

Julije Knifer

Mitchell-Innes & Nash

The Croatian artist Julije Knifer (1924–2004) practiced in the realm of the forever modern. The paintings, works on paper, and a video in this show, his first in the United States, revealed an artist stuck not in time, but in no time—or all times. Knifer called his geometric-based paintings and drawings “meanderings,” though his repetitive, tightly structured optical and labyrinthine works do not really meander, since they operate within strict parameters, composed of only horizontal and vertical lines painted almost exclusively in black and white.

Often sculptural in spirit, the works have solid blocks of dense, opaque black paint on unmodulated white or very pale hues. Figure and ground are in constant play.

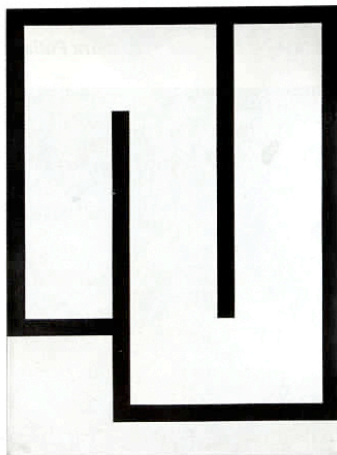
The works on view, curated by Zarko Vijatovic and organized in conjunction with Paris’ Galerie Frank Elbaz, dated from the 1960s through early 2000 and could be regarded from the context of the Russian Suprematists, the Minimalists of the ‘60s and ‘70s, David Smith’s abstract drawings and sculpture, the Land Art of Robert Smithson, and the serial works of On Kawara and Hanne Darboven. But where Knifer differed was in his subtle optical plays. In a characteristic painting, *Untitled* (1992), two vertical black lines near the center of the canvas approach but never reach the edges of the painting. Viewers must scan the whole to try to make sense of it. Such incomplete lines have a poetic counterpart—like a break in a line establishing rhythm and pause—and a musical one, commanding the audience’s attention.

Knifer operated in long series in which each individual piece is inconclusive. This open-endedness links with the artist’s concept of “non-development,” whereby he considered his entire output as one extended work.

Knifer’s huge outdoor murals, which he began painting in 1975, took the “meander” from the studio to the landscape. The video here showed one such work being created on canvas in a quarry in Tübingen.

In 1959, Knifer wrote that he was obsessed with creating anti-painting, which at the time might have seemed revolutionary, but today seems impossible.

A founding member of the avant-garde group Gorgona in Zagreb, formed in the ‘60s, Knifer actually came to speak the international language of Conceptualism, and in so doing, created a stunning and mesmerizing body of work that deserves to be known. —*Barbara A. MacAdam*



Julije Knifer, *TÜHDA W2*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 51 1/4" x 37 3/4". Mitchell-Innes & Nash.