



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHO SHIBUYA

# VISUAL VOCABULARY

A STAPLE OF INSTAGRAM FEEDS EVERYWHERE, SHO SHIBUYA'S PAINTINGS AREN'T JUST A FORM OF PERSONAL EXPRESSION — THEY'RE AN ALMANAC OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE

By David Saric

**At one moment, your works call to mind the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko, and at another, the anti-aesthetic conceptualism of Hans Haacke. What influences from art history have helped shape your oeuvre?**

I've admired On Kawara since seeing his *Date Painting* work at Dia Beacon. He observed a strict set of rules, inscribing the exact date he created the painting in white letters and numbers on a monochromatic ground. I became obsessed with his practice of capturing time. When he finished each painting, he added newspaper clippings from that day to the storage box where he kept the artwork. It inspired me, so I started doing daily paintings with the Japanese characters representing the day of the week and continued that practice for four years. Then, in 2020, when COVID happened, I started a new series that dealt with the passage of time in a way, which is *Sunrise from a Small Window*.

**How does your work as a graphic designer factor into your paintings?**

With design, the goal is to visually communicate a message without having to explain it. The only difference [with my paintings] is that the client is myself.

**Your pieces often also contain sharp political critiques. Did you always feel a call to comment on current affairs?**

Until the death of George Floyd, every painting [I did] had depicted the sunrise. On that day, reading the news, I was overcome with emotion, and painting the sunrise didn't feel right — so I painted a black square over the cover. As the project evolved, I continued to paint a more abstract, graphic interpretation of the news whenever I felt particularly moved by a story. Sometimes they were somber, like the wildfires in California, and other times more humorous or, at least, a little less serious. The common thread is that each painting reflects how I felt in the moment, on that morning.

**How did you get involved with Saint Laurent and their unforgettable installation of your work during Art Basel?**

I had visited the Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Morocco a few years ago, which originally sparked my interest. However, it wasn't until recently that the opportunity to collaborate came about. I received a DM on Instagram from the Saint Laurent team, floating the potential for a collaboration. We went through a number of different ideas before landing on Miami Beach. The idea to have the gallery on the beach during Art Basel came from [creative director] Anthony Vaccarello. I thought it was a wild idea, that you will be able to look back and experience the sunrises and the turmoil of 2020 and 2021. Then, after you are finished looking at the painted sunrises, you can see the real thing on the ocean outside. It's like a time capsule or a pathway from past to present, and perhaps a future, because I believe the sunrise carries with it some bit of hope or optimism for what's to come.

**Was it unnerving to have your work viewed on such a large platform during one of the world's biggest showcases of art?**

Not just a bit! I was *nervous* — but I had done everything I could to prepare. Eventually, I felt calm, and I could enjoy the moment.

**Do you feel your work is as impactful when viewed on Instagram as in a gallery?**

I have tried to capture time to create a record. The time of publication is as important as the concept. Without social media, that would be more difficult. However, like how 55 Sunrises shows the past all at once and gives an opportunity to look back on all the turmoil of 2020, you can also feel the texture and details of the paintings, or wrinkles of the newspaper, which you can't experience on the screen. So I think they deliver different experiences, but one is not more important than the other.