

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

Julije Knifer's Unstable and Expansive Geometry

by John Yau on March 15, 2014



Installation view, 'Julije Knifer' (2014) at Mitchell-Innes and Nash (all photos courtesy Mitchell-Innes and Nash)

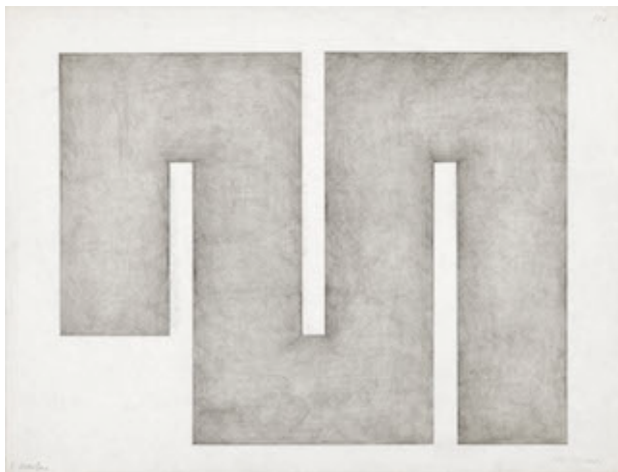
For the first time in America, we have the opportunity to see the stark abstract paintings and drawings of the Croatian artist Julije Knifer (1924–2004), which are on display at [Mitchell-Innes and Nash](#) through today. Knifer, who was one of the founding members of the influential Zagreb group Gorgona, has often been linked to conceptual painters such as Roman Opalka (1931–2011) and On Kawara (b. 1933), artists who painted time. However, in contrast to Opalka's counting to infinity and Kawara's dating of his canvases, Knifer developed what he called a "meander," a maze-like geometric motif, which he introduced into his work in 1960 and employed throughout the rest of his career.

Repetition and variation seem to be the keys to Knifer's approach to art. In 1949 and 1950, before he began studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, he drew his self-portrait every day, which, according to Zvonko Makovič in the monograph *Knifer* (2001), he began to see as "an endless series of the same or almost the same rhythmical shifts." He took the same approach to a portrait by Franz Hals, which he drew repeatedly in pencil on the same sized sheet of paper, varying only the texture and intensity of the gray.



Julije Knifer, "Untitled" (1990), acrylic on canvas

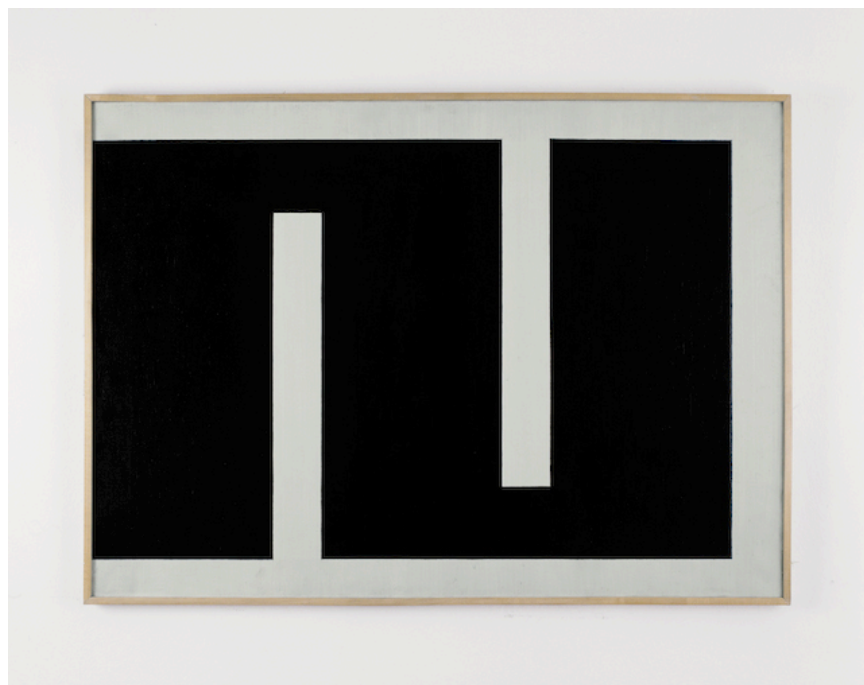
While at the Academy, Knifer studied with the painter Djuro Tiljak, a student of Kandinsky's (1919 to 1923) who also attended some of Malevich's seminars. In 1959, after graduation, Knifer went to Ulm and Amsterdam to see Malevich's Suprematist paintings, which he knew only from reproductions. One can deduce that Malevich helped confirm Knifer's desire to take a reductive approach, to pare away everything he thought was unnecessary. It seems to me the crucial difference between the two painters isn't just in the motif — Malevich's square to Knifer's meander — but that the former was initially utopian, while the latter lived in a failed utopian society.



Julije Knifer, "Untitled" (1977), pencil on paper

This is how Knifer put it: "I realized that I didn't want to create a single painting, a work that would be self-contained and complete in and of itself. I understood that my drawings and my own images were only one in a series of connected similar acts." He wasn't interested in art so much as in anti-art. Knifer's reductive, asymmetrical motif consisting of horizontals and verticals, almost always in black and white, seems to align him with Minimalism and the reductive impulse that began taking hold in painting around 1960. And yet, as tempting as it is to read his work purely in aesthetic terms and under the ideal of art-for-art's sake, I think that it would be wrong to do so.

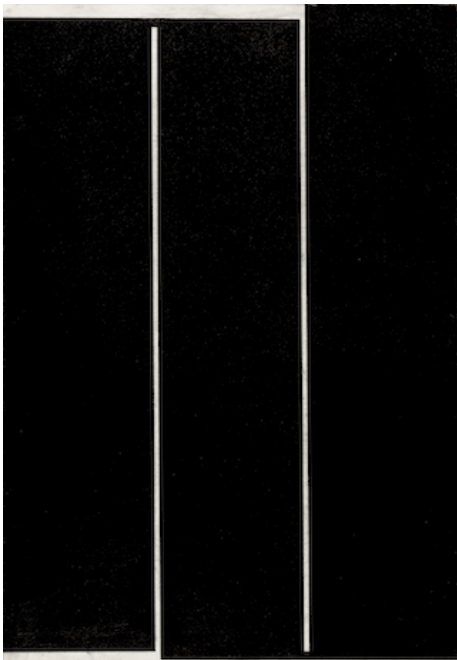
Among other things, Knifer's inventive variations of his motif within a severely circumscribed possibility challenge the paradigm of progress. In effect, through his work, Knifer effectively and repeatedly refutes the tradition of Western thinking that begins with Kant and passes through Hegel and Marx. For an artist living and working in what was then known as Yugoslavia, a Communist state ruled by Josip Broz Tito, the idea of progress must have seemed a sham. As Knifer put it, rather slyly and pointedly, I might add, he was interested in the "escalation of uniformity and monotony" in painting. Is it too much of a stretch to connect what we might take as a purely aesthetic statement to the grind of daily life in Communist Yugoslavia? In both its conception and execution Knifer's work presents a convincing challenge to Frank Stella's oft-quoted statement, "What you see is what you see."



Julije Knifer, "M 69 4-3" (1969), acrylic on canvas

Restricting his palette to black and white, Knifer uses the maze-like motif to effectively undermine the stability of a figure-ground relationship, with the black shifting between form and void, and white shifting between solid and light. As I see it, his reasons for doing so go beyond a formal concern with opticality. In the horizontal painting, "M 69 4-3" (1969), which is done in acrylic, the black "meander" is abutted with the painting's left edge. His use of acrylic enabled him to arrive at a smooth, impenetrable surface. A black rectangle has two narrow, vertical openings, which rhythmically divide the horizontal rectangle into three vertical rectangles. These are partially separated by two evenly spaced, vertical, white openings, with one starting from the black form's top edge and the other starting from the bottom, a severe, geometric stalactite and stalagmite. These narrow openings span about five-sixths of the rectangle. The result is a right-angled, geometric number 2 lying on its side.

By varying the relationship between the black and white areas, Knifer is able to calibrate a different dance between solid and void, dark and light. At the same time, the size and placement of the "meander" within the painting's horizontal or vertical rectangle registers the pressure of the form against the physical boundaries. For all of Knifer's emphasis on the vertical and horizontal, his "meander" never sits comfortably within the painting's rectangle.



Julije Knifer, "Untitled" (1993-97), graphite on paper

In many of the paintings, while I mentally registered a constant push-pull between solid and void, presence and absence, I found it nearly impossible to visually separate the areas, whose contours are defined by the opposite color. I had to constantly refocus my attention, shifting between the black and white areas, and between the painting's interior and its edges. It was not surprising to feel as if I had a slight case of vertigo. The possibility that I was not standing on solid and secure ground took on a political dimension: what could you believe in while living in Zagreb in the 1970s and '80s? In 1994, shortly after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the beginning of the ethnic wars between Croatia and Bosnia, Knifer moved to Paris, where he died in 2004.

This exhibition, which was an introduction to an important artist who is all but unknown in America, is important for a variety of reasons. It challenges the narcissistic viewpoint that, with Minimalism and Pop Art, it was all happening in America. It disputes the view of Modernism that believes in progress, while suggesting that abstract art needn't be only about itself and two-dimensionality. As I walked around the exhibition, it also occurred to me that there should be an exhibition of geometric artists who use black and white. In addition to Knifer, this show would include works by Lygia Clark, John McLaughlin, Myron Stout and Don Voisine. Stella may have emptied everything out from his monochromatic paintings but what you see, but it is equally true and certainly as important that a number of artists found a way to put emotions and much else back in.

[Julije Knifer](#) continues at *Mitchell-Innes and Nash* (534 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through today.