Simple Truths in Matters of Life and Death

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ART REVIEW

In 1970 the Japanese artist On Kawara began sending out a series of telegrams to friends around the world. Each one bore the message "I am still alive," turning an urgent medium often associated with bad news into a steady, reassuring pulse.

Mr. Kawara's affirmations anchor "I Am Still Alive: Politics and Everyday Life in Contemporary Drawing," a timely but confused collection show at the Museum of Modern Art. In it you can view a group of telegrams addressed to Mr. Kawara's dealer in Amsterdam, as well as two of the date paintings he has been making since 1966, along with works by 21 others.

The title is a bit of a catchall; any remotely conceptual work on paper seems to qualify, as do quite a few pieces that aren't on paper. But it does allow for some welcome geographic diversity. Less familiar than Mr. Kawara's telegrams is a diary by the Turkish artist Cengiz Cekil, who stamped its pages with the phrase "I am still alive today" during a period of military tension in 1976.

Also here are several works by Latin American artists. The best are by the Argentine León Ferrari, whose loopy and nearly illegible handwriting is a thin cover for political satire in drawings from 1964. (One declares, in hyperbolic language, his intent to make a statue of President Lyndon B. Johnson.)

Most of the objects were acquired after the huge Judith Rothschild Foundation gift of 2,500 works to the museum in 2005. In some ways "I Am Still Alive" is a sobering rejoinder to that heady event. The show has been organized by Christian Rattemeyer, the associate curator of drawings, with help from Maura Lynch, a curatorial assistant. Mr. Rattemeyer also selected and installed the expansive Rothschild Collection show of 2005.

In this exhibition color is kept to a minimum and exuberance suppressed. The artists seem to be in a permanent state of wariness and suspicion, which is sometimes the result of political instability and at other times more innate. But their efforts to process matters of life and death in short bursts of creative activity feel very of the moment. (Not surprisingly Twitter is rife with fake Kawaras.)

It seems appropriate that T. S. Eliot's dithering J. Alfred Prufrock makes an appearance, in a series of carbon-transfer prints by Frances Stark. She has reproduced sections of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" from a used copy, earnestly annotated by an anonymous reader whose own second-guessing echoes the narrator's.

Language offers other pleasures in Fiona Banner's "nude standing," an exhaustively detailed, occasionally ribald description of a naked model, and in Paul Chan's creation of fonts based on erotic texts — a project that works better on a computer than it does in his large-scale ink drawings.

Other artists produce maddeningly abstruse drawings that relate to their better-known performances. Trisha Donnelly sketches wormholes and fragmentary waterfalls in the middle of big sheets of paper; Guy de Cointet builds word-image puzzles with diagonal lines and snippets of Raymond Roussel.

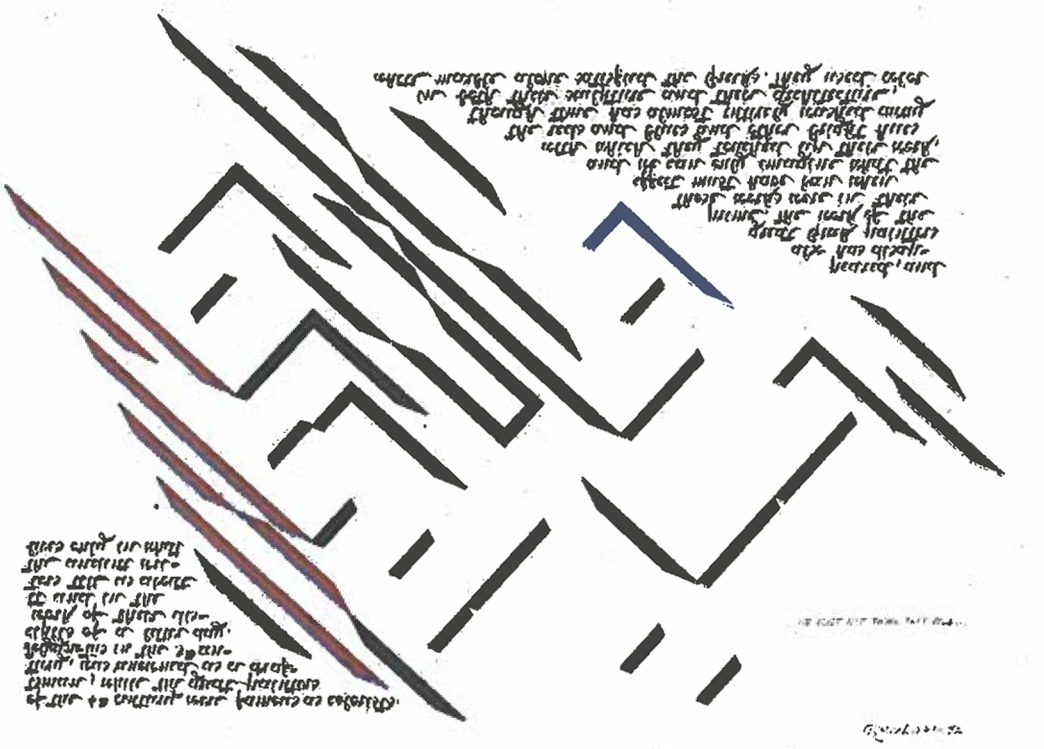
Some works aren't drawings at all, by any conventional definition. Here, for instance, is Felix Gonzalez-Torres's pile of candies in red, white and blue wrappers. The curators seem to have chosen it because of the artist's friendship with Jim Hodges, whose "Diary of Flowers," blooms sketched on coffee-stained napkins, is installed nearby. Mr. Hodges ended the diary on the day that Mr. Gonzalez-Torres died of AIDS.

Danh Vo's installation, which revolves around a chandelier taken from the hotel where the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, makes another big sculptural statement, one that seems out of line with the show's theme of modest responses to major events. Mr. Vo has stripped the fixture of some of its branches and crystals, which are laid out on the floor in neat rows.

You might wonder what this has to do with drawing. A partial answer is supplied by Mr. Vo's "Death Sentence," a series of literary and historical texts in English and French that accompany the chandelier. All of them have been hand-copied by the artist's father, who doesn't know either language, in meticulous cursive script.

Mr. Vo has the show's last word, with another piece of writing that hangs near the exit. It's a letter from the son of a 19th-century French Catholic missionary, Théophane Vénard, to his father. The son, imprisoned in Vietnam and condemned to death, writes in French, "We are all flowers planted on this earth that God gathers in his own time, some sooner, some later."

Reading this resigned missive, you imagine the father's helplessness — just as you imagine the recipients of Mr. Kawara's telegrams breathing a sigh of relief.



MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, COMMITTEE ON DRAWINGS FUNDS, ESTATE OF GUY DE COINTET

I Am Still Alive, *featuring Guy de Cointet's "We must not think that cold . . . ," at the Museum of Modern Art.*

"I Am Still Alive: Politics and Everyday Life in Contemporary Drawing" continues through Sept. 19 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, moma.org.

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