

Nushin Elahi's London Letter

Yayoi Kusama: *Flower* Tate Gallery.

Yayoi Kusama has been called the Polka Dot Princess, and with good reason. She was covering not only paintings, but cats and horses – even the facades of grand buildings – in dots long before Damien Hirst was born.

And if you haven't yet heard of this Japanese octogenarian, this is the year that will change. The **Tate Modern** is holding a retrospective of her work (until 5 June), more of her recent paintings are on view at the **Victoria Miro Gallery** (until 5 April) and her sponsors, Louis Vuitton, will be releasing a clothing range inspired by her work in the summer. The retrospective has been in Madrid, at the Pompidou in Paris and goes on to New York, a definitive stamp of approval from the art world. She may be in her eighties, wheelchair-bound, and voluntarily living in a mental institution, but she has lost nothing of the steely determination and insatiable desire for publicity that thrust her from her straight-laced family background in Japan to the epicentre of the Sixties art scene in New York.

Claims that she inspired everyone from Andy Warhol's repetitive wallpaper images to Claes Oldenburg's oversized sculptures must be taken with a certain caution, if one judges by the reported friendship with Georgia O'Keefe and the polite bemused tone of the older artist's letters on display.

Certainly Kusama's infinity nets from the Sixties, with their layering of white on white, have a hypnotic quality and in Miro's private viewing rooms one can see them in the vivid colours that have now become Kusama's trademark. At the Tate the tight display of her latest paintings, an endless series of bright square canvases with repetitive motifs, reflects the obsessive nature of her work, but seen as individual works at Miro's it is starkly evident that these are not individual masterpieces, as indeed the Tate curator admits.

The Tate has none of the enormous sculptures of flowers, dolls and pumpkins she now creates which reflect the same commercial world as compatriot Takashi Murakami. There is instead a magical infinity room, with mirrored surfaces much like many clubs today, but then Kusama was creating them in the early Sixties.

Another artist whose career spans decades is **Lucien Freud**, labelled the Greatest Living Artist until his death last year. He was personally involved in the retrospective at the **National Portrait Gallery** (until 27 May) and his last, unfinished, painting is included in this enormous show which is expected to be very popular.

Looking at how his work developed, it is easy to forget how out of kilter it was with the time, as he doggedly pursued his artistic vision. Despite his current popularity, for many years he was considered a dinosaur in art with his figurative studies. He saw his work as autobiographical, and constant subjects were wives, lovers, daughters and of course, himself. The countless self-portraits offer an interesting timeline of how his work and style changed but not the authority and vigour with which he painted in oils.

There is flesh – lots of it, and none of it airbrushed. Freud painted people, often

James Abbott McNeil Whistler: *Nocturne: Blue and Silver- Cremorne Lights* 1872.

in the nude, but there is nothing scintillating about his bodies sprawled across a narrow bed in a dingy room. As he aged, his canvases and sitters got bigger: Big Sue and Leigh Bowery's obese bodies adorn many of the later works. His palette is muted and earthy, almost dull, as painting after painting shows his intense scrutiny of bodies in a bare room, their mottled flesh beautifully rendered but with a savage gaze that reduces them to animals. Freud's tenderness is revealed in a series of portraits of his mother, and the dogs that accompany his sitters. Considering his affinity with animals it is a pity the retrospective doesn't include more animal portraits.

A very uneven survey of **Freud's drawings** is on display at **Blain|Southern** (until 5 April), spanning his entire career and including works never shown before. Far from revealing him as a great draughtsman, one simply wonders why many were framed at all. The most impressive drawings are from the Forties, and though there are a few strong late etchings, much of the work then was simply a prompt for his oils, which is where his focus lay.

Italian artist Alberto Burri was one of the great post-war figures in abstract art and a major influence on the Arte Povera movement, yet **Form and Matter** at the **Estorick Collection** is the first retrospective in the UK since the Sixties (until 7 April). Burri worked as a doctor in North Africa during World War II, and some of his paintings look like suppurating wounds, while others reflect a dry and cracked terrain. His work has an earthy, textural quality, exploring materials such as metal, sacking and tar and the unpredictable novelty of the effect of fire on them. It is the earlier experimental work that is most interesting. The scorched edges of a black sheet of iron and plastic from 1961 catch the light to become a starkly modern crucifix, while the harsh outlines of abstracts from the Nineties seem more dated. This is work created to be experienced first-hand, not made for the commercial world of reproductions.

Migrations: Journeys into British Art at **Tate Britain** is a rather haphazard collection of work by people who have come to Britain as immigrants, ranging from artists as early as Van Dyck to modern video installations. An interesting premise, it is still a slim excuse for displaying wildly disparate work from the Tate's collection, although there are many exquisite pieces such as one of Whistler's Nocturnes and interesting pairings such as a boat scene by James Tissot and another by Lubaina Himid with a century between them. The sheer quantity of work and lack of themed discussion around their choice makes this a sadly fruitless exercise.

Hajj – Journey to the Heart of Islam at the **British Museum** (until 15 April) looks at one of the five pillars of Islam, the pilgrimage to Mecca, through the ages. A fascinating discovery for those prepared to give it some study, it includes heavily embroidered textiles, ancient maps as well as striking modern art works inspired by faith.



Yayoi Kusama in front of one of her recent works



Yayoi Kusama: *Self-Obliteration No.2* 1967 / Lucian Freud: *Startled Man* / *Self Portrait (for Equilbraid)*, 1948 / Kusama posing in Aggregation: *One thousand boats show* 1963 / Burri Red Plastic / Lucian Freud: *Girl in a Dark Jacket* / Lucian Freud: *The Brigadier* 2003-2004