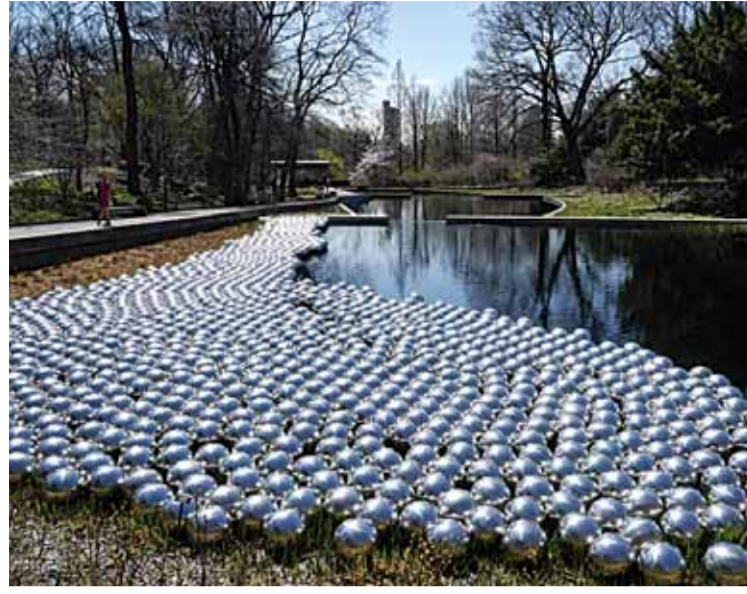


Lifestyle | Features



Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's "I Want to Fly to the Universe" on display during the KUSAMA: Cosmic Nature Media Preview on April 7, 2021 at the New York Botanical Garden. —AFP photos



Kusama's "Narcissus Garden" made up of 1,400 reflective spheres is on display.



Kusama's "Dancing Pumpkin", a 16-foot-tall sculpture, is on display.

PUMPKINS, PEAS, PEONIES: NEW YORK EXHIBIT CELEBRATES JAPAN'S KUSAMA

Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama grew up among plants; walking through her grandfather's vast nursery as a child she first saw the pumpkins that would come to define her work. Now, the 92-year-old's sculptures stretch across the 250-acre grounds of the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx in a major exhibition that was delayed by a year because of the pandemic.

"KUSAMA: Cosmic Nature" was due to open in March 2020 following years of preparation and finally began welcoming visitors from yesterday as cultural life gradually returns to New York City. "It's not just big pumpkins and big flowers," explains Karen Daubmann, vice-president of exhibitions at the garden. "It's really looking at the life of an incredible artist and her roots in the natural world."

From Kusama's first drawings of flowers and leaves to her more recent series "My Eternal Soul," the exhibition traces her progression as an artist through her love of plants, a permanent source of inspiration and self-analysis, according to exhibition curator Mika Yoshitake. An example of this is "Self-Portrait," which resembles the blackened center of a sunflower.

"She grew up with fields of flowers, peonies, zinnias, pumpkins. Her first memories are walking through it with her grandfather and that's why there's

so many botanical images," said Yoshitake. Her later memories were more tormented: Artistic talents impeded in adolescence by her parents and then 15 years of living as an immigrant in the United States, mostly in New York.

Kusama, an admirer of American modernist painter Georgia O'Keeffe, struggled to establish herself in a male-dominated art world and a post-war America where anti-Japanese sentiment was rife. But for the avant-garde Kusama, whose art has been heavily influenced by bouts of hallucinations and mental illness, nature is also a world full of colors and joy, exemplified in her giant "Dancing Pumpkin" sculpture created specially for the Bronx exhibition.

The pumpkin's "tentacles" are covered with polka-dot patterns characteristic of Kusama's work. These symbols of sun and energy, according to Yoshitake, have helped make the nonagenarian one of the most Instagrammable artists on the planet. Daubmann describes the exhibition as "colorful" and "fun" and hopes it will break attendance records, as was the case with earlier Kusama exhibitions, most notably at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2019.

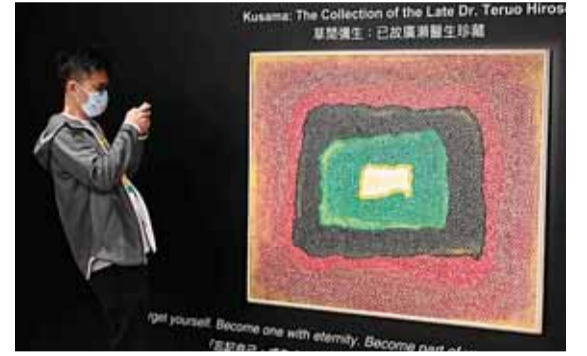
If the photos already posted online by the first visitors are anything to go by then its success, on social networks at least, seems assured. Polka dot patterns, mesh, flowers and bright colors - the recur-



Kusama's "Ascension of Polka Dots on Trees" is seen on display.

ring themes of Kusama's 75-year career are all present. The reflecting steel orbs of her "Narcissus Garden" roll slowly in the New York wind, 55 years after she first exhibited them, without authorization, in front of the entrance to the Venice Biennale.

Kusama, who since 1977 has voluntarily lived in a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo, will not travel to see the exhibition, which runs until Oct 31. She is in a wheelchair and hardly leaves home, according to Yoshitake, but continues to paint daily, in particular



A visitor to Bonhams auction house in Hong Kong on April 7, 2021 photographs a painting titled "Untitled", part of some of the earliest recognized works by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama - which have never been exhibited in public and will be offered in a special single-owner collection sale at Bonhams New York on May 12, 2021.

to feed the "My Eternal Soul" series and produce canvases, some of which are part of the exhibition. "It's been a rough year and no one's really felt inspired," said Daubmann. "I hope that everyone's inspired by this exhibition." —AFP



In this picture taken on Jan 31, 2021, female students of the Hazara community warm up before a martial arts training class at the Kazmi International Wushu Academy in Quetta. —AFP photos

PAKISTAN'S HAZARA WOMEN STRIKE BACK WITH MARTIAL ARTS

Hundreds of Pakistani Hazara women are learning how to deliver side kicks and elbow blows as martial arts booms within the marginalized community. Hazaras, who are mainly Shia Muslims, have faced decades of sectarian violence in the southwestern city of Quetta, living in two separate enclaves cordoned off by checkpoints and armed guards to protect them.

Women must also contend with routine harassment from men, with groping commonplace in crowded markets or public transport. "We can't stop bomb blasts with karate, but with self-defence, I have learnt to feel confident," 20-year-old Nargis Batool told AFP. "Everyone here knows that I am going to the club. Nobody dares say anything to

me while I am out."

Up to 4,000 people are attending regular classes in more than 25 clubs in Balochistan province, of which Quetta is the capital, according to Ishaq Ali, head of the Balochistan Wushu Kung Fu Association, which oversees the sport. The city's two largest academies, which train around 250 people each, told AFP the majority of their students were young Hazara women.

Many of them go on to earn money from the sport, taking part in frequent competitions. It is still unusual for women to play sport in deeply conservative Pakistan where families often forbid it, but martial arts teacher Fida Hussain Kazmi says exceptions are being made. "In general, women cannot exercise

in our society... but for the sake of self-defense and her family, they are being allowed."

The uptake is also credited to national champions Nargis Hazara and Kulsoom Hazara, who have won medals in international competitions. Kazmi says he has trained hundreds of women over the years, after learning the sport from a Chinese master in the eastern city of Lahore. The 41-year-old offers two hours of training six days a week for 500 rupees (\$3) but gives free classes to women who have lost a relative to militant violence. "The Hazara community is facing many problems... but with karate we can begin to feel safe," said 18-year-old student Syeda Qubra, whose brother was killed in a bomb blast in 2013. —AFP



In this picture taken on Jan 31, 2021, Mubarak Ali Shan (right), a martial arts instructor, trains female students of the Hazara community during a self-defense martial arts training class on the outskirts of Quetta.

SCAR TISSUE: VIETNAMESE WOMEN FIND HEALING WITH TATTOOS

In her tiny Hanoi apartment, tattoo artist Ngoc inks middle-aged women whose lives have been upended by divorce or illness, each of them searching for healing through an art form that is still largely taboo in Vietnam. Although attitudes are changing, tattoos remain associated with gangsters, prostitution and the criminal underground in the communist, broadly conservative country.

"I met many women who told me they loved tattoos but they were born at a time when no-one supported them," Ngoc, who goes by the name "Ngoc Like", told AFP. But some are choosing to push back against those old ideas, seeing body art as emancipation from some of the rigid societal norms they have lived by.

Getting inked is often a landmark moment in these women's lives, Ngoc, 28, says. "They have overcome that fear of social prejudice and have a personal wish to renew themselves... to open a new chapter in life." Educated and business-savvy, Ngoc was ridiculed when she started out as a tattoo artist less than a decade ago - with many assuming she did not go into the industry out of choice.

But she has since built up a solid, mostly female clientele. "Being a tattoo artist, I have had to accept the fact that people dismiss my skill, my studies, my personality... They say: 'You do this because you did not get good grades.'"

"Strength and confidence"

Just four percent of Vietnamese have tattoos, according to a small survey in 2015 by Vietnam market research firm Q&Me, the most recent data available. It also suggested that 25 percent of people "feel scared" when seeing body art. But for Tran Ha Nguyen, a high school teacher, getting a tattoo was an act of celebration following a divorce from her "conservative and rigid" husband. "My ex strongly opposed any tattoo on my body," she recalled. "I on the other hand had been afraid I would lose my job if I had something visible."

After the separation, the 41-year-old told AFP she wanted a clean break from her old self and to do things she would never have dared do in her previous life. She chose a daisy design for her thigh, high enough that no-one can see it unless she is in a bikini. "It's just one small tattoo but I feel I have found my true self," Nguyen said.

Also recovering from trauma, 46-year-old Nguyen Hong Thai chose a rose tattoo over a scar on her stomach, and the words "forever in my heart" on her arm, months after her husband died of lung cancer. He had always wanted her to get inked. "Now he's gone, I think he would have wanted me to be strong, to be the person I had always been with him. The tattoos have given me strength and confidence (to do that)," said Thai, with a huge smile.

"I live for myself"

Ngoc has decided to focus her tattooing work on women with scars, both physical and mental. Demand is growing - her schedule is completely full, she says. Her clients in Hanoi, where average monthly income per capita is less than \$500, are often willing to spend double that amount on their body art. One of them, 33-year-old office worker Huong - not her real name - has felt ashamed of her body since appendicitis surgery 14 years ago left her with an "ugly" vertical scar.

"I considered going to a clinic to see if they could get rid of the scar. 'But then I thought: why can't I have a tattoo to hide it?' Her eyes shut tight in anxiety, Huong lies on the chair, waiting for the needle to begin its march across her midriff. This "is not just about beautification... The beauty here is giving a woman the chance to be herself," says Ngoc.

Hours later, looking in the mirror at a string of



This photograph taken on March 20, 2021 shows tattoo artist Ngoc designing a tattoo over a female customer's scar at her studio in Hanoi. —AFP photos



This combination photograph shows a female customer's post-surgery scar before (top) and after a tattoo procedure at Ngoc Like's studio.



Nguyen Hong Thai poses with her tattoo made in memory of her late husband at Ngoc's studio.

pink flowers across her stomach, a grin breaks out over Huong's face. "I was afraid if (my family) saw this big tattoo, they would think I was a party woman. 'But the most important thing is I live for myself. If I can lose the shame around my scar, life gets more interesting.'" —AFP