

Amorsolo, Rothko, and Kusama converse with Indonesian contemporary art

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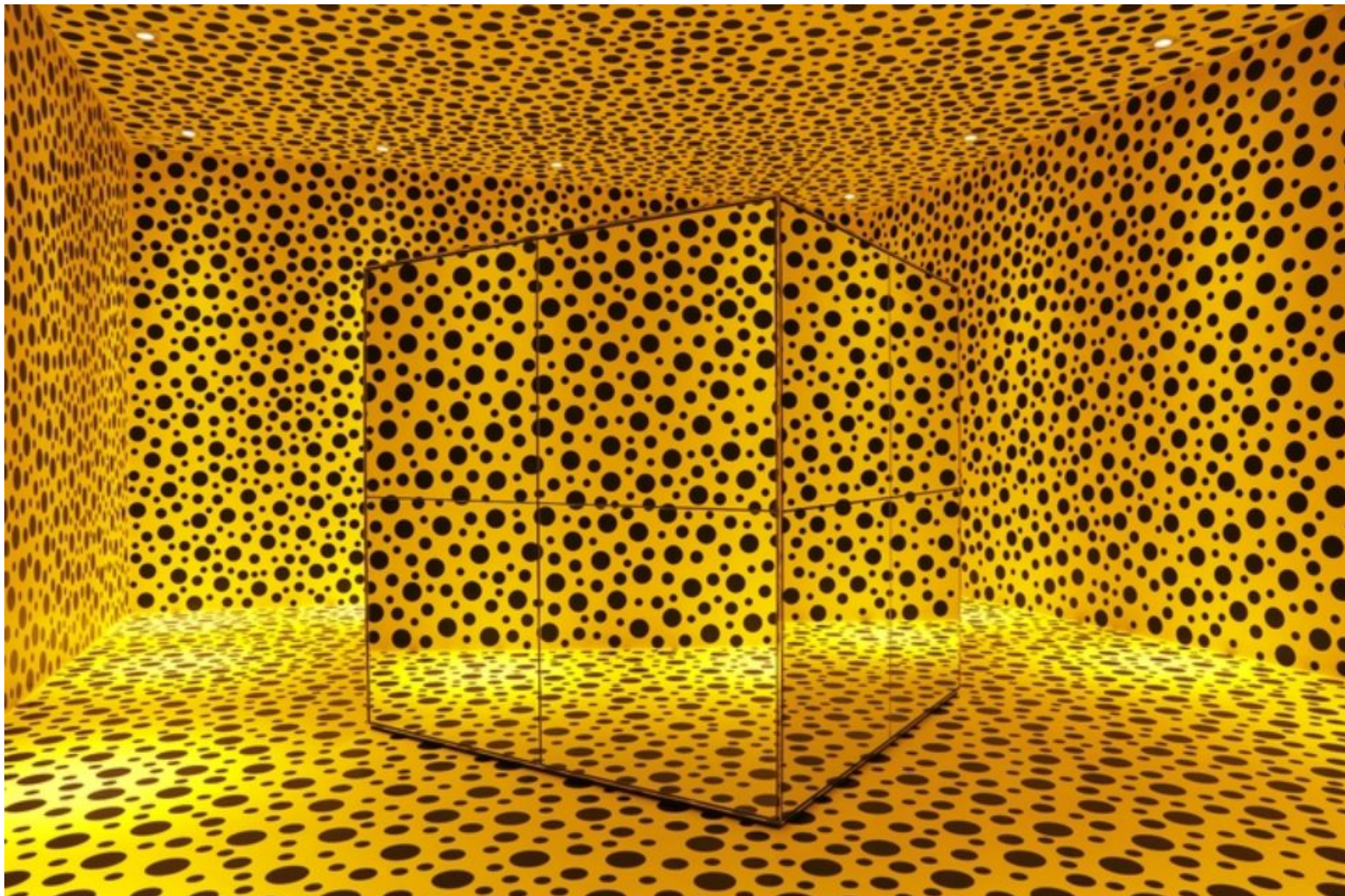
Installation view of "ASEAN+3" (2017) at the opening of Museum Macan in November, under the banner "Art Turns. World Turns. Exploring the Collection of Museum Macan." Photo courtesy of MUSEUM MACAN

Manila (CNN Philippines Life) — Even as a child, Yayoi Kusama experienced unending hallucinations which she dealt with by drawing repetitive patterns to “obliterate” the recurring images in her head. Her obsessional neurosis didn’t stop, however, and she has since lived in a psychiatric asylum in Tokyo.

Her psychological condition has been the point of interest to many, as she is also known for her “gimmicks,” like sending then-U.S. President Richard Nixon a controversial letter (“I will lovingly, soothingly, adorn your hard masculine body”) to stop the Vietnam war.

“The critics were focused on her eccentricities and forgetting to look at the work or forgetting to look at how it may be reflective of other things that are going on,” says Aaron Seeto, director of [Museum Modern and Contemporary Art in Nusantara \(MACAN\)](https://www.museummacan.org/) (<https://www.museummacan.org/>), Indonesia’s first and recently opened contemporary art

Current hosts “Yayoi Kusama: Life is the Heart of a Rainbow,” a survey exhibition covering more than 130 works made by the Japanese artist in over 70 years. The touring exhibition was first shown at the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia, then in National Gallery Singapore, and now in Indonesia, its third and final stop.



"The Spirits of the Pumpkins Descended Into the Heavens" (2015) by Yayoi Kusama at the "Yayoi Kusama: Life is the Heart of a Rainbow" exhibit at Museum MACAN. Visitors can enter this mirrored installation that has been painted with her signature pumpkin-inspired yellow and black polka dots. Photo courtesy of MUSEUM MACAN

Seeto says that this would be a unique opportunity for people in the Southeast Asian region to experience the breadth and depth of Kusama’s work, and how, indeed, the dots reflect more than her mental condition.

“Is she talking about atomic obliteration? Is she talking about some kind of personal, existential crisis? Is she talking about the American-Vietnam conflict? We’ve got the opportunity to be able to look at this; it’s seven decades of work. You see more than just seeing a yellow inflatable with black dots,” he says.

Growth of art in the region

Kusama is the highest paid living female artist to date, and exhibitions that feature her signature dots, pumpkins, and nets have attracted millions of people across the globe. Her works have also reached the Philippine public, through Lito and Kim Camacho, one of the biggest Kusama collectors in the world, when Ayala Museum showed the couple’s collection during the museum’s “collector’s series” program in 2013.

In 2017, the couple also lent some of their Kusama pieces to the National Gallery Singapore for the “Life is the Heart of a Rainbow” show that is now staged in MACAN.



"Love Forever" by Yayoi Kusama at "Yayoi Kusama: Life is the Heart of a Rainbow," Museum MACAN. The Japanese artist worked on these black and white pieces from 2004 to 2007. Photo courtesy of MUSEUM MACAN

Hosting an exhibit of this scale, MACAN has vowed to set Indonesia in the global stage by welcoming local and foreign artists alike into its spaces. In fact, during its opening on November, the museum included works of Philippine National Artist Fernando Amorsolo as well as American abstract expressionist Mark Rothko, as the museum wanted to examine not only the history of Indonesia but also how the country is part of a bigger international conversation.

"This is a museum for Indonesia but we also understand that we're connected everywhere," says Seeto. "It's really about presenting Indonesia in the world, rather than just being about just Indonesia itself."

Because art has often been used to reflect on the state of the world, Museum MACAN drives to open their premises up to an international audience despite a global political climate of neo-nationalist views (closed borders, immigrants taking jobs, etc). The presence of the museum also contributes to the so-called "[Southeast Asian Renaissance](https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2131781/museums-behind-murmurs-southeast-asian-renaissance)," (<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2131781/museums-behind-murmurs-southeast-asian-renaissance>) together with The Factory of Contemporary Arts in Ho Chi Minh, the MIIAM Contemporary Art Museum in Chiang Mai, the Ilham Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, and the Pinto Art Museum in Antipolo, which all opened in the last decade.



The tour with Co-Curator Agung Hujatnika of "Art Turns. World Turns. Exploring the Collection of Museum MACAN," the inaugural show of the museum. Photo courtesy of MUSEUM MACAN

These spaces are also part of a [growing trend](https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/indonesia-unveils-the-museum-macan-1141112) (<https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/indonesia-unveils-the-museum-macan-1141112>) of collectors in Asia who open their own private museums, and it is said that the number of collectors in developing countries will [continue to increase](https://www.larryslist.com/reports.php) (<https://www.larryslist.com/reports.php>) in the coming years.

“In our situation, and maybe the Indonesian situation, private collectors or private capital has taken on a lot of the conversations that we, maybe in the West, expect the State to take up,” Seeto says. “It’s not just happening in Indonesia. But maybe the difference between us and some other places is our mission is quite clear.”

Focusing on art education

MACAN’s philanthropic mission is precise: it is to strengthen arts education in the country and beyond. “Yes, we’re a private museum but we understand we’ve created a public infrastructure,” explains Seeto. “And that’s also one of the reasons why my team and also myself is so invested in this space. Because there is some kind of social outcome that will eventually happen through the building of this private museum.”

The Museum MACAN Foundation, which oversees the funding and governance of the place, has a dedicated education department that partners with schools so more people, particularly Indonesian children, can be more exposed to art. Fenessa Adikoesoemo, the chairwoman of the foundation, explains that art is still a very underdeveloped course in a lot of schools around the region, and that it’s very difficult to find people working in the arts that actually understand how to do processes like conservation, museum management, and all other work within the art industry.



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"I think, Indonesia is not the only country that has that problem," she says. "What we're trying to do is to really be able to create that platform where universities or schools can actually come to us and build programs together with us."

Adikoesoemo's team found that there are only two universities that have an art history course in the whole country, making it difficult for people who want to work in the arts to find opportunities of study and eventually work in that field. This, she says, is why the professional field in the arts in Indonesia never grows.

"That's what we're trying to change through [the museum] as well," she explains. "And create opportunities together with the universities but also with the network that we have overseas with other institutions, [where] people can do residencies and actually train under different museums overseas and actually learn and bring that back to Indonesia."

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) have formulated programs to mainstream arts and culture under the K-12 basic education program. Br. Armin A. Luistro, who was the education secretary during President Benigno Aquino III's administration, said in a statement: "This means that we are recognizing the arts as one of the innate talents of Filipinos and can be a source of steady livelihood for our people when properly nurtured in the schools."



"Infinity Mirrored Room – Brilliance of the Souls" (2014) by Yayoi Kusama. This is one of Kusama's immersive installations which are mirrored chambers with LED lights. Photo courtesy of MUSEUM MACAN

In the same agreement, DepEd and the NCCA said that they will incorporate teacher training programs in art and culture. Similarly, Museum MACAN has created educational resource kits for teachers that they can use in their curriculum for art studies, and the team is also conducting training for teachers on how to teach proper art history and art lessons in their classrooms.

Unlike DepEd and NCCA which are government agencies, Adikoesoemo says that it's not "necessarily always easy to work with" State-owned or government-owned museums in Indonesia.

"That's why we collaborate with other institutions overseas and actually create that relationship," she says. "Southeast Asia as a region can grow very much in this field. And it's great that we've had a lot of growth in the private museum sector like in the Philippines, in Thailand as well. Those are creating the opportunity for people to work there too ... the art and culture scene will grow together."

Making art accessible

Through a strong arts education program and regular engagement with the art-going public, Museum MACAN has made art easily accessible to Indonesians, not only through the drawing sessions and workshops, musical performances, and artists' talks, but also by making the cost as affordable as possible (Seeto says entry to the museum is approximately the same [price](https://www.museummacan.org/en/eventexhibition/) (<https://www.museummacan.org/en/eventexhibition/>) of a cinema ticket in Indonesia).

Because the Kusama show typically attracts record number crowds (The Broad's Kusama survey exhibit last year [sold 50,000 tickets](https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/09/yayoi-kusama-infinity-mirrors-art-the-broad-los-angeles) (<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/09/yayoi-kusama-infinity-mirrors-art-the-broad-los-angeles>) in the first hour), the MACAN team expects a plethora of social media posts (read: selfies) in the immersive installation "infinity rooms," which are mirrored chambers with LED lights.



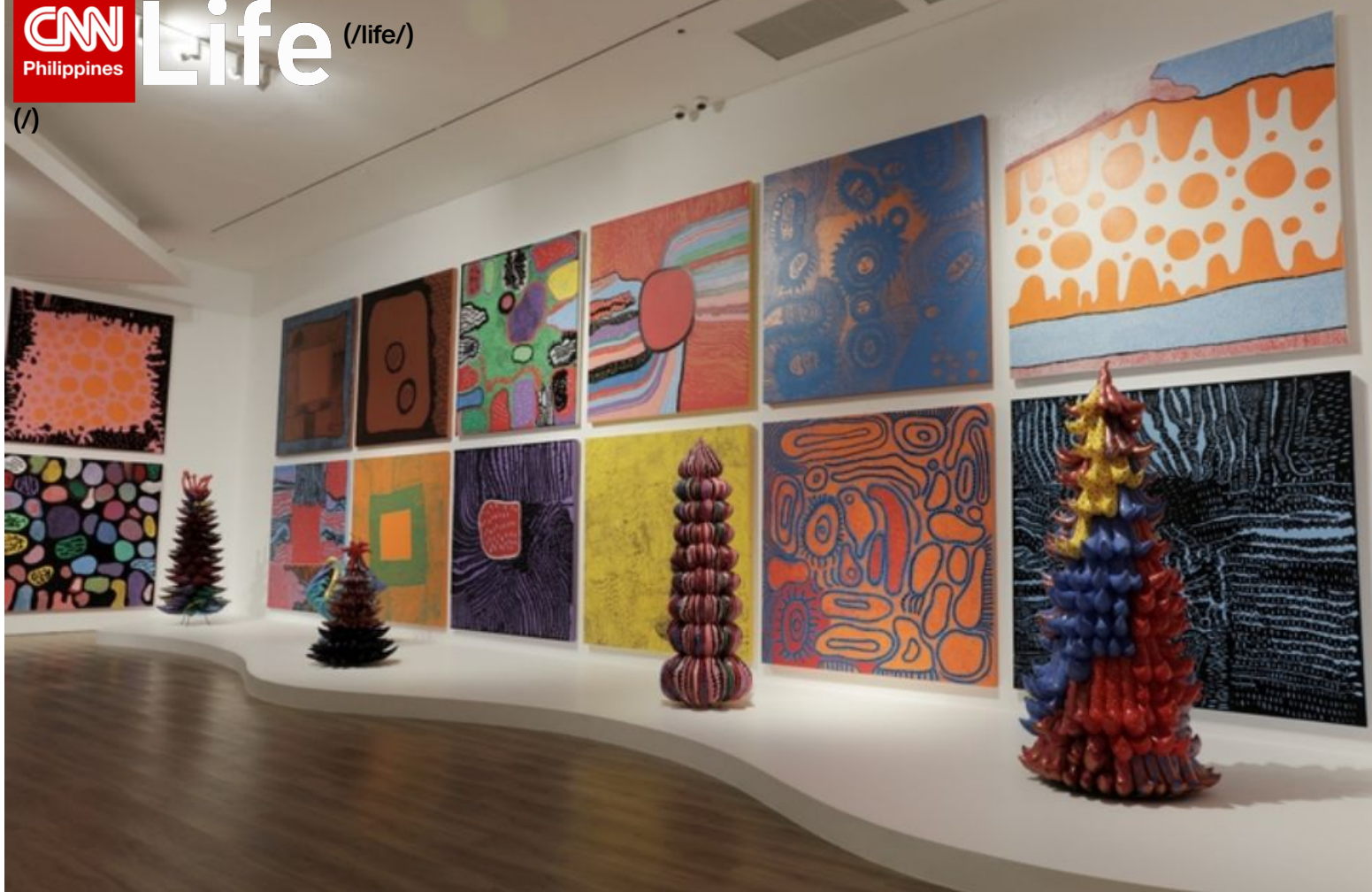
"Narcissus Garden" (1966 – 2002) by Yayoi Kusama at the "Yayoi Kusama: Life is the Heart of a Rainbow" exhibit. This installation was first shown at the 33rd Venice Biennale. Photo courtesy of MUSEUM MACAN

Kusama's works have been known to be crowd-pleasers, as her patterns and participatory installations do make for a good Instagram photo, and Seeto says one of the challenges that they have in the museum is how to handle crowds of people who seem to only be there for a photo. "People like to take selfies and that's fun if people want to have a memento," he says. "But we're also thinking about ways right now in order to encourage a certain kind of etiquette that happens in the museum."

During Art Fair Philippines 2017, there were over 40,000 people who went, which also [caused crowd-control problems](http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2018/02/01/Art-Fair-Philippines-2018.html) (<http://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/arts/2018/02/01/Art-Fair-Philippines-2018.html>) for the organizers. Leading up to this year's fair, the team had consulted experts for optimal viewing experience; timed-entries and circulating social media guidelines were just some of the methods used to ensure a more comfortable fair.

MACAN is expecting more people in and outside of Indonesia to see the works of Kusama, and so they are also rolling out a social media campaign about etiquette in the museum. Seeto envisions the museum to be reflective of how people live and if spending however many hours on the phone is what is happening, he says that Macan is open to thinking broadly about how they can engage their audience better.

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"My Eternal Soul" by Yayoi Kusama at "Yayoi Kusama: Life is at the Heart of a Rainbow" exhibit. The room is filled with a series of vibrant paintings scaled in uniform canvasses, which she executed since 2009. Photo courtesy of MUSEUM MACAN

Seeto adds that we don't have to always conform to the more established ways of looking at the world, and because the art scene is fairly young in the region, we can rethink the way we consume art, as there are no high standards of museology in terms of needing to have quiet spaces.

Same goes with their mission to educate more people. "We want to be able to engage with as many people as we can and if we can deliver great art education through these [mobile] devices and well then that's a challenge for us," he says.

"But of course, while respecting the work."

For more information, visit the Museum Macan website.

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