

January 2011



Hitoshi Nomura: *Dryice*, Nov. 2, 1969, one of ten photographs, 15¾ by 19½ inches; at McCaffrey.

HITOSHI NOMURA MCCAFFREY

Throughout his four-decade career, the Japanese conceptual artist Hitoshi Nomura (b. 1945) has explored various ways of thinking about time, that most ineffable of phenomena. Titled “Marking Time,” this compact, well-organized exhibition offered a sampling of emblematic works by Nomura, an artist who is less known outside of Japan than his conceptualist compatriot On Kawara, whose postcards and date paintings (the “Today” series, begun in 1966) also mark the passage of time. Unlike Kawara, who stamps his postcards with the date and his name, along with a changing message (“I got up at [hour]”), Nomura tends to keep any self-referential traces out of his art. Instead, his efforts feel more like the research of a natural historian.

As art historian Reiko Tomii points out in the exhibition catalogue, when Nomura entered what she calls Japan’s “culture of showing,” there were no collectors and scarce venues to support avant-garde efforts. Few artists took care to preserve artifacts of ephemeral

actions, much less their photo-documentation, which was often produced by outsiders. Nomura was innovative in that, from the start of his career, he shot the photographs himself and considered them works of art in their own right.

On view at McCaffrey were several series of black-and-white photographs recording Nomura’s early time-based works. *Tardiology*, which he showed in his graduate thesis exhibition at Kyoto City University of Arts in 1969, was a 26¼-foot-high tower of stacked empty cardboard boxes that collapsed under its own weight. In the photographs, Nomura traced its auto-destruction over time. For the series “Dryice” (1969-70), he regularly weighed and then placed on rubber, cardboard or canvas mats blocks of dry ice, which gradually evaporated. Each time he weighed the ice, he recorded that number on the mats in white letters, with the time and date, moving the ice along and photographing the revised set-up. He took the same approach in *Iodine* (1970), documenting the disappearance of a material that, like dry ice, changes directly from a solid to a gas.

From 1972 to ’82, Nomura randomly

shot 100 feet of motion-picture film each month (for *Ten-Year Photobook* or *the Brownian Motion of Eyesight*); transferred-to-video film clips from the project were screened in the show on monitors. In *The Sun on Latitude 65° North* (1982-87), Nomura recorded the sun’s progress through the sky at a specific location in 365 photographs mounted on a plastic-and-metal, figure-8-shaped armature hung on the wall. In an ongoing series, he places liquid oxygen in tanks with open tops that allow their contents to evaporate (the “Time Arrow” series, begun in 1988); two tanks were included at McCaffrey, displayed on pedestals. The sheer variety of works on view demonstrated the ingenuity of Nomura’s engagement with time, and made this a most illuminating show.

—Edward M. Gómez