

On Kawara

On Kawara was interested in time—its measurement in days, years, centuries, and eons. Each Date Painting in his Today series, the magnum opus that he began in 1966, is a monochrome field on which the date that the painting was executed is written according to the language and calendar of the country where Kawara was at the time. If he did not complete a painting by midnight, he destroyed it. Some days he made two paintings. Very occasionally, he made three. But most days he made one.

The paintings in the series conform to one of eight sizes, produced in a horizontal format, ranging from eight by ten to sixty-one by eighty-nine inches. For each work the artist mixed the paint afresh, so that the color of each is unique. Tonalities in the brown-gray and blue-black range dominate the paintings of his last decades. Four or five coats of acrylic are evenly applied to the canvas, creating a dense matte surface. Letters, numbers, and punctuation marks are then built up by hand, rather than with the aid of stencils. Initially he used an elongated Gill Sans typeface, later a quintessentially modernist Futura. Despite these variations, Kawara maintained that the letters and hues are of no symbolic significance, nor is the choice of a work's color more connotative than its measurements.

Each painting is stored in a handmade cardboard box, most with a clipping from a newspaper published in the same city and on the same day that the painting was made. (Kawara has exhibited the works both with and without their boxes.) History as recorded in daily events, whether global or local, is bound together with a residue of individual activity. The subtle traces of manual execution are a counterpoint to the dialectic between order and chance—that is, between the regularity of calendrical and linguistic conventions and the arbitrary strictures of size and color. Kawara created Date Paintings in over 112 cities worldwide, a project that ended only with his death.

Thirty-six Date Paintings are on view at Dia:Beacon, one for each year from the beginning of the series until the millennium (including the exceptional Friday, November 3, 1989, when he completed a pair of works). Executed in the same small format and similar dark tonalities, they were made in locations from Tokyo to Stockholm, from New York to Nova Scotia. Their starting point is contemporary with some of the earliest works in Dia's collection.

This installation contains an additional, unseen component: its air is purified by Japanese white charcoal installed at the artist's request under the wood floor. This charcoal is known for absorbing chemicals, freshening air, removing humidity, and releasing it back into the air when the conditions are drier. While this material is traditionally used to ionize the air in Japanese houses, Kawara's subtle gesture may or may not affect viewers in ways they consciously register.