*No. 2 Light*, 1962

Watercolour, gouache, pastel, felt tip pen, and ink on paper

Signed, inscribed and stamped

29.8 by 36.8 cm.



**Yayoi Kusama**

*The Woman*, 1953  
Pastel, gouache and ink on paper  
Signed and dated on the reverse  
40 by 30 cm.

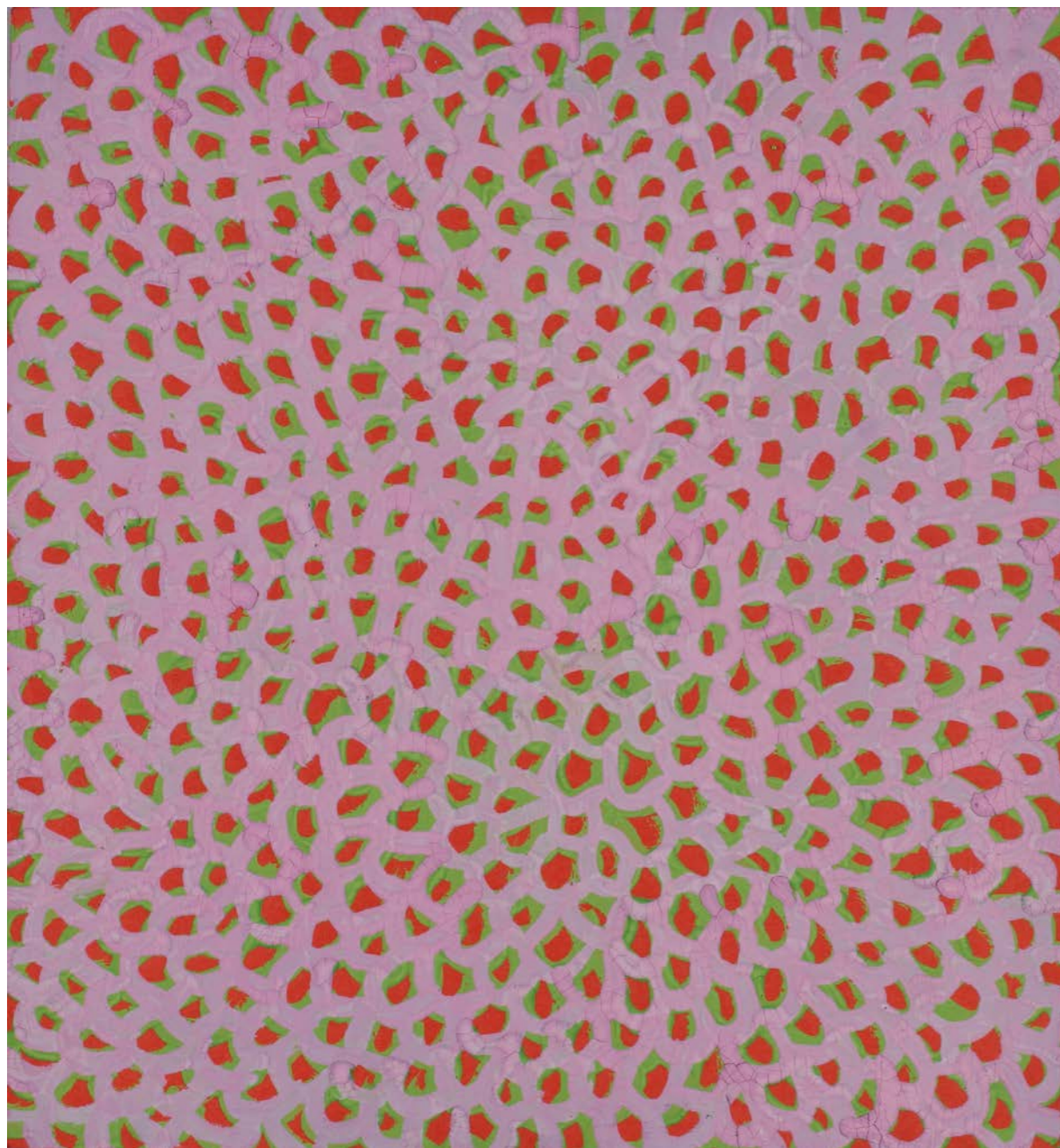




**Yayoi Kusama**

*I land [Island] in Night (No 2)*, 1953  
Watercolour and pastel on paper  
Signed and titled on the reverse  
25 by 33.7 cm.

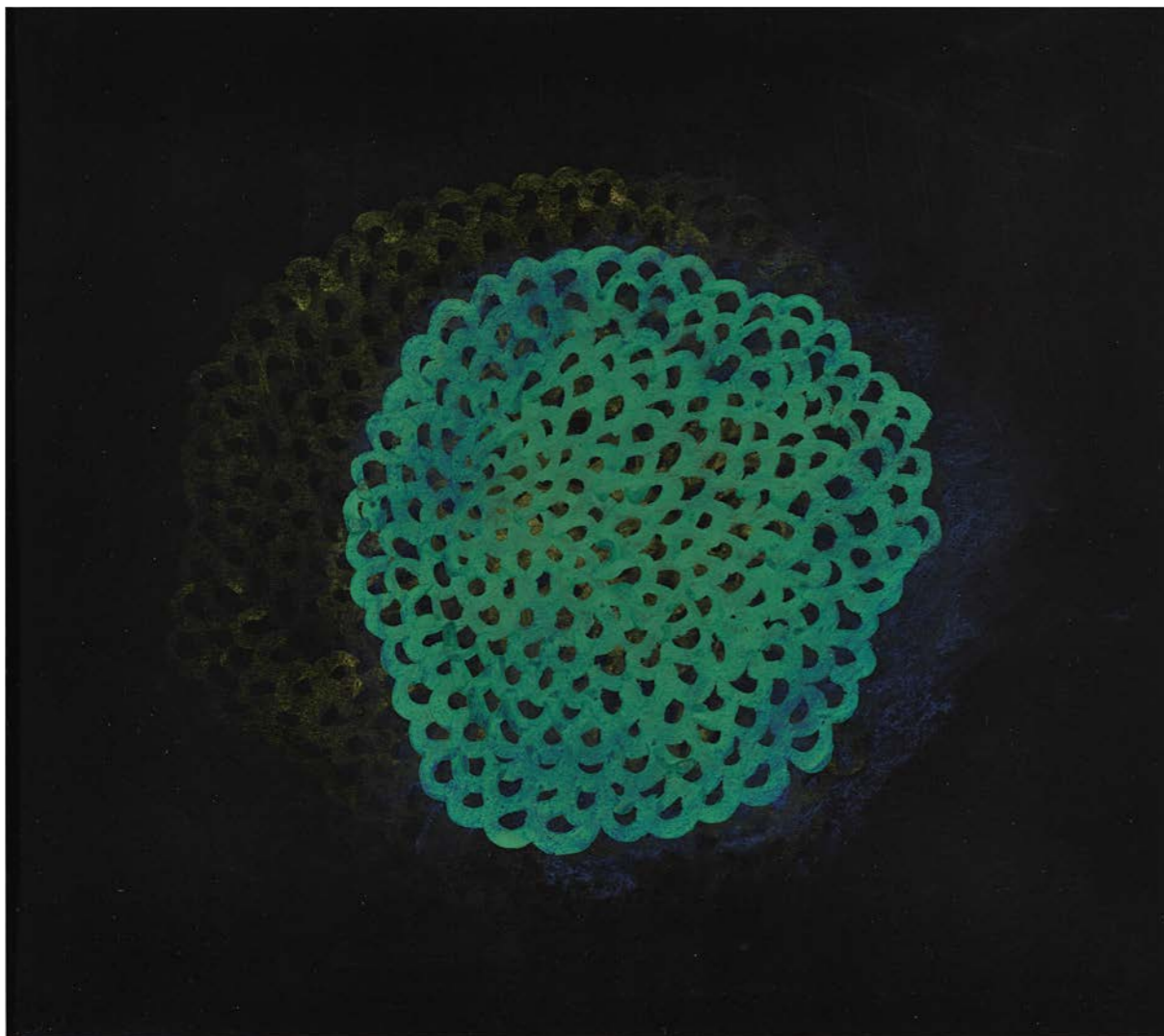




**Yayoi Kusama**

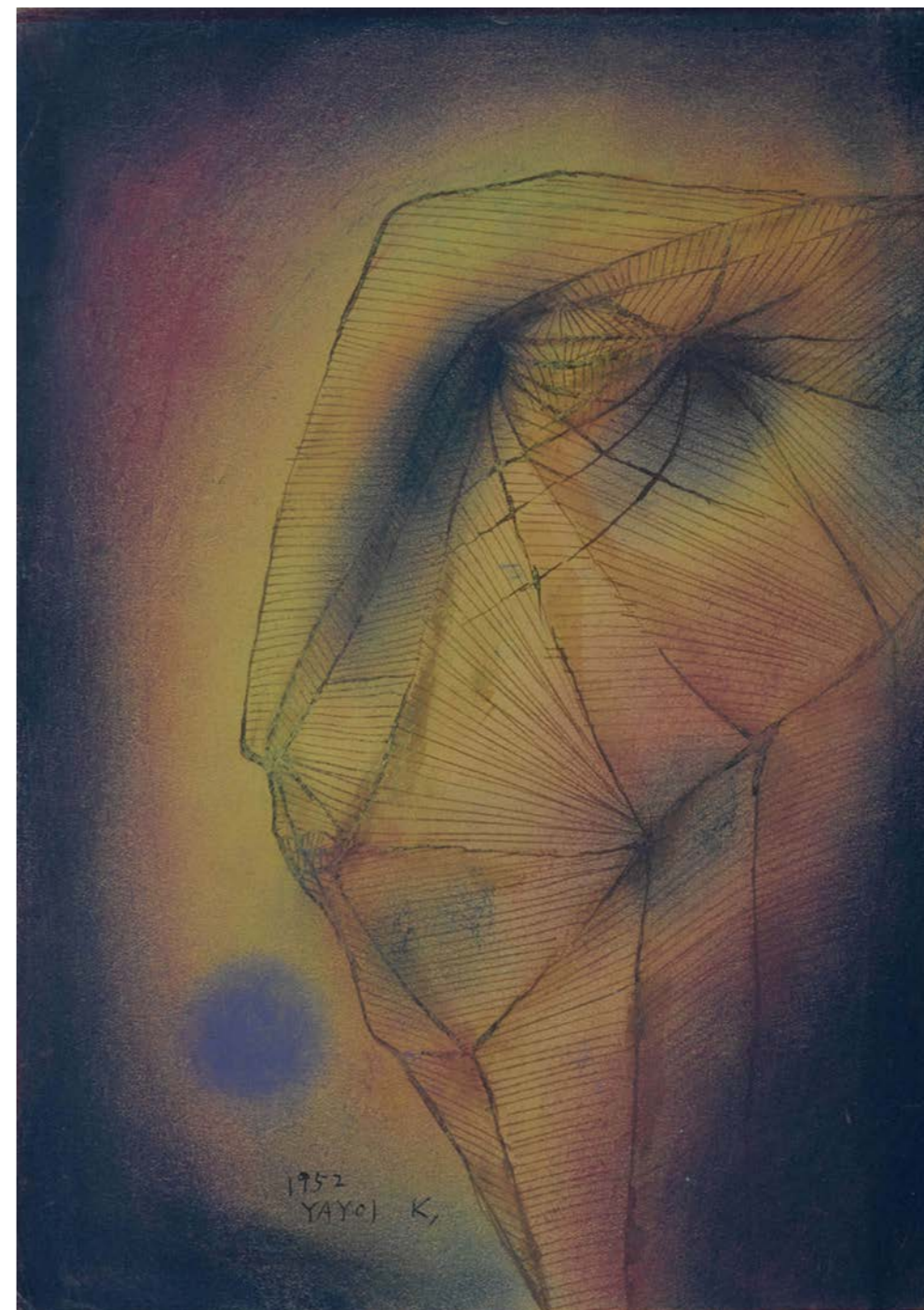
*An Island (13)*, 1955  
Gouache on paper  
Signed, titled and dated on the reverse  
31.8 by 29.2 cm.





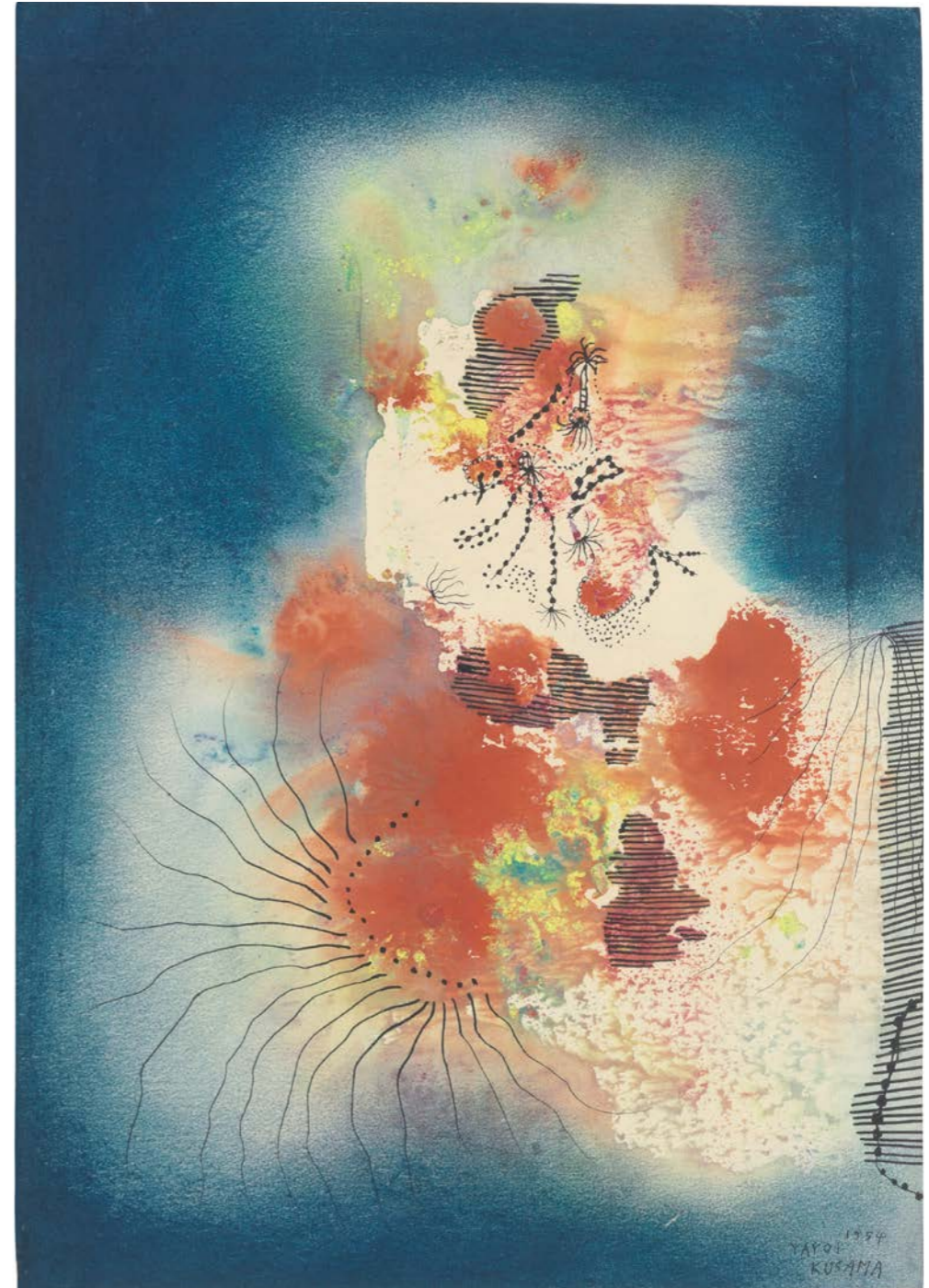
**Yayoi Kusama**

*Untitled*, 1953  
Pastel and gouache on paper  
Signed in English and dated on the reverse  
34.5 by 39.4 cm.



**Yayoi Kusama**

*Autumn*, 1952  
Pastel and ink on paper  
Signed and dated lower centre; signed, titled, dated in Japanese,  
titled and dated twice on the reverse  
26.4 by 18.6 cm.



**Yayoi Kusama**

*The Castle*, 1954

Ink, pastel and gouache on paper

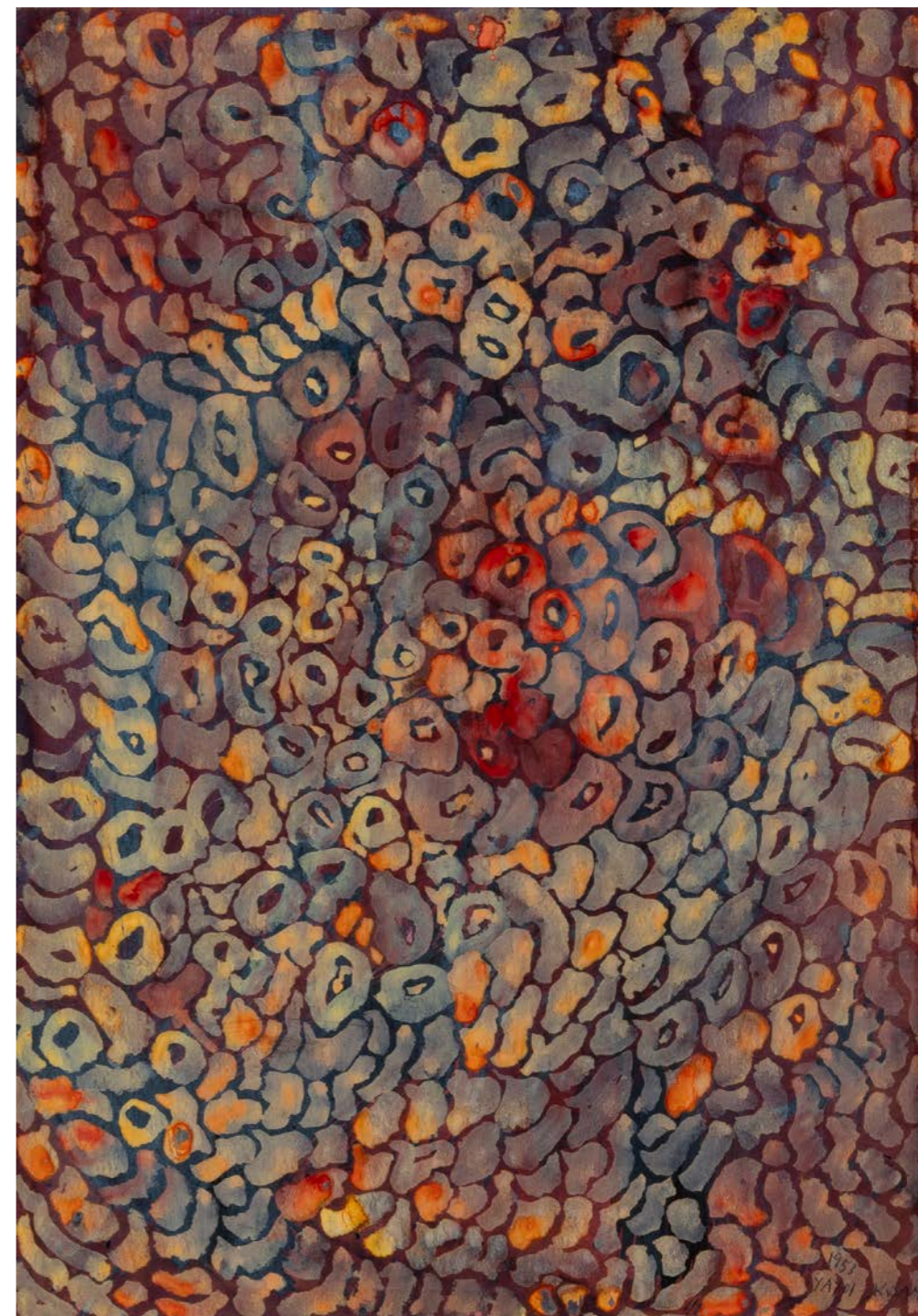
Signed and dated lower right; signed again, titled and dated again on the reverse; signed again on the reverse of the backing board

24.6 by 17.8 cm.



**Yayoi Kusama**

*Untitled*, 1953  
Watercolour, gouache, pastel and ink on paper  
Stamped and dated on reverse  
29.8 by 22.9 cm.



**Yayoi Kusama**

*Days*, 1953  
Gouache on paper  
Signed and dated lower right  
35.5 by 25.4 cm



**Yayoi Kusama**

*No. 5.B.*, 1958  
Gouache, watercolour, pastel and ink on paper  
Signed twice, titled and dated on the reverse  
60.1 by 71.1 cm.



# Omer Tiroche Gallery

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