ROBERT RYMAN

PAINTINGS 1955 TO 1993

When we look at paintings, we are generally looking *for* something *in* painting, something that paint describes, or suggests, or evokes. It may be an image, a symbol, or an idea. Frequently it involves a synthesis of all three. Even in its most abstract form, therefore, painting has usually been *about* something outside or beyond itself. Consequently, it has commonly been regarded as a means to an end, the way in which the artist envisions reality or depicts things that may exist only in the imagination. For the past forty years, Robert Ryman has approached painting from the opposite direction. "There is never a question of *what* to paint," he once said, "but only *how* to paint. The how of painting has always been the image."

Versions VII. 1991

The radicality of Ryman's work results from the deliberate, even literal manner in which he has elaborated in the studio upon this simple proposition. His work's quiet poetry derives from the dazzling variety of form and feeling he has discovered by adhering to his faith in painting's inherently inexhaustible visual and emotional richness. Rather than ask what paint can represent, he asks only that one pay close attention to what paint does, and to the space it occupies. "To paint the paint," as he further defined his ambition, means giving absolute primacy to subtle specifics of a given application of pigment to a given surface. And, as he has shown in example after example, what seems obvious to the mind when explained in words may suddenly appear a marvel to the eye when closely examined in its material reality.

To achieve such heightened sensation, Ryman has severely limited his artistic vocabulary. Over the course of his long career, Ryman has for the most part stuck to white paint and square formats. Yet the term "white" only grossly describes the extraordinary range of substances and shades the artist has identified and deployed. Using traditional oils and water-based paints, as well as an expanding list of commercial and industrial primers, enamels, and other types of synthetic coatings, Ryman's white can be crusty or suave, opaque or sheer, as warm as fresh cream or as cool as ceramic tiles.

In much the same way, the scale of his works can vary from handkerchief-size squares of paper, linen, metal, or plexiglass to vast sheets of fiberglass or stretched canvases measuring some twelve feet square. Significantly, Ryman treats these greatly differing surfaces as essentially equal in importance, because unique in the possibilities they offer. Small paintings are as "major" as large ones, since none are sketches or warm-ups, and each, whatever its dimensions, is pushed to the same degree of resolution.

Notable exceptions to these general constraints do, nevertheless, occur. On occasion, Ryman has chosen vertical or horizontal rectangles, though frequently the divisions of space he has created within them square off the larger area. Moreover, in the mid-1950s, when he began painting, he often started by covering the support with combinations of reds, blues, greens, deep violets, ochers, and browns. In a single example, on which he labored from 1955 until 1959, Ryman left this saturated undercoat of oranges, yellows, and greens fully exposed. Patches of color peek through the layer of white he superimposed on the chromatic grounds in every other work from this formative period, or an aura may flicker at the margins of a painting where the white tapers off. Meanwhile, the surfaces on which he has worked have their own coloration, such as the warm tints of drawing paper, cardboard, raw canvas, or wood, and later, from the 1970s onward, the translucent ambers and soft greens of fiberglass, or the luminous sheen of milled steel or aluminum. Along with applied tube color, these hues also contribute importantly to Ryman's palette. Contrasting "white" in all its shades and densities with such partially hidden backgrounds, Ryman

has simultaneously revealed their full brilliance and the full luster of his predominate pigment, making his work startlingly colorful rather than—as some people persist in thinking—basically monochrome and colorless.

By the same token, Ryman's attention to the edges of his work, to the shallowness or thickness of the surface he chooses to work on, to its edges, and to the hardware that holds it in place distinguishes his painting from more traditional types, in which what matters is what is seen in or on the frontal picture plane. Accordingly, not only has Ryman greatly expanded the selection of materials available to contemporary artists by his experiments with unconventional paints and painting surfaces, he has also brought into play every dimension of painting's structure. This concern with the work as an entirety dates back to his endeavors of the 1950s and 1960s, a considerable number of which he framed in taped-glass mounts of his own devising; after the mid-1970s the nails, screws, clamps, and bars that secure a work to the wall become increasingly conspicuous elements. Just as important as these attachments is the wall itself, to which these fasteners act as a visual bridge; the wall's white height and breadth constitute the enlarged field in which the self-contained painted object becomes a dynamic and visually expansive image.

Like the signature and dates that often emblazon his early work, reappearing in that of the last decade, these structural components are more than accents, they are integral to the composition. In this and all other aspects of his artistic practice, Ryman's rules of order are categorical and illuminating. Nothing inessential is allowed to remain in a completed work, so nothing that remains is inessential or merely subordinate. Everything seen must be considered an active part of the whole. And though, from this perspective, the whole must ultimately be larger than the sum of its parts, it achieves that aesthetic "largeness," or transcendence, by the intuitive combination of visual facts, rather than by references to any extraperceptual reality.

Robert Ryman, 1992

Ryman's painterly gesture is likewise disciplined, and surprisingly diverse; in some instances barely perceptible in its fine-grained cross-hatching or lateral drag, in other cases it may be a wide wash, a pasty ribbon, a buttery curlicue, a luscious meandering squiggle, or a broad, emphatic swipe. Seen close up, the attack, speed, and assurance of his hand are amazing demonstrations of spontaneous control and responsiveness to the sensory and emotional charge of superficially inert materials. Seen at a distance, the patterned pigment catches and holds light in a wondrous variety of ways. Looking at a Ryman is much like studying the sequential motions of a cellist. For the instrumentalist, precise physical changes in inflection determine a sound's tone and duration; for Ryman they give rise to a painterly trace of dazzling flexibility and optical resonance.

When he first arrived in New York, where he has lived ever since, Ryman was himself a musician. A saxophonist, he set out from his home in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1952, after two years in the Army Reserves Band. It was the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, and some connection to that tendency is evident in the bold brushiness of his earliest work, which is being shown in depth for the first time in New York, in this, his first full-scale retrospective in his own country. But Ryman never felt drawn to the rhetorical anguish or symbolic codes of Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, or Philip Guston, though he did admire their willingness to let paint speak freely for itself. While in the process of abandoning music and making his initial artistic experiments, Ryman took a job at The Museum of Modern Art, where, as a guard, he was able to study firsthand the history of modernist painting. (To get an idea of the work with which he had close daily contact in that period, it is useful to look back through the Third Floor galleries of the Permanent Collection, next to those in which this exhibition is installed, and especially at the rooms devoted to the New York School of the late 1940s and early 1950s.)

Of all the artists he discovered, two were of crucial importance to him. The first was Mark Rothko, who taught him that paintings should be looked at as whole entities, including their sides. Rothko's work also showed that, contrary to Abstract Expressionist myth, painting imbued with intense feeling could be open and calm. Matisse was the second artist to make a deep impression on Ryman. Given the apparent austerity of Ryman's work, this may seem startling, but the lesson of Matisse reinforced the one he had learned from Rothko, namely that, despite the extreme effort their creation takes, paintings should in the end look almost effortless. Together, these two precedents confirmed Ryman's belief that art was not about the struggle experienced by artists, but rather something that concentrated upon itself alone and, purged of anguish, constituted a gift to the spirit.

It is fitting, then, that Ryman's own retrospective should directly follow last fall's Matisse exhibition, for, in spite of the obvious differences in their artistic manner, the emphases that both Matisse and Ryman have put upon the primacy of perception and pleasure have much in common. And while the pursuit of visual enjoyment and the avoidance of theoretical dogma link the two artists, these dual aims also definitively separate Ryman from much of the radical abstractionist tradition with which art criticism has associated him. This includes, for example, the Constructivists of the period between the two world wars, and the majority of Minimalists of his own time. Instead of using the medium to diagram formal options or symbolize theoretical precepts, Ryman in his painting expresses a kind of optimism rooted in a (continued on page 8)

ROBERT RYMAN: REMARKS ON PAINTING

Untitled. 1959

That's where I began, Abstract Expressionism. I was very familiar with that movement, but I wasn't working in the manner of the Expressionists. I wasn't abstracting from something the way I think a lot of the Expressionists were doing.

The Matisse show was really a great exhibition. Actually, I saw it, I think, five or six times, maybe seven times, and each time you could see things that you didn't see the other time. You would realize certain aspects of his work that you missed the first time. His painting had a sureness about it, as if the paintings were very easy. Maybe they weren't so easy to do, actually, but they had an easy feeling to them, as if they almost happened, magically, and you wonder how they were done or how he put it together that way. The way he handled the paint was very direct and very naked. You could see almost every step that he took because he left it visible.

Untitled. 1961

Untitled. 1965

At that time [c. 1955–61], I began the paintings with color and not with white, although I knew I was going to continue with white. Many times the color was totally arbitrary. Usually I would use three colors, maybe four. It was just a way of beginning; that's why the actual colors weren't important. I could leave a little of them or not. I was very conscious of scale and what size brush to use and how the surface would be with the thick paint I was using. The paintings were made up of several layers. I would put it on in one way on the first layer, and I would keep the same gesture but put it on in the opposite direction when I put the second layer on, and then maybe a third layer in an opposite direction again, so that the brush strokes were moving in all directions, and the light would be broken up on the surface. I wanted movement on the surface. I wanted the surface to be alive, yet I wanted the light to be soft and even.

I just never thought of removing images at all. I could see why someone would say so, but I don't approach it that way at all. Because the image is the painting, the whole. Everything that makes up the painting is the image.

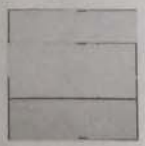
Surface Veil. 1970

Phoenix. 1979

The installation of paintings is very important. The Modern's space will be a more intimate situation, in a sense, which I think will be good. My paintings begin with this outward aesthetic; the way they work with the wall plane and with the surrounding area were greatly affected by light. And so, if the light is soft like daylight, or if it is reflected light, it changes the paintings considerably. There is the way the paintings interact with each other, some being much softer and quieter than others, some having different relationships to the walls through the fasteners. It's a type of thing that cannot be solved on a plan, for instance. It has to be actually seen directly, the paintings have to be put in the space, and they have to be considered. There has to be a certain knowledge of the paintings themselves. So the installation is always challenging and interesting. Each time it should be different, but each time the painting should be able to hold its own with the surroundings.

I don't see my painting as abstraction in the usual sense of the word, because I am not abstracting from anything representational. I think of my approach as realism. I don't want to confuse things, but it seemed that what I was working with was real — real surface, real light, the way the paint plane works with the wall and with the environment. There is no illusion involved, and no myth or symbolism. So that's why I felt it was more real than abstract.

Access. 1983



Catalyst III. 1985

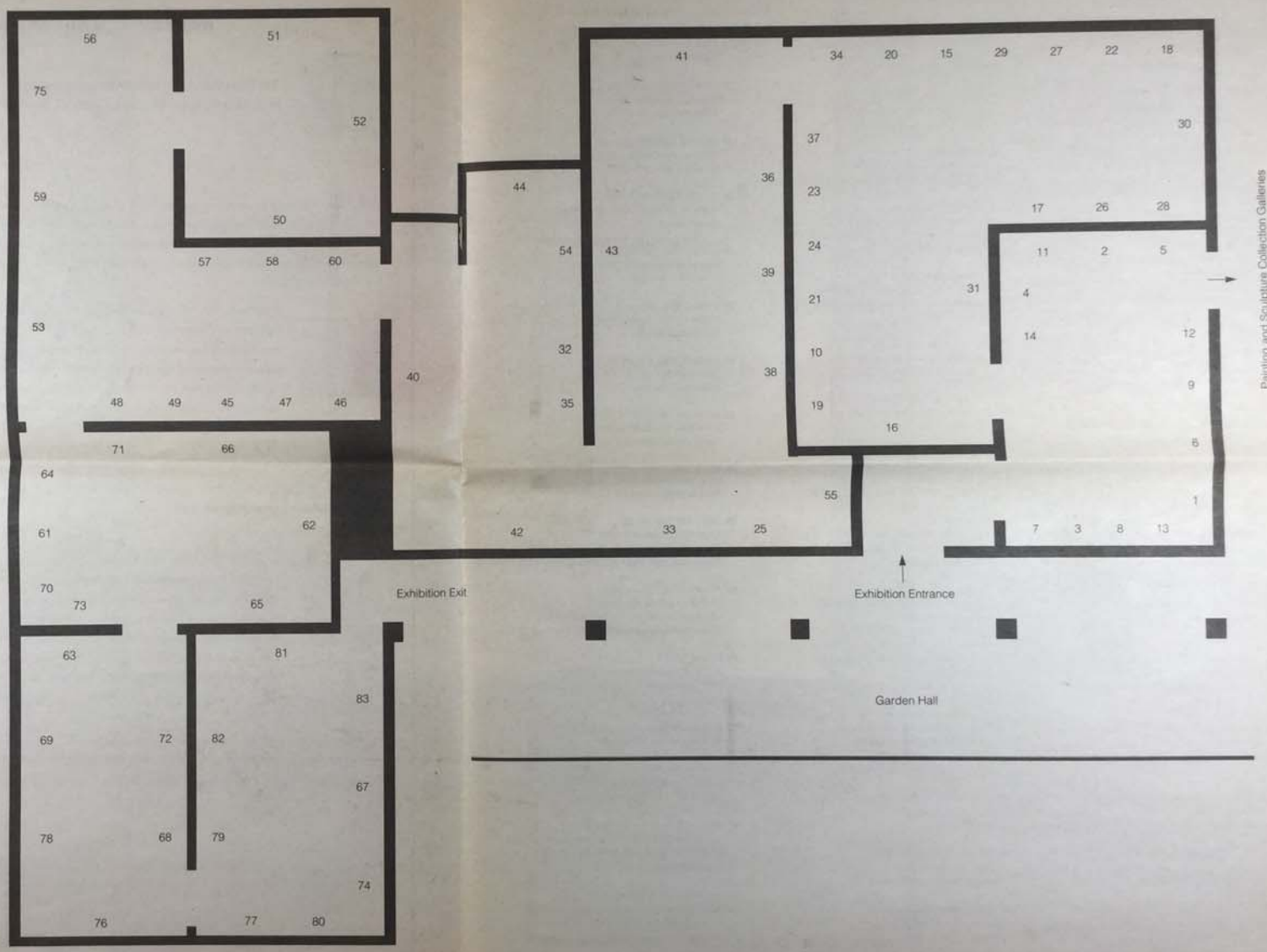
I look at early painting just as I would recent painting. Certainly there's a difference, but I don't think of it as a progression. It's just another approach to another painting. Painting can go in all directions. It's just so rich. I don't see how there could be a last painting.

Please refer to checklist for additional illustration information.

HOW THE EXHIBITION IS ORGANIZED

Robert Ryman has been painting for nearly forty years. The work in this retrospective covers the full span of his career, from his first mature painting of 1955 to work completed within the last two years. This exhibition traces his development chronologically, by clustering related paintings and series of paintings in the order they were made. Within each section, however, works have been taken out of sequence for the sake of greater visual clarity.

Since Ryman uses the wall space around his images as an essential compositional element, we have omitted individual labels that might intrude upon that already active area. To identify specific works, match the entries in the checklist to the numbers on this map, or consult the lists of works that appear by the entrance to each room throughout the exhibition.



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1 *Untitled (Orange Painting)*
1955 and 1959 [cat. no. 1]
Oil on canvas, 28⅛ x 28⅛"
Collection of John E. Ryman

2 Untitled 1957 [cat. no. 2]
Casein and pencil on primed cotton canvas, on board on manila folder, on glass, on plywood, 9⅝ x 8½"
Collection of the artist

3 Untitled 1957 [cat. no. 3]
Gouache on paper mounted on board and plywood, 7⅞ x 8⅛"
Collection of the artist

4 Untitled 1958 [cat. no. 4]
Oil on cotton canvas, 53¼ x 32¾"
Collection of the artist

5 Untitled 1958 [cat. no. 5]
Oil on cotton canvas, 43 x 43"
Collection of the artist

6 *The Paradoxical Absolute* 1958 [cat. no. 6]
Casein on printed paper, 7⅛ x 7¼"
Collection of the artist

7 Untitled 1958 [cat. no. 7]
Oil, casein, and pencil on wallpaper, 9 x 9⅛"
Collection of the artist

8 Untitled 1958 [cat. no. 8]
Casein and pencil on paper on mat board, 14 x 13⅝"
Collection of the artist

9 *To Gertrud Mellon* 1958 [cat. no. 9]
Casein and pencil on wallpaper, 11¾ x 12"
Collection of the artist

10 Untitled 1959 [cat. no. 10]
Pencil, casein, and tracing paper on tracing paper, 10¼ x 10⅜"
Collection of the artist

11 Untitled 1959 [cat. no. 11]
Casein, pencil, crayon, ballpoint pen, and tracing paper on tracing paper on board, on wood, 10 x 8½"
Collection of the artist

12 Untitled 1959 [cat. no. 12]
Oil on cotton canvas, 43½ x 43½"
Collection of the artist

13 Untitled 1959 [cat. no. 13]
Oil on jute sacking, 33 x 33"
Collection of the artist

14 Untitled 1959 [cat. no. 14]
Oil on pre-primed canvas, 8⅛ x 8¼"
Collection of Lucy R. Lippard

15 Untitled 1959 [not in catalogue]
Casein and gouache on paper, on board, on wire mesh, 10⅞ x 10⅞"
Collection of the artist

16 Untitled 1960 [cat. no.15]
Oil on cotton canvas, 65½ x 65"
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

17 Untitled 1960 [cat. no. 16]
Oil on linen canvas, 52⅜ x 52⅜"
Crex Collection, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen

18 Untitled 1960 [cat. no. 17]
Oil, gouache, casein, pencil, and crayon on tracing paper on plain paper, 13 x 13"
Collection of the artist

19 Untitled 1960 [cat. no. 18]
Pencil, oil, casein, and tracing paper on tracing paper laid on opaque paper, 10 x 10⅛"
Collection of the artist

20 Untitled 1961 [cat. no. 19]
Oil on linen canvas, 38 x 38"
Collection of the artist

21 Untitled 1961 [cat. no. 20]
Oil on sized Bristol board, 9 x 9"
Collection of the artist

22 *A painting of twelve strokes measuring 11¼ x 11¼" signed at the bottom right-hand corner* 1961 [cat. no. 21]
Oil and gesso on linen canvas, 11¼ x 11¼"
Collection of the artist

23 *Wedding Picture* 1961 [cat. no. 22]
Oil on Bristol board, 12 x 12"
Collection of the artist

24 Untitled 1961 [cat. no. 23]
Oil and gesso on linen canvas, 16½ x 16½"
Collection of the artist

25 Untitled 1961 [cat. no. 24]
Oil and graphite on brown paper, mounted on board, 8 x 8"
Collection of the artist

26 *An all-white painting measuring 9½ x 10" and signed twice on the left side in umber* 1961 [cat. no. 25]
Oil on linen canvas, 9½ x 10"
Collection of the artist

27 Untitled 1961 [cat. no. 26]
Oil on Bristol board, 10 x 10"
Private collection

28 Untitled 1961 [cat. no. 27]
Oil on linen canvas, 13 x 13"
Private collection, New York

29 Untitled 1962 [cat. no. 28]
Oil on linen canvas, 16½ x 16½"
Collection of the artist

30 Untitled 1962 [cat. no. 29]
Oil on linen canvas, 69½ x 69½"
Collection of the artist

31 Untitled 1962 [cat. no. 30]
Oil and vinyl on linen canvas, 63 x 65"
Collection of the artist

32 *Stretched Drawing* 1963 [cat. no. 31]
Charcoal on unprimed cotton canvas, 14½ x 14⁷⁄₁₆"
Collection of the artist

33 Untitled 1965 [cat. no. 32]
Enamelac on linen canvas, 62½ x 62½"
Private collection

34 Untitled 1965 [cat. no. 33]
Enamel on linen canvas, 10⅛ x 10⅛"
Collection of the artist

35 Untitled 1965 [cat. no. 34]
Enamel on Bristol board, 7¾ x 8⅛"
Collection of the artist

36 *Untitled I* 1965 [cat. no. 35]
Oil on linen canvas, 11 x 11"
Collection of the artist

37 *Winsor 34* 1966 [cat. no. 36]
Oil on linen canvas, 63 x 63"
The Greenwich Collection Ltd.

38 Mayco 1966 [cat. no. 37]
Oil on linen canvas, 6'3½" x 6'3½"
Thomas Ammann Fine Art, Zurich

39 *Twin* 1966 [cat. no. 38]
Oil on linen canvas, 6'4" x 6'4"
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Charles and Anita Blatt Fund and purchase, 197

40 *Adelphi* 1967 [cat. no. 39]
Oil on linen canvas with staples, waxed paper, and masking tape, 8'6" x 8'6"
Museum für moderne Kunst, Frankfurt-am-M

41 *Lugano* 1968 [cat. no. 40]
Acrylic on handmade paper, 7'6" x 7'6"
Crex Collection, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen

42 *Classico 3* 1968 [not in catalogue]
Acrylic on handmade paper, 7'8⅛" x 7'4¼"
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

43 *VII* 1969 [cat. no. 42]
Enamelac on corrugated paper, seven panels, each 60 x 60"
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

44 *General 48½ x 48½* 1970 [cat. no. 43]
Enamel and Enamelac on cotton canvas, 48½ x 48½"
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Panza Collection, 1991

45 *Surface Veil* 1970 [cat. no. 44]
Oil on fiberglass on Featherboard, 19⅞ x 19⅞"
Private collection, courtesy Lisson Gallery, London

46 *Surface Veil* 1970 [cat. no. 45]
Oil on fiberglass on Featherboard, 12¼ x 12"
Private collection

47 *Surface Veil* 1970 [cat. no. 46]
Oil on fiberglass with waxed-paper frame and masking tape, 33 x 33"
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of the Denise and Andrew Saul Fund and the Scaler Foundation

48 *Surface Veil* 1970–71 [cat. no. 47]
Oil on fiberglass with waxed-paper frame and masking tape, 22 x 19"
Private collection

49 *Surface Veil 4* 1970–71 [cat. no. 48]
Oil on fiberglass on Featherboard, 39 x 39"
Collection of Emily and Jerry Spiegel

50 *Surface Veil I* 1970 [cat. no. 49]
Oil and blue chalk on linen canvas, 12 x 12'
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Panza Collection, 1991

51 *Surface Veil II* 1971 [cat. no. 50]
Oil and blue chalk on linen canvas, 12 x 12'
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Panza Collection, 1991

52 *Surface Veil III* 1971 [cat. no. 51]
Oil and blue chalk on cotton canvas, 12'¼" x 12'¼"
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Panza Collection, 1991

53 Untitled 1973 [cat. no. 52]
Baked enamel on copper, five panels, each 15⅜ x 15⅜"
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

54 Untitled 1973 [cat. no. 53]
Double-baked enamel on oxidized copper, five panels, each 9½ x 10½"
Collection of Emily and Jerry Spiegel

55 Untitled 1973 [cat. no. 54]
Enamel on aluminum, 39⅛ x 39⅛"
Crex Collection, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen

56 *Embassy I* 1976 [cat. no. 55]
Oil and Elvacite on plexiglass, black oxide fasteners, and bolts, 63 x 63"
Crex Collection, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen

57 *Advance* 1976 [cat. no. 57]
Oil on blue Acrylivin with vinyl, Elvacite, and sanded plexiglass fasteners with cadmium bolts, 35½ x 34"
Collection of Franz Meyer

58 Untitled 1976 [cat. no. 58]
Pastel and pencil on sandblasted plexiglass with black oxide steel bolts and fasteners, 49½ x 49½"
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Fractional gift of the PaineWebber Group Inc.

59 *Monitor* 1978 [cat. no. 59]
Oil on cotton canvas with metal fasteners, 69 x 66"
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

60 *Phoenix* 1979 [cat. no. 60]
Varathane on steel, 17½ x 14½"
Collection of the artist

61 *Archive* 1980 [cat. no. 61]
Oil on steel, 13½ x 11⅞"
Private collection

62 *Paramount* 1981 [cat. no. 62]
Oil on linen canvas with metal fasteners, 7'4" x 7'
Courtesy Thomas Ammann, Zurich

63 *Crown* 1982 [cat. no. 63]
Enamelac on fiberglass panel with aluminum fasteners, 40½ x 38"
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

64 *Access* 1983 [cat. no. 64]
Oil and Enamelac on fiberglass with steel fasteners, 20 x 18"
Private collection, The Netherlands

65 *Range* 1983 [cat. no. 65]
Oil and Enamelac on fiberglass with aluminum, 51¾ x 47¾"
Collection of Hannelore B. Schulhof

66 *Pace* 1984 [cat. no. 66]
Lascaux acrylic on fiberglass with wood and aluminum, 26 x 26 x 26⅝"
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York

67 *Spectrum II* 1984 [cat. no. 67]
Ink on anodized aluminum, 8⅜ x 8⅜"
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

68 *Catalyst III* 1985 [cat. no. 68]
Enamel on aluminum with steel bolts, 23 x 23"
Private collection

69 *Courier I* 1985 [cat. no. 69]
Enamel on aluminum with aluminum fasteners, 47¾ x 44⅞"
FAE Musée d'art contemporain, Pully/Lausanne

70 *Expander* 1985 [cat. no. 70]
Oil on aluminum with black oxide steel bolts, 28 x 28"
Private collection

71 *Administrator* 1985 [cat. no. 71]
Lascaux acrylic on Lumasite with black oxide bolts, 48 x 48"
Crex Collection, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen

72 *Transport* 1985 [cat. no. 72]
Oil and Enamelac on fiberglass panel, redwood, and non-anodized aluminum fasteners, 51¼ x 47¾"
Private collection, Paris

73 *Credential* 1985 [cat. no. 73]
Oil on aluminum with steel bolts, 62¾ x 22 x 2"
Collection of Ralph and Helyn Goldenberg

74 *Express* 1985 [cat. no. 74]
Oil and Enamelac on fiberglass with black oxide steel bolts and fasteners, 8'11¾" x 47½"
Crex Collection, Hallen für neue Kunst, Schaffhausen

75 *Constant* 1987 [cat. no. 75]
Lascaux acrylic on Gator board, 17' x 16⅞"
Collection of Barbara Gladstone

76 *Journal* 1988 [cat. no. 76]
Lascaux acrylic on Lumasite and plastic with steel fasteners, 8 x 8'
Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, The Netherlands

77 *Initial* 1989 [cat. no. 77]
Oil on Gator board with wood, 23¾ x 23"
Private collection

78 *Locate* 1989 [cat. no. 78]
Oil on Gator board and aluminum with painted steel fasteners, 20 x 19"
Collection of Linda and Harry Macklowe

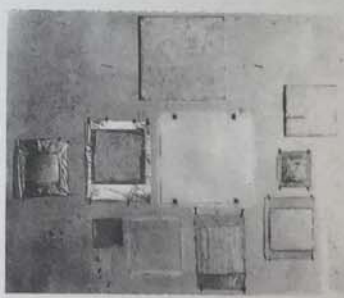
79 *Versions VII* 1991 [cat. no. 79]
Oil on fiberglass with waxed paper, 44½ x 41"
Collection of Constance R. Caplan, Baltimore

80 *Versions XII* 1991 [cat. no. 80]
Oil on fiberglass with waxed paper, 18¾ x 17"
Private collection

81 *Versions I* 1992 [not in catalogue]
Oil and graphite on fiberglass with waxed paper, 7'7" x 7'
Collection of the artist

82 *Versions XVI* 1992 [cat. no. 81]
Oil and pencil on fiberglass with waxed paper, 14¼ x 13"
Private collection

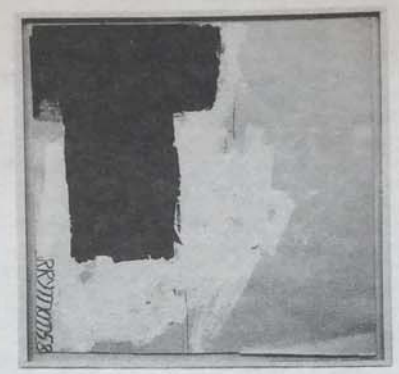
83 *Case* 1993 [not in catalogue]
Oil and Enamelac on Lumasite, 48 x 48"
Collection of the artist



Works from the Surface Veil series, Robert Ryman's studio, New York, early 1970s

(continued from page 2) peculiarly American pragmatism. In that sense, he is an empiricist of beauty, who, painting by painting, proves that however far skepticism has encroached upon our faith in art's capacity to make the world coherent, aesthetic and emotional balance still remains within our grasp. Though it may appear that he is pushing painting to the point of invisibility, Ryman is actually making painting fully visible; rather than pointing toward painting's end, he is demonstrating its infinite fecundity.

Thus, while a retrospective normally looks back to summarize an artist's career, this one looks back in order to look forward and to show how, even at its most reductive, painting itself continues. Most of all, however, this exhibition encourages the "simple" act of looking. With nothing hidden, Ryman's work is an open invitation to immerse oneself in a rare but immediate serenity. Instead of taking us elsewhere, his paintings bring us back to our senses and encourage us to delight in them. Finally receiving his full public due, Ryman at sixty-three continues to pursue that constant ambition, making work that is a marvel of intuitively achieved surprise, plainness, and grace.



To Gertrud Mellon. 1958

Robert Storr

Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture

BIOGRAPHY

May 30, 1930: Robert Tracy Ryman. Born Nashville, Tennessee.

1948: Enters Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, Cookville, Tennessee.

1949: Transfers to George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Tennessee, where he studies music.

December 12, 1950: Enlists in the United States Army, assigned to an Army Reserves band. Plays the tenor saxophone.

February 14, 1952: Is discharged from active service.

March 1952: Moves to New York City with the intention of becoming a jazz musician. Works odd jobs in New York.

June 30, 1953: Begins temporary employment as a guard at The Museum of Modern Art, and stays on full time for the next seven years.

1953: Makes his first paintings.

1954: Quits music and begins painting in earnest.

1958: Participates in a staff exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in the Museum's penthouse. This is the first public showing of his work. His work in this exhibition is purchased by Gertrud A. Mellon, a member of the Museum's Painting and Sculpture Committee.

May 15, 1960: Resigns from staff of the Museum. On June 17 begins work as a clerical assistant at The New York Public Library, in the Art Division.

May 31, 1961: Quits job at the Public Library to devote himself to painting full time.

September–November 1966: Shows work in *Systemic Painting*, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. This is the first time he is included in a major museum exhibition.

April–May 1967: Has first one-person exhibition, at Paul Bianchini Gallery, New York. He shows the Standard series, thirteen paintings on rolled steel.

October–November 1968: Has first one-person exhibition in Europe, at Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich.

March–April 1972: Has first solo museum show, *Robert Ryman*, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Exhibition includes works from 1965 to 1972.

January–March 1974: *Robert Ryman*, retrospective exhibition, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

June–August 1975: *Robert Ryman*, one-person exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Basel.

January–February 1977: *Robert Ryman: Paintings 1976*, exhibition at P.S. 1, includes seventeen recent works and inaugurates P.S. 1's more formal exhibition wing.

September–October 1977: *Robert Ryman*, retrospective exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery, London.

June–August 1980: *Robert Ryman*, retrospective exhibition of fifty-seven works done between 1955 and 1979, at InK. für internationale neue Kunst, Zurich. Travels to Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf.

October–November 1981: *Robert Ryman*, retrospective exhibition at Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

October–June 1988: *Robert Ryman*, one-person exhibition at Dia Art Foundation, includes thirty-three works, mostly from the 1980s.

October 1990–July 1991: *Robert Ryman*, exhibition at Espace d'art contemporain, Paris. Includes works from 1958 to 1981.

February 1993–October 1994: *Robert Ryman*, retrospective exhibition organized jointly by the Tate Gallery, London, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Includes eighty-three works done between 1955 and 1993. In addition to its London and New York showings, the exhibition will travel to the Reina Sofia, Madrid; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. It is the first comprehensive retrospective of Ryman's work to be held in the United States.

PANEL DISCUSSIONS

The following panel discussions will be moderated by Robert Storr:

Thursday, November 4, 8:30 p.m.
Painting After Progress: The Painter's Predicament
with
Stephen Ellis, painter and art critic
Marcia Hafif, painter and art critic
(Other participants to be announced.)

Thursday, December 9, 8:30 p.m.
Abstract Painting: End or Beginning?
with
Arthur Danto, art critic, *The Nation*
Linda Norden, art historian, Bard College
Peter Schjeldahl, art critic, *Village Voice*
Naomi Spector, independent critic

Panels will be held in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1. Tickets $8.00, Members $7.00, Students $5.00, available at the Lobby Information Desk. For more information, please call the Department of Education at 212-708-9795. The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York.

PUBLICATION

Robert Ryman is written by Robert Storr. The catalogue is 236 pages, with 126 illustrations, including 81 color plates. Published by the Tate Gallery, London. Clothbound, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, $49.50. Paperbound, $29.50. Available in The Museum Book Store or by mail order, 212-708-9888.

All photographs by Bill Jacobson, except *Access* (p. 3), by Tom Haartsen, and photograph of Ryman's wall (p. 7), contributed by the John Weber Gallery.

Robert Ryman was organized jointly by Robert Storr, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Nicholas Serota, the Tate Gallery, London.

The New York showing is made possible by grants from the Lannan Foundation; The Bohen Foundation; the National Endowment for the Arts; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.; and the Contemporary Exhibition Fund of The Museum of Modern Art, established with gifts from Lily Auchincloss, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and Mr. and Mrs. Ronald S. Lauder.

PRINTED BY THE STAR-LEDGER, NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

ABRAMS
100 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10011

CONTACT: Linda Ciotti
(212) 229-7120
Publication Date: September 1993
Price: $49.50

ROBERT RYMAN

By Robert Storr

Robert Ryman is one of the foremost American abstract artists of his generation. He is known as the painter of white paintings, but within that realm his works explore myriad possibilities. They range from rich and succulent surfaces to equally beautiful but more coolly sensuous paintings, where edge, relief, ways of fastening to the wall, synthetic or natural materials, are explored and juxtaposed. Ryman would like the viewer to enjoy "An experience of delight, and well-being, and rightness . . . like listening to music."

Robert Storr, Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, has interviewed Ryman on a number of occasions over several years. His stimulating essay provides an insightful account, augmented by new quotes from the artist, of the development of Ryman's work from the mid-1950s to the present day. Storr shows how it has been convenient, but erroneous, to regard Ryman as a minimalist painter.

Individual commentaries on 81 works, all reproduced in color and ranging from small early collages to large recent paintings, draw extensively on the interviews. A detailed chronology places Ryman's work in the context of his major contemporaries.

This book is the catalogue of a major retrospective exhibition of Ryman's work that opened in early 1993 at the Tate Gallery, London, and that will be at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from September 22, 1993, to January 4, 1994. The exhibition will also travel to the Museo Nacional Reina Sofia, Madrid, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Bibliography, chronology, glossary 126 illustrations, including 81 in full color, 236 pages, 9 x 11¼" *ISBN 0-8109-3771-9*
EAN 978081093771-0 US$49.50 C$65.00

please shoot at 50% — final 3.25 x 3.5

Panel Discussions About Painting

NOVEMBER 4

Painting After Progress: The Painter's Predicament

Stephen Ellis, Marcia Hafif, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

DECEMBER 9

Abstract Painting: End or Beginning?

Arthur C. Danto, Linda Norden, Peter Schjeldahl, Naomi Spector

Moderated by Robert Storr, Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, who coorganized the exhibition **Robert Ryman**

Panels begin at 8:30 p.m. in the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1. See **Robert Ryman** before each evening's discussion; open from 12:00 noon until 8:30.

Tickets $8, $7 members, $5 students; available at the lobby information desk. Tickets may be used for entry to the exhibition.

The Museum of Modern Art

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK

212-708-9795

VillageVoice

ROBERT RYMAN

Robert Ryman during the installation of the exhibition. Photo: Peter Moore, New York

Through January 4, 1994

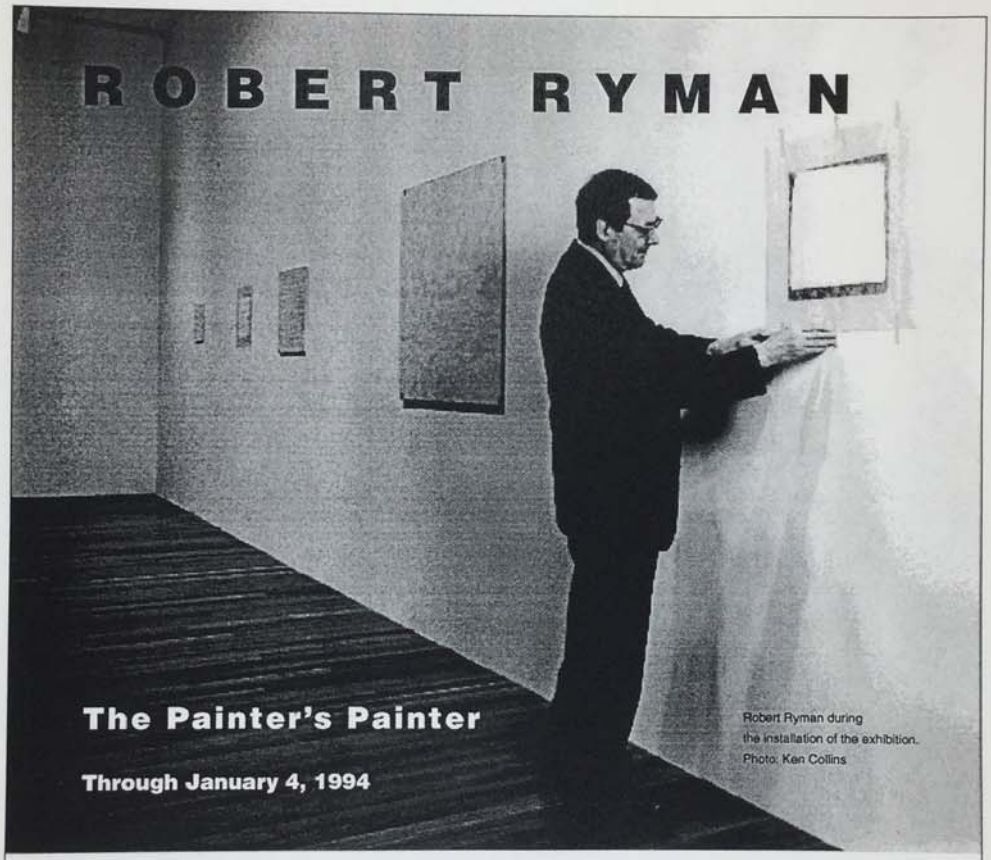
Organized jointly by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Tate Gallery, London. The New York showing is made possible by grants from the Lannan Foundation; The Bohen Foundation; the National Endowment for the Arts; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.; and the Contemporary Exhibition Fund of The Museum of Modern Art, established with gifts from Lily Auchincloss, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and Mr. and Mrs. Ronald S. Lauder.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 West 53 Street, New York

NY Times ad

This is a rush -- please edit today
call me to p-u at 9756
PS. Sorry. - Alix



THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 West 53 Street, New York

Robert Ryman was organized jointly by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Tate Gallery, London. The New York showing is made possible by grants from the Lannan Foundation; The Bohen Foundation; the National Endowment for the Arts; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.; and the Contemporary Exhibition Fund of The Museum of Modern Art, established with gifts from Lily Auchincloss, Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and Mr. and Mrs. Ronald S. Lauder.

OK cc

● MUSICA CLASICA

«Laiñoa» de Larrauri

TOMAS MARCO

En el actual panorama musical, la presencia de grandes compositores vascos de proyección internacional es un hecho incluso por encima de la discreta conciencia que en el propio País Vasco se tiene de ello y muy comparable a los mucho más celebrados artistas plásticos. Eso sí, si ha habido un compositor que haya intentado aunar lo racial vasco con las nuevas corrientes musicales y lo ha hecho con éxito, ése es Antón Larrauri, bermeano de 60 años, residente en Bilbao, donde la vida musical lo tolera más que lo integra, Larrauri es una naturaleza musical de primer orden y a ella ha unido una profunda especulación filosófica que tiene en primer lugar un deseo especulativo sobre el ser de lo vasco. Ello ya late en algunas grandes obras suyas, como «Espatadantza», el «Concierto para piano y orquesta», en el que incluyó un bersolari, «Gardunak», «Soiñua», «Grimorios», «Zan Tiretu», etcétera.

La última especulación sonora de Larrauri ha surgido por encargo de la Orquesta Sinfónica de Euskadi, que la llevará este mes a varias localidades norteñas con una batuta tan fiable como la de José Ramón Encinar y la soprano Pura María Martínez. La obra, de media hora de duración, se llama «Laiñoa» y es para soprano, orquesta y electrónica sobre un texto en euskera de Eguzki. Trata de evocar la niebla física del paisaje y la niebla metafórica en la que se insertan los valores culturales de los pueblos. Hay un concepto de ensamblado de bloques musicales basados en distintas ideas que van desgranando procesos. El propio Larrauri define la imagen inspiradora como «una niebla que provoca un caos y desorden estruendosos; y una voz que increpa, se lamenta, grita y exhorta en esa confusión y oscuridad».

Como en otras ocasiones, Larrauri ha apostado por la unión entre lo más telúrico y racial de su tierra y la mirada hacia adelante, el compromiso lingüístico y expresivo con la modernidad. Ser vasco no tiene por qué significar ser musicalmente carca, parece decirnos esta música grande y poderosa que es como un grito, el grito creativo que todo nacimiento comporta. Y el compositor ha logrado así no sólo uno de sus mejores frutos sino una obra válida e importante a nivel europeo.

Procedente de la Tate Gallery, la retrospectiva de Ryman (Nashville, 1930) consta de 83 pinturas que se caracterizan por la variedad de tamaños y soportes

La poética del blanco sobre el blanco de Robert Ryman, en el MOMA

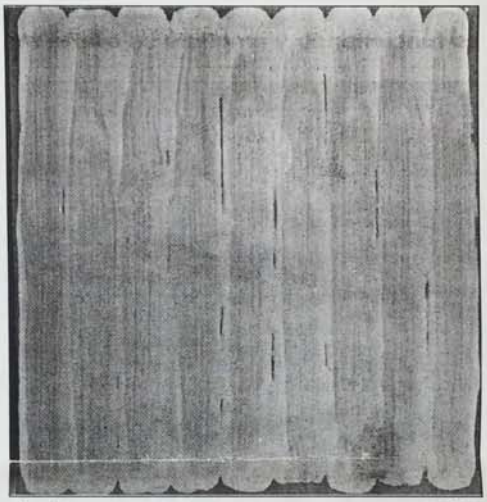
La muestra repasa los cuarenta años de la carrera del artista

OCTAVIO ZAYA
NUEVA YORK

Entre las exposiciones que han pasado casi inadvertidas durante la temporada, la retrospectiva de Robert Ryman en el MOMA podría ser también la más infravalorada. Tal vez la atención que recibe la retrospectiva de Miró ha contribuido a disminuir su atractivo. O tal vez el público neoyorquino no acaba de entender el interés que este pintor americano despierta entre las instituciones y artistas europeos. Cualquiera sea el caso, desde el famoso cuadrado blanco sobre fondo blanco que Kazimir Malevich pintó hace ahora 80 años, ningún pintor se ha acercado a la obsesión o al entusiasmo de Ryman por el blanco.

Procedente de la Tate Gallery de Londres, y tras su paso por el Reina Sofía, la exposición repasa los 40 años de la carrera de Ryman; desde 1955, cuando el artista asumió los principios del expresionismo abstracto, hasta el presente, cuando se le reconoce como uno de los pintores más destacados de la posguerra. Aunque Ryman practica una forma de pintura particularmente reductiva en cada una de las 83 pinturas que componen esta muestra, limitándose a la pintura blanca sobre un formato cuadrado, su obra es sin duda expresiva y visualmente rica. La variedad de tamaños y los diferentes soportes que utiliza para pintar (cartón, papel encerado, fibra de vidrio, lienzo, acero, etcétera), las brochas y los gestos que usa y hasta los artefactos que sujetan la pintura a la pared, contribuyen a una exploración de las posibilidades formales de la esencia pictórica. «Podría decirse —nos asegura el artista— que siempre quise pintar la pintura.»

La obra de Ryman se ha relacionado con el minimalismo y a menudo se le ha asociado con artistas de los sesenta y los setenta como Robert Mangold, Sol Lewitt y Donald Judd. No obstante, como evidencian sus primeras obras, Ryman —como explica el curador de pintura y escultura del MOMA, Robert Storr, en el catálogo de esta exposición— es un artista intuitivo, no pragmático, que afectuosamente realiza su pintura a mano, no para el intelecto, sino para los ojos. Por eso se ha concentrado exclusivamente en el blanco, porque —como él dice— le «permite la clarificación de los matices en la pintura».



«Sin título» es una de las obras que se muestran en el MOMA

Ryman nació en Nashville, Tennesee, en 1930. En 1948 entró en el Instituto Politécnico de la ciudad y poco después emprendió estudios de música. Después de servir en la banda musical del Ejército norteamericano durante la guerra de Corea, Ryman se trasladó a Nueva York en 1952 para probar suerte como saxofonista de jazz. A partir de 1953 trabajó durante 6 años como guardián en el MOMA, donde se fascinó particularmente con la obra de Matisse y Rothko, artistas con los que a veces se ha relacionado su pintura por la sensualidad, la atmósfera, la luminosidad y la elegancia que Ryman invierte en este medio. La diferencia con aquéllos estaría en que tanto la pintura de Matisse como la de Rothko se sitúan al lado de las respuestas de la pintura y la de Ryman siempre sugiere preguntas como ¿Cuál es la relación de la pintura con el soporte?

A partir de 1967, la obra de Ryman revela una creciente experimentación con pigmentos y materiales no convencionales en su continuada exploración de la naturaleza de la pintura y las propiedades que la hacen sensible a la luz. Aunque austera y sin transgredir los estrechos confines que se impone a sí misma, empleando sus innovaciones materiales al servicio de la luz, el espacio y el tacto, la obra de Ryman continúa siendo una presencia influyente entre los artistas contemporáneos.

Exposición de arte egipcio en México

Con piezas que pertenecieron al emperador Maximiliano de Habsburgo

D.A.V. / *MEXICO*

Por primera vez en 50 años se presentará en México una exposición de arte egipcio procedente del Museo de Historia del Arte de Viena, que incluye piezas que pertenecieron al emperador de México, Maximiliano de Habsburgo, fusilado en 1867.

La exposición, titulada «Dioses, hombres, faraones» se inaugurará el próximo jueves en el Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, con 300 obras, algunas obtenidas por el Emperador francés Napoléon Bonaparte en sus campañas guerreras por el norte de África y otras de colecciones de la dinastía austriaca de Habsburgo.

Las piezas de los Habsburgo fueron obtenidos entre los siglos XVI y XIX, albergadas en el Museo austriaco desde 1891 y consideradas por los especialistas como algunas de las más importantes que existen en el mundo sobre el antiguo Egipto. Wilfried Seipel, director del Museo de Historia del Arte de Viena comentó que la exposición tendrá un significado «muy especial», ya que 20 piezas pertenecieron a las colecciones que Maximiliano pretendió exhibir en México en el siglo XIX.

El lirismo de Javier Riera

FERNANDO CASTRO FLOREZ

En la Galería Bárcena & Cía. expone sus últimos trabajos Javier Riera (Avilés, 1964). Participó en los Talleres de Arte Actual del Círculo de Bellas Artes impartidos por Carlos León y Julián Schnabel, algunas de sus obras se han podido contemplar en la exposición de los cursos de arte de Mojácar de 1992 o en la Bienal de Arte de Almería del mismo año.

Riera es uno de los pintores más prometedores de la actualidad, vinculado estéticamente a otros creadores como Felicidad Moreno o Jorge Galindo. Una estética que parte de la experiencia del expresionismo abstracto para llegar a composiciones que tienen mayor contención, en las que el combate de la pintura se detiene en atmósferas de gran lirismo.

Los cuadros de gran formato que ahora muestra Javier Riera suponen un paso adelante desde sus trabajos anteriores, en los que había una disolución del paisaje en atmósferas cromáticas muy leves; la energía de los colores que ahora pone en acción sobre el lienzo, la calcinación de la que quedan huellas precisas subrayan que Riera se separa de algo.

No hay, sin embargo, rastro de melancolía, sino una acidez especial, un intento de desbordar los límites convencionales de la pintura.

En cartones y cuadros más pequeños se produce una tensión experimental, el inacabamiento que se acentúa en otras obras es sustituido por una condensación que recuerda la sublimidad romántica o una concepción del vacío y la plenitud oriental.

Javier Riera contrae y extiende su geografía apasionada, los colores pugnan y se detienen en imágenes prodigiosas.

Traslado de la histórica «Piedra Hincada»

MADRID

La Asociación «ADENEX» ha considerado un «expolio» el traslado de la histórica «Piedra Hincada» de Alburquerque a Herreruela en Badajoz. Se trata de una columna cilíndrica de cantería granítica de más de 2 metros de altura, en la que se encuentra esculpido el escudo de armas del Comendador de Piedrabuena. (D 16)

THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF ART
February 1994

Robert Ryman: The Great White Hope

Ross Neher

THINK of Robert Ryman and words like "subtlety" and "purity" will probably come unbidden to your mind: subtlety because of the fine distinction that his works are thought to contain, purity because of the effects that those discriminations are thought to produce.

But the one word that really typifies this minimalist painter is "white." For the past thirty years, Ryman has seemed hell-bent on drawing out of whiteness all of its mysterious variations. In several hundred largely or wholly white canvases of varying shapes and materials and textures, the painter has gone after this goal with the single-mindedness of Ahab pursuing the white whale. Ryman is so determined in this quest for redemptive purity that at his recent retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, one was surprised to find not only that the white-walled galleries were covered with paintings as white as themselves, but that labels weren't even provided, for fear of contaminating the clinical purity of the art.

For Ryman white is a thing rather than a color. Not satisfied with traditional flake, zinc and titanium, he has embraced more exotic commodities such as baked enamel, double-baked enamel regular enamel, enamelac and Elvacite, a penchant that parallels his use of arcane supports and fastening devices. But, materials aside, the question remains: how good is Ryman really as a painter in terms of the color, composition and so forth? Clues to the answer are provided by the oil-on-canvas pieces.

Consider first of all his one unabashedly "colorful" painting in the show, *Untitled (Orange Painting)*, painted in 1955 and 1959. This work is of interest because it reveals, as his pure white paintings could not, his chromatic and compositional strengths and weaknesses. It is a smallish painting containing a modulated field of pumpkin, ocher and orange, each more or less randomly positioned. The bottom right trails off in a gently rising arc, "balanced" by an almost black underpainting in the upper left, a rectangle of creamy hue, and a reddish-orange patch that constitutes, believe it or not, the real drama of the painting.

From this description, you might think the work more "composed" than it is. In fact, it doesn't add up to much pictorially. Ryman is no picture builder, and the alterations due to paint loss over the years merely confirm the picture's general sense of randomness. Its color as well is unimpressive. There is no important interrelation among the varying hues, and therefore no light is given off. Compare these hues with the "abstract-impressionist" earth-tone hatchings in Philip Guston's paintings from the same time. There color creates light and the brushstrokes are massed into a form that lives within its space. But Ryman's pigment, by contrast, remains inanimate stuff, nothing more.

Even though this inertness pervades Ryman's career, some will say that it is unfair to dwell on his one avowedly orange painting. So let's move on to what I believe to be two of his best and most typical works. First, *Untitled* of 1962. Measuring a little over five feet square, it is evenly distributed with red and green marks that stand out nicely against the natural umber of the linen. Over them are impasted white strokes resembling chromosomes or mutilated commas. The painting seems to breathe and the effect is a pleasant one. Though there is no space and little light to speak of, at least a comfortable relationship has been struck between scale and actual size. But Ryman ruins the work by arbitrarily deciding to staple a few inches of linen to the back of the stretcher on the right. While this allows the painting to continue around the side and onto the wall, it ultimately subverts the work's authority. There's a fear here, if not a full-blown phobia, of letting the painting speak for itself. Almost everywhere one looks in this exhibition there's a feature that screams "object," whether it is the above-mentioned excess linen, those high-tech bolts and brackets, the use of nevel materials as supports, or the conceit of spacing the "painting" several inches away from the wall.

Another classic Ryman, *Twin* from 1966, is 76 inches square and consists of nothing but white oil paint on linen. Surely one could not choose a better example with which to test the validity

of the many claims habitually made on Ryman's behalf. This painting looks perhaps to have been constructed in the following way: a brush about a foot wide was used to paint six horizontal bands in what is made to look like a single continuous movement. The bands are not discrete: they fuse together in such a way that the painting first seems to consist of a single, unarticulated field. The paint stops short about a quarter of an inch from each edge, leaving the perimeter of the support exposed. Now, according to the wall text at the entrance of the exhibition, "Ryman's work requires close and patient attention to nuance and detail—and fully rewards it. . . . [He] devotedly places material invention at the service of the poetics of space, light, and touch."

Alright, then. Let's start with space. There is none—if by space we mean that in a painting space is not merely identical to the surface but also suggestive of an imaginary area beyond it. Of course, a choir of critics will rise up to insist that there is space here, since Ryman's works are quintessential objects, and as such exist in three dimensions. They make my point: these works are painted objects rather than paintings.

Light? No light. Compare these paintings with the works of Rembrandt, Turner or Monet. Since white naturally reflects light, just as black naturally absorbs it, Ryman's use of white is ultimately a gimmick. Obviously there's plenty of light in the museum, what with the wattage approaching meltdown conditions. And obviously all works of art look best in clean, well-lighted spaces. But as anyone knows who has come upon Caravaggio's chiaroscuro images in a darkened Roman church, great artists put their light in the painting rather than shining it on the painting.

Touch. Yes, there is touch. In fact, there's nothing else, and precisely because there is nothing else it becomes a fetish. And true, in the case of *Twin* it is very subtle; one notes how the brush has been pulled across the support, leaving in its wake tiny lines in the pigment like grooves in an LP with light caught and released from each minute ridge. But Ryman's subtlety consists in focusing on the minutiae of the process, and by doing so he magnifies its import. I must admit that any epiphany accruing from "close and patient attention" to this painting's surface has eluded me. True, I did register an infinitesimal blip of satisfaction in recognizing that the painting consisted of discrete bands as opposed to a homogenous field and in having this observation corroborated by the catalogue. But that, surely, was more a Holmesian satisfaction than an aesthetic one.

According to Ryman, "The way I use white, it's more as a neutral paint, in order to make other things in the painting visible, color for instance." Now it would take a more extravagant imagination than I for one possess to determine how white, used as a neutral paint—whatever that is—could make color more visible. But I take Ryman's statement to mean that his interest in white is restricted to its materiality. It is no more and no less a part of a painting than are the canvas, the bolts or the brackets. The subtlety of his whites, therefore, consists in their shifting densities. In that 12-foot-square white elephant titled *Surface Veil II* from 1971, a square has slipped down the picture plane at an oblique angle. Yet it is rendered, not by different values of white, but by a different density in its application to the canvas. The effect is thus material rather than chromatic, physical rather than optical. To see white used chromatically, go no farther than Whistler's *The White Girl: Symphony in White, No.1* from 1862 in Washington's National Gallery. You will find that Whistler, who is subtlety itself, achieves his astonishing effects through the merest gradations and shadings of tone.

Out of the mass of paintings in Ryman's retrospective, one epiphany did come my way. The official reason for not including labels beside the paintings was that "since Ryman uses the wall space around his images as an essential compositional element, we have omitted individual labels that might intrude upon that already active area." As I interpret these words, they are the official recognition that aesthetic discourse must be conducted in terms of architecture rather than of painting. As I passed through this exhibition, I became increasingly aware of the difficulty of making any aesthetic judgments, and I recalled Clement Greenberg's facetious remark that, of course, Ryman did good paintings but that it was not possible to say which ones they were. In order for genuine aesthetic judgments to take place, one has clearly to determine what is and what is not the painting. This means that every painting must have, if not a frame, at least legible bounds beyond which it cannot be said to exist. Cast a Mondrian on a landfill and it is still a structured work of art. While a landfill may not provide ideal viewing conditions, as long as the Mondrian is undamaged the viewer can "bracket out" the surroundings and Mondrian's metaphoric world remains intact. With Ryman, however, not only is there little internal incident to speak of, but the monochrome work, wrenched from its architectural context, is also incomplete in a way that Mondrian's paintings are not. Hence the fanatical attention paid to lighting and installation.

Ultimately there is something almost costive and persnickety in Ryman's attention to such details. In spite of his disavowal of the transcendental element in his paintings, he caters to the sort of people who seek the chimerical purity of spotless white spaces, and in so doing he gives us what amounts to moral interior decoration. Ω

Robert Ryman, by Robert Storr. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, pp. 236.

THE ART NEWSPAPER
London
February 1993

London

White-out at the Tate

Robert Ryman exhibition shared with MoMA, New York

LONDON. A survey of the career of Robert Ryman, the American artist noted for the white paintings which he has been making for nearly forty years, is the most significant exhibition of contemporary art to be taking place in London this spring. Following its launch at the Tate Gallery (17 February-25 April), a prestigious international circuit has been arranged for the exhibition which goes to the Museo Nacional de Reina Sofía, Madrid (8 June-23 August), New York's Museum of Modern Art (22 September-4 January 1994), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (3 February-17 April 1994) and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (23 July-2 October 1994).

The selection of eighty-one canvases and other works of art has been made by Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery and long an admirer of Ryman's work, which he showed at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1977, and Robert Storr, Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In the past, the Tate Gallery has borrowed exhibitions which have been organised by MOMA's staff, including "de Chirico" (1982) and "Schwitters" (1985), but this occasion is a proper collaboration between the two institutions.

Although Ryman has been making art since 1954 and belongs to the generation of Jasper Johns, he did not exhibit his work until the later Sixties and was not given a solo museum exhibition until 1972. As a result, his biography has been compressed into the chapter of Minimalism. In fact, he has usually been regarded as the supreme Minimalist painter, but perceptions have been changing through a closer study of his earlier work which reveals him as an artist whose origins lie in painterly Abstraction. This rediscovery has come through historical exhibitions held recently at New York's DIA Center for the Arts (1988-89), Claude Berri's RENN Espace d'Art Contemporain in Paris (1991-92) and at the Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, where Ryman's art has been prominently featured for several years and a fresh installation opens shortly (2 May-31 October).

The Tate Gallery's exhibition continues this process of reassessment through a selection of those earlier works dating before 1960 and including a rare coloured canvas, "Untitled (Orange Painting)", which was created in 1955-59 and has never been shown, although it is known from illustrations in catalogues. That those unexpected interests in colour are still valid has been confirmed by Ryman's "Versions", a series of sixteen recent pictures employing a thin layer of white pigment washed over coloured grounds laid on fibreglass, which were seen in Shaffhausen and at Pace, the artist's New York gallery, in an exhibition which closed last month. Three examples from that series mark the conclusion of the present exhibition.

The catalogue includes an essay by Storr and entries for the exhibited pictures prepared by Catherine Kinley of the Tate Gallery and MoMA's Lynn Zelevansky based upon interviews with the artist. **Roger Bevan**

The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY	Collection:	Series.Folder:
	PI	II.A.1602

ARTNEWS
New York
December 1993

NEW YOR

Robert
Paintin

Robert Ryman, *VII*, 1969, e ... 60 inches. Museum of Modern Art.

London

White-out at the Tate

Robert Ryman exhibition shared with MoMA, New York

LONDON. A survey of the career of Robert Ryman, the American artist noted for the white paintings which he has been making for nearly forty years, is the most significant exhibition of contemporary art to be taking place in London this spring. Following its launch at the Tate Gallery (17 February-25 April), a prestigious international circuit has been arranged for the exhibition which goes to the Museo Nacional de Reina Sofía, Madrid (8 June-23 August), New York's Museum of Modern Art (22 September-4 January 1994), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (3 February-17 April 1994) and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (23 July-2 October 1994).

The selection of eighty-one canvases and other works of art has been made by Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery and long an admirer of Ryman's work, which he showed at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1977, and Robert Storr, Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In the past, the Tate Gallery has borrowed exhibitions which have been organised by MOMA's staff, including "de Chirico" (1982) and "Schwitters" (1985), but this occasion is a proper collaboration between the two institutions.

Although Ryman has been making art since 1954 and belongs to the generation of Jasper Johns, he did not exhibit his work until the later Sixties and was not given a solo museum exhibition until 1972. As a result, his biography has been compressed into the chapter of Minimalism. In fact, he has usually been regarded as the supreme Minimalist painter, but perceptions have been changing through a closer study of his earlier work which reveals him as an artist whose origins lie in painterly Abstraction. This rediscovery has come through historical exhibitions held recently at New York's DIA Center for the Arts (1988-89), Claude Berri's RENN Espace d'Art Contemporain in Paris (1991-92) and at the Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, where Ryman's art has been prominently featured for several years and a fresh installation opens shortly (2 May-31 October).

The Tate Gallery's exhibition continues this process of reassessment through a selection of those earlier works dating before 1960 and including a rare coloured canvas, "Untitled (Orange Painting)", which was created in 1955-59 and has never been shown, although it is known from illustrations in catalogues. That those unexpected interests in colour are still valid has been confirmed by Ryman's "Versions", a series of sixteen recent pictures employing a thin layer of white pigment washed over coloured grounds laid on fibreglass, which were seen in Shaffhausen and at Pace, the artist's New York gallery, in an exhibition which closed last month. Three examples from that series mark the conclusion of the present exhibition.

The catalogue includes an essay by Storr and entries for the exhibited pictures prepared by Catherine Kinley of the Tate Gallery and MoMA's Lynn Zelevansky based upon interviews with the artist. **Roger Bevan**

---

comprises forty-three representational works of consistent high quality, collected by New York investment banker Maurice Wertheim, and bequeathed in 1950 to his alma mater, where they have been on display since 1974. The Fogg is circulating the show in celebration of the museum's imminent centenni-

---

from figurative images, and progressively from drawn lines, colors, intentional symbolism, or any other metaphorical content, each work is a lean essay on the elements of painting itself. Or as Ryman has said, "I wanted to paint the paint. . . . There is never any question of *what* to paint, but only how to paint."

In stripping painting down till its ribs ...

If you've never read Fran... *Hunger Artist*, there's n... before a walk through a ... by Robert Ryman. There ... Ryman on view recently a... Modern Art, a retrospecti... Robert Storr at the Mode... Serota, the director of the Ta... don, where the survey premi...

Kafka's tale is about a m... starve himself. The crowds ... hibition cage and watch him ... before he's stopped by his m... the art of fasting goes out o... artist finds himself in a final ...

... Ryman's work is a logi... o a certain impulse in mod... mean its conclusions are al... g. So often his obsessive ... ill to beat his own record, ... whose tiny variations offer ... f pleasures or just plain ... er the long haul—from the ... the paintings from the early ... egant stripes of *Winsor 34* ... ensuous Monet-like veils of *VII* (1969) and the cooler, machined look of *Transport* (1985)—there's a cumulative power to Ryman's peculiar performance.

By holding to the most basic aspects of painting, his art takes on an excruciating and almost absurd poignancy. With all the great accomplishments marked out in modern painting, he's the small, brilliant figure who makes art from crumbs. It's a display of supreme devotion—even excess. And like all displays of excess, there's a fascination about it. If we don't admire or want to emulate it, at least it ought to be acknowledged as an act of faith. And real acts of faith are too rare to be dismissed. The rest of us, who have lived in mostly ordinary ways, are like the spectators watching the hunger artist. Appalled or bemused, we have to stare, transfixed by wonder.

—Steven Henry Madoff

ARTNEWS
New York
December 1993

aint

from figurative images, and progressively from drawn lines, colors, intentional symbolism, or any other metaphorical content, each work is a lean essay on the elements of painting itself. Or as Ryman has said, "I wanted to paint the paint. . . . There is never any question of *what* to paint, but only how to paint."

In stripping painting down till its ribs show, Ryman comes at the end of a long line in the history of modernism, whose early spokesman was Paul Cézanne. "Everything in nature is modeled on the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder," Cézanne lectured his stu-

New York

Ultra-German Beuys hits MoMA

A growing interest in Joseph Beuys in the United States indicated by the Walker Art Center's major acquisition

NEW YORK. A touring exhibition of 200 drawings covering the career of Joseph Beuys from 1936 until his death in 1986 opens at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, towards the end of this month (21 February-4 May). Organised by Bernice Rose, the museum's senior curator of drawings, and Ann Temkin, curator of twentieth-century art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the exhibition is the most important selection of his drawings to have been assembled since the Victoria and Albert Museum's survey in 1983. It includes six blackboards which are usually classified among his sculptures or objects. The exhibition's centrepiece is, in fact, "Richtkräfte", an installation of one hundred blackboards created by the artist in 1974-77.

This show fits into a wider reassessment of Beuys currently taking place in the United States, which, ironically, follows, rather than precedes, the considerable interest already shown in the work of other German artists including Gerhard Richter, Anselm Kiefer and Georg Baselitz. In spite of Caroline Tisdall's marvellous study of his art which was held at the Guggenheim Museum in 1979, this complex man has never been widely known nor understood by an American audience. A partial explanation for this state of affairs lies in his infrequent appearance in the salerooms, for Beuys was not a producer of easily collectible objects. It must also be relevant that his social ideas and political goals were not sympathetic to American tastes. The situation is, however, changing, and Anthony d'Offay, a leading dealer in Beuys material, reports greater interest and sales to American private collectors. As this issue went to press the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis announced its acquisition of 437 multiples by Beuys, rivalling the collections of the artist's works in the Guggenheim Musem and Dia Center for the Arts in New York. To be called the Alfred and Marie Greisinger Collection, the works range from 1965 to 1986, making it the most comprehensive array of Beuys multiples outside Germany.

A major installation of Beuys, "Arena (where I would have got if I had been intelligent)", created in 1970-72 (see The Art Newspaper No.16, March 1992, p.6), remains on exhibition at the Dia Center for the Arts until mid-April, while the MoMA exhibition travels to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (30 May-15 August), the Philadelphia Museum of Art (10 October-2 January 1994) and the Art Institute of Chicago (15 February-25 April 1994). In Europe, the Milanese bank The Credito Valtellinese is showing a group of works including blackboards given by Beuys to the museum Satuki in Lodz, Poland, in its exhibition space Refettorio delle Stelline on Corso Magenta until 28 February. **Roger Bevan**

❑ **Zika Ascher**, fabric maker and fashion designer, died London 5 December, aged eighty-two. In Paris in 1945 Ascher conceived the idea of comissioning contemporary artists to design scarves: Picasso, Braque, Ivon Hitchens, Matisse, Moore, Derain, Piper, Laurencin and Sutherland were among those to respond. In the late 1950s, he introduced shaggy mohair as a fashion textile, which, after an initially hostile reception, proved a great success.

Correction to must see in '93

The exhibition of Frank Lloyd Wright will be at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from 20 February to 10 May 1994, and not 1993 as published in our last issue.

Hunger Artist, there's no better time than before a walk through a painting exhibition by Robert Ryman. There were 83 works by Ryman on view recently at the Museum of Modern Art, a retrospective cocurated by Robert Storr at the Modern and Nicholas Serota, the director of the Tate Gallery in London, where the survey premiered last February.

Kafka's tale is about a man whose art is to starve himself. The crowds pass him in his exhibition cage and watch him dwindle for days before he's stopped by his manager. But when the art of fasting goes out of style, the hunger artist finds himself in a final performance. "He long time," Kafka writes. "Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a permanent [illegible]"

[illegible] to room, there was nothing on the walls but white paintings. You had to pick up a list of the works at the show's entrance. We almost absurd poignancy. With all the great accomplishments marked out in modern painting, he's the small, brilliant figure who makes art from crumbs. It's a display of supreme devotion—even excess. And like all displays of excess, there's a fascination about it. If we don't admire or want to emulate it, at least it ought to be acknowledged as an act of faith. And real acts of faith are too rare to be dismissed. The rest of us, who have lived in mostly ordinary ways, are like the spectators watching the hunger artist. Appalled or bemused, we have to stare, transfixed by wonder.

—Steven Henry Madoff

REVIEWS

ARTNEWS
New York
December 1993

NEW YORK

Robert Ryman: Painting the Paint

COLLECTION STEDELIJK MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

Robert Ryman, *VII*, 1969, enamelac on corrugated paper, 60 by 60 inches. Museum of Modern Art.

If you've never read Franz Kafka's story *A Hunger Artist*, there's no better time than before a walk through a painting exhibition by Robert Ryman. There were 83 works by Ryman on view recently at the Museum of Modern Art, a retrospective cocurated by Robert Storr at the Modern and Nicholas Serota, the director of the Tate Gallery in London, where the survey premiered last February.

Kafka's tale is about a man whose art is to starve himself. The crowds pass him in his exhibition cage and watch him dwindle for days before he's stopped by his manager. But when the art of fasting goes out of style, the hunger artist finds himself in a final performance. "He had held out for a long time, an illimitably long time," Kafka writes. "Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a performance beyond human imagination. . . ."

The story seems like a dead-on allegory for Ryman's art, since he has slowly starved the art of painting for the last 30 years, getting it down to the bone. He even starved this exhibition of its picture labels. From bare white room to room, there was nothing on the walls but white paintings. You had to pick up a list of the works at the show's entrance. Weaned from figurative images, and progressively from drawn lines, colors, intentional symbolism, or any other metaphorical content, each work is a lean essay on the elements of painting itself. Or as Ryman has said, "I wanted to paint the paint. . . . There is never any question of *what* to paint, but only how to paint."

In stripping painting down till its ribs show, Ryman comes at the end of a long line in the history of modernism, whose early spokesman was Paul Cézanne. "Everything in nature is modeled on the sphere, the cone, and the cylinder," Cézanne lectured his student Emile Bernard. "It's necessary to learn to paint based on these simple figures, and you can make whatever you want."

Cézanne wanted to build up his painted world out of pared-down elements, and Ryman is really after the same thing. Yet spheres, cones, and cylinders are contours, after all. And Ryman goes Cézanne one further by sticking to his white, inflected flatness. But then, Ryman comes after Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism. He's got less room to move in. His art is left with a pragmatist's strict proclamation: Forget the metaphysical. Only what you see matters. And, of course, there are a lot of possibilities in what can be seen—even in white. He elaborates with an art-supplies salesman's dream of white materials: different shades, mediums, finishes, canvases, papers, vinyl, Mylar. And then there are the fasteners: the staples, the steel screws and flanges, plastic stripping, masking tape, and on and on.

But just because Ryman's work is a logical conclusion to a certain impulse in modern art doesn't mean its conclusions are always interesting. So often his obsessive curiosity, his will to beat his own record, leads to works whose tiny variations offer the slightest of pleasures or just plain vanilla. Still, over the long haul—from the crusty whites of the paintings from the early 1960s to the elegant stripes of *Winsor 34* (1966) to the sensuous Monet-like veils of *VII* (1969) and the cooler, machined look of *Transport* (1985)—there's a cumulative power to Ryman's peculiar performance.

By holding to the most basic aspects of painting, his art takes on an excruciating and almost absurd poignancy. With all the great accomplishments marked out in modern painting, he's the small, brilliant figure who makes art from crumbs. It's a display of supreme devotion—even excess. And like all displays of excess, there's a fascination about it. If we don't admire or want to emulate it, at least it ought to be acknowledged as an act of faith. And real acts of faith are too rare to be dismissed. The rest of us, who have lived in mostly ordinary ways, are like the spectators watching the hunger artist. Appalled or bemused, we have to stare, transfixed by wonder.

—Steven Henry Madoff

ANTIQUES & THE ARTS WEEKLY
Newtown, CT
November 19, 1993

Abstract Artist Ryman Retrospective Now at The Museum of Modern Art

NEW YORK CITY – A retrospective of the work of Robert Ryman, one of the foremost American abstract artists, has opened at The Museum of Modern Art. Organized jointly by Robert Storr, curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, and Nicholas Serota, director, Tate Gallery, London, Robert Ryman is the most comprehensive exhibition of the artist's work ever held in the United States. Comprising some eighty works from 1955 to the present, a considerable number of which have never before been seen in this country, the retrospective reveals the subtle variety and sensuality of Ryman's work.

It will be on view through January 4.

While Ryman practices the most reductive form of painting, generally limiting himself to white paint and a square format, his work is nonetheless both intensely expressive and visually rich. By varying the scale and material of the supports he paints on, the brushes and gestures he uses, and the fasteners with which he attaches the works to the wall, Ryman explores myriad formal possibilities while realizing paintings of unusual elegance and luminosity.

Arranged chronologically in the museum's newly renovated third-floor Painting and Sculpture Galleries, Robert Ryman's work is installed with the artist's participation. Ryman has said, "My paintings don't really exist unless they're on the wall, as part of the wall, as part of the room."

Ryman is often described as a Minimalist, and associated with such artists of the 1960s and 1970s as Sol LeWitt, Robert Mangold, and Donald Judd. Yet the exhibition's examples of his early paintings reveal Ryman's work to be rooted in the art of the 1950s and the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism. These paintings form the first ten years of his career, few of which have ever been exhibited in this country, are executed in traditional mediums such as casein, gouache, and oil. "Gritty or silky, feathery or caked, tightly-woven or unravelling," writes Mr Storr, "each work's surface, like its particular cast of white and particular chromatic undertones or accents, is unique and immensely sensuous."

Born in 1930, Robert Ryman grew up in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1948 he entered college at the Tennessee Polytechnic Institute and soon after switched to study music at the George Peabody School for Teachers. After serving in the army reserve band during the Korean War, he moved to New York in 1952 to pursue a career as a jazz saxophonist. Sometime the following year, he purchased some art supplies and began to make paintings.

Beginning in 1953, Ryman worked for seven years as a guard at The Museum of Modern Art, where he was particularly fascinated by the works of Henri Matisse and Mark Rothko. Significantly, this period coincided with the museum's active role in collecting and displaying the work of the Abstract Expressionists; during these years, other artists such as Sol LeWitt and Dan Flavin, who were also to make major contributions to the art of the next generation, worked with Ryman on the museum staff.

Ryman's first one-person exhibition was in 1967 at the Paul Bianchini Gallery, New York. Since 1969, he has received increasing critical attention and has had numerous one-person shows internationally. Until recently, however, Ryman's work has been more widely shown in Europe than in the United States.

Robert Ryman opened at the Tate Gallery, London, in February 1993 and travelled to the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid. After its New York showing, the exhibition travels to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (February 3 - April 17, 1994) and to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (July 23 - October 2, 1994).

NEW YORK MAGAZINE
11 October 1993

Art/Kay Larson

A PALER SHADE OF WHITE

"...Robert Ryman's art evokes the starry-eyed glee of a kid let loose in the hardware store the day before Christmas..."

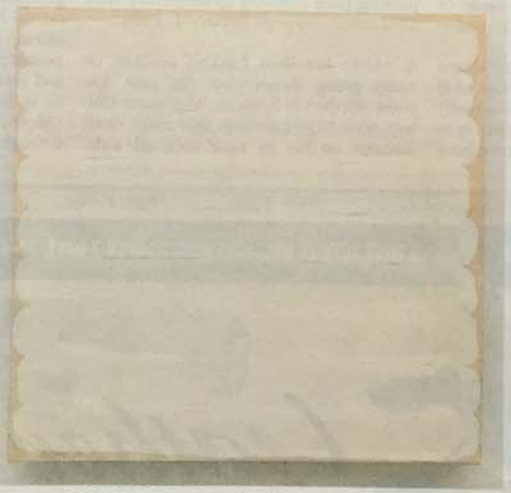
WHEN **Robert Ryman** BEGAN PAINTING PROfessionally, at the end of the fifties, leaving behind a budding career in jazz, American society was in a different place than it is now. Everything Ryman has since created owes its shape and style to that moment. So there is an odd, quite unexpected undercurrent of nostalgia in Ryman's retrospective at MOMA (organized jointly with the Tate Gallery in London). Nostalgia and faith—neither of them is now what it was then.

The faith is Ryman's expectation that the eye, stripped of all the distractions urged on it by the mind, offers an experience rich enough to sustain itself through nine large galleries at MOMA, and through 30-odd years of patient elaboration. Ryman's medium is white paint, and there is so much of it here that you would expect it to exhaust itself well before the last room. Just when it seems impossible to wring another change on white, Ryman manages. It's a tribute to the old art-school exercise of taking a paper and scissors and seeing how far you can get.

Out of this materialist optimism—the belief that seeing is enough, if one does it without metaphors, literary references, or metaphysical crutches—Ryman has fashioned a modestly fine achievement, not flashy but solid. Ryman, an artist's artist, has avoided the limelight, even when it glares right in his eyes. He has cultivated a luxury that now seems almost unimaginable in the America of the nineties: irrelevance.

By *irrelevance,* I mean not feeling forced to solve all the world's problems; accepting the right of pleasure for its own sake. Only a stable, introverted, materially confident society grants artists that right. The rewards of the material side—its sensuosity, its gratifications, its sustaining excitement—are the center of Ryman's work. To re-enter this place of simplicity and tranquillity, and to realize how strange it feels, is to ponder what's happened to us in 30 years.

In the time frame of American art, Ryman's career began midway between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism; he arrived about the same time as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Agnes Martin, and he shares certain predilections with each of them. Lacking formal art training, he worked as a guard at MOMA, and mused on what he saw. It was the era summarized in Stella's famous mot: "What you see is what you see." Ryman was too early to be a true Minimalist—a movement epitomized by Donald Judd and his industrially milled, high-gloss boxes. He was too late for Abstract Expressionism, which was beginning to disintegrate; artists of his age realized that the painterly gesture had become a fetish. For a while, Ryman fit nowhere.



LEAP OF FAITH: *An untitled Ryman from 1965.*

Ryman's first painting is mostly orange. Immediately afterward, he began to hide his background colors under a heavily worked white skin. Each painting, from then to now, exploits a single type of stroke, repeated to give each picture a particular kind of character. The endless virtuosity of white-on-white depends on how the paint is laid down: quickly, slowly, broadly, thinly, thickly, transparently, horizontally, vertically, on a grid, on a hard flat surface, on a soft flat surface, on a thick panel, on a thin panel, on linen, on aluminum, on fiberglass. And so on.

Ryman's career didn't take off until the sixties. By then, he was perfectly positioned to become a hero of the Minimalist era. His work framed the discussion (and there was endless discussion) about the painting-as-object and its physical support. As dry as that sounds—why should you care how the painting attaches itself to the wall?—it's probably the most important half of Ryman's contribution.

You should be clued in right away by the masking tape—its corners neatly sliced and folded—that covers the edges of the wooden frames in the earliest pictures. To your eye, the masking tape *is* the frame. The tape has been newly applied for this show, so it looks minty-clean. It testifies to the beauty of the matter-of-fact materials of the artist.

Since then, the support has gone through the same exponential cell division as the paint. Ryman has used paper held to the wall with Band-Aid-size pieces of masking tape. Canvas framed by wax paper and stapled to the wall. Wood pegs stuck into the wall to support a piece of Gator board. Plastic bands like a headband holding the object. Aluminum bands sanded so they glitter like rhinestone dust. Copper sheets, both green and coppery. Anodized-aluminum sheets held by rivets. Lumasite (a sheet synthetic akin to plastic) held by black oxide steel bolts. Or painted bolts, or cadmium bolts, or even bolts that have been moved once so they leave holes. And so on.

Ryman's art evokes the starry-eyed glee of a kid let loose in the hardware store the day before Christmas. Every bin holds some awesome new possibility, some exciting new substance. (See the Dickensian description of *Advance,* 1976: "Oil on blue Acrylivin with vinyl, Elvacite, and sanded plexiglass fasteners with cadmium bolts.") Ryman applies himself to each discovery with the precision of a surgeon, but there is a poetry that peeks out nonetheless. We might think it's not allowed, since the Modern's catalogue, by MOMA curator Robert Storr, laboriously instructs us in what this work is not: not transcendence, not escapism, and so on. He's right, but he also protests too much. (In

line with this determination to liberate Ryman from explanations, MOMA has eliminated labels. Most of this work is untitled anyway. You can pick up a map and a checklist at the gallery entrance.)

A retrospective allows us to decide what we want to make of it. The artist steps into the present and takes his chances. In Ryman's case, you realize that material presence always relates to the natural world, or the industrial world, or—as here—to both. The third category of changes wrought by Ryman deals with white, which comes in as many varieties as the Eskimo words for snow: a thin, glittering white, like ice crystals swirling over icy pavement; a fluid, melted-vanilla-ice-cream white, puddling at the end of each stroke; a foggy white-out white, thick as a California coastal fog bank; a don't-mess-with-me industrial enamel white; a thick toothpaste white laid down in a crescendo of commas; a stain-on-the-linen white; a broad white wash put on with what looks to be foot-wide bristles; a dried-over-night-puddle-of-ice-cream white made of paint sanded and resanded to a consistency like parchment. And so on.

So much whiteness eventually cleans out the brain, like a blizzard whose chill finally seeps into your bones. It's actually a disappointment when Ryman gives in to a colorist impulse and does something with gray steel or aluminum. Poetic analogies arise—I kept thinking of classical Japanese poetry, for reasons I can't explain. Emptying out induces reveries that aren't possible during normal life. Usually, the brain supplies a constant stream of voice-overs, like talk radio without an OFF knob. The Whitney Biennial was like a battle of the rap songs; the artists were determined to replace your voice-overs with their own. People were perhaps annoyed at having someone else's voice forced on them.

Ryman is a classicist. He had no preconceptions when he started, and he knew almost nothing of art history. He arrived pure, and he stayed that way. The experience is primally simple: just the materials of art, and the opportunity offered the mind to clean up its act. That this process is transcendental is not Ryman's concern. But it *is* our concern, and we have as much to say about it as he does. Fortunately, by the end of this show, the impulse to argue is gone. The shape of what Ryman once called "the paradoxical absolute"—he inscribed it on a painting from 1958—is up to you. (11 West 53rd Street; through January 4, 1994.)

IN BRIEF: **Jonathan Lasker**, DENIZEN OF many group shows over the past few years, appears at Sperone Westwater Gallery, with large paintings that make small variants on his by now habitual style. Lasker has turned the picture surface into a battle of warring sign systems: Each painting offers orderly rows of gestural "writing" overlaid with freer scribbles, and pseudo-graffiti "writing" on top of that. It's like a medley of undecipherable hieroglyphics from various unidentifiable Egyptianesque tribes. Lasker practices a kind of linguistic-cultural appliqué—almost too courant. He would be the perfect illustrator for a journal of semiology. On the other hand, these are at least smart. (142 Greene Street; through October 23.)

Cal Arts alumnus **Gary Simmons** had a delicate painting in the Whitney Biennial: commercial cartoon figures stereotyping black people, which Simmons redrew and then erased, to express his distress. His first solo show releases the anger, and is better for it. There are tarpaulins hung from hooks—a common motif now among painters-*refusés*—covered with edgy simulacra of advertising slogans, I.D.'s, and other visual assaults on the brand-name-obsessed generation. A wall of 850 Polaroids focuses on real Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem residents. In large studio shots downstairs, people pose in front of the banners. People and texts abide somewhat uncomfortably, as in life, testing the limits of tolerance. (Metro Pictures, 150 Greene Street; through October 23.)

THE NEW YORK OBSERVER
4 October 1993

White Squares at MoMA: Ryman a Minimal Talent

By Hilton Kramer

A Critic's View

How minimal do you like your Minimalism? Completely anonymous, or with some telltale hint of personality? In a big, showy format, or mini-sized? In series, or in single, isolated examples? Painterly, or hard-edged? Locked into immaculate, geometrical grids, or smeary, soft-edged and even runny? Is some discernible show of texture permitted, or do you prefer your Minimalism as smooth as a vinyl kitchen counter?

And speaking of vinyl, what sort of materials do you prefer in your Minimalism? Paper or canvas? Sheet metal or masking tape? And do you favor your Minimalism framed or unframed, tacked to the wall or hanging from it? Given the immense range of materials available to the Minimalist artist today, these can be vexing questions. Or perhaps they are only minimal incitements to curiosity. It depends, I suppose, on the artist's temperament—something that Minimalist painters and sculptors tend to have a lot of, even if they are temperamentally disinclined to advertise it in their work.

Questions about facture and format and materials inevitably loom very large in the Minimalist mind, for so much else has been dropped from artistic consideration. Minimalist artists are radically dependent upon such questions for whatever little openings into the tiny realm of innovation they permit themselves. And while innovation is always kept to a radical minimum in Minimalism, it is desperately important for some minimal degree of innovation to be discernible in Minimalist art lest it be seen to be only an endless recycling of the same minimal conception.

For newcomers to the minimal pleasures of Minimalism, perhaps the best place to begin their examination of the

IL GIORNALE DELL'ARTE
Torino, Italy
March 1993

Ryman alla Tate

C'è del colore sotto il pallore

Una retrospettiva del minimalista americano

LONDRA. Una retrospettiva di Robert Ryman è l'evento inverno-primavera in calendario alla Tate Gallery.

Aperta dal 17 febbraio al 25 aprile, la mostra si sposterà dall'8 giugno al 23 agosto al Museo Nacional Centro Reina Sofia di Madrid, dal 22 settembre al 4 gennaio 1994 al Museum of Modern Art di New York, dal 3 febbraio al 17 aprile '94 al Museum of Modern Art di San Francisco e dal 23 luglio al 2 ottobre al Walker Art Center di Minneapolis. La selezione delle 80 tele si deve a Nicholas Serota, direttore della Tate Gallery e da sempre grande ammiratore di Ryman, di cui aveva già curato una mostra alla Whitechapel Art Gallery nel 1977, e da Robert Storr, del Museum of Modern Art di New York. Nonostante i primi lavori di Ryman risalgano al 1954, le sue opere non sono state esposte fino alla fine degli anni '60, mentre si è dovuto attendere il 1972 per la sua prima personale in un museo. Di conseguenza, la critica ne ha collocato la ricerca in ambito minimalista, riferendosi soprattutto alla vasta produzione di Ryman incentrata su stesure bianche e sull'assenza del colore. Eppure un'analisi più approfondita delle prime opere rivela accenni che farebbero pensare ad origini pittoriche legate all'Astrattismo storico. È in questa nuova luce che sono state allestite le recenti esposizioni al Dia Center for the Arts di New York (1988-89), al Renn Espace d'Art Contemporain di Claude Berri, a Parigi (1991-92) e all'Hallen für Neue Kunst di Sciaffusa, dove le opere di Ryman sono rimaste esposte per diversi anni e in cui presto si aprirà una nuova mostra, dal 2 maggio al 31 ottobre.

La retrospettiva della Tate conferma questa nuova lettura di Ryman, presentando una selezione delle primissime opere, precedenti al 1960, in cui compare «Untitled (Orange Painting)», realizzato fra il 1955 ed il 1959 e mai esposto prima d'ora. L'esecuzione di «Versions», una recente serie di sedici dipinti realizzati con la stesura di un sottile strato di pigmento bianco su di un'imprimitura di base colorata, eseguita su lana di vetro, dimostra poi, non senza sorpresa, che in Ryman è ancora vivo l'interesse per il colore. In catalogo, un saggio di Storr e commenti introduttivi ai dipinti esposti, basati su interviste all'artista, realizzati da Catherine Kinley della Tate Gallery e da Lynn Zelevansky del MoMa (**R.B.**).

THE INDEPENDENT
Page 2

Much ado about nothing

"It's *not* a blank canvas," protested Robert Ryman, the American abstract artist, standing before one of his canvases – as flawlessly smooth and white as the Tate Gallery's wall behind it. "It's got a lot in it," he added. "This has to do with the light. It looks very different in different light."

Ryman had flown into London from New York last week for a retrospective exhibition of some 75 works. Opening at the Tate tomorrow, and organised in association with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the show will pay homage to one of the leading figures in American abstract art – an artist who is said to have bridged the gap between Minimalism and Abstract Expressionism through his primarily "white paintings".

For Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery, Ryman is "one of the most important abstract painters of his generation. By limiting himself to an area of the palette, as it were, but working on all kinds of materials and surfaces, he has stretched the boundaries of painting. In particular, he has drawn attention to the importance of light in painting."

For Massimo Carboni, writing in *Contemporary Artists*, "the great majority of Robert Ryman's pictures are rectangular in shape and painted in white. They refer to nothing beyond themselves: they are simply surfaces covered with paint. Thus what comes clearly to the fore is the language, or rather the various languages, of the material, released from any obligation to depict actual existing phenomena." For Matthew Collings, in *City Limits*, the problem with Ryman's all-white paintings is that "the people who tend to go on about them divide too much into saints or philistines. The paintings themselves are a bit like that – at once inward and meditative, and all too obvious." And for John McEwen, reviewing the 1970s Whitechapel show in the *Spectator*, "Ryman's art is about sensation, the physical sensation of painting and visual sensations thus revealed . . . Ryman is at his best when he is least constructional and most painterly."

Almost every painting in the retrospective is white, or a shade of it. Some are so minimalist that there is barely a sign of their having been touched by human hand; others are heavy with tempestuous swirling patterns in thick *impasto*. Some have underlayers of one or several colours – blues and greens in one, deep reds in another – subtly peeking through curving, often biomorphic forms in heavy white paint. In a number of works, the bare canvas shows through – either at the edges, almost as a frame, or peeking through the painted areas, playing with finished and unfinished surfaces. Many of these works are seductively sensuous, calming on the eye and, indeed, beautiful.

'The great majority of Robert Ryman's pictures refer to nothing beyond themselves: they are simply surfaces covered with paint'

But his most minimal canvases are not "easy" works for the uninitiated. For the benefit of those who draw a blank at what are – on the surface – blank canvases, a direct if philistine question seemed the best approach: how would he explain to the man on the street the difference between a canvas painted with white household enamel and the wall decorated in household paint by gallery staff? "What I'm doing is different," he said. "I'm not doing what a wall-painter does. They wouldn't paint a wall like this. It wouldn't have this depth or size." He giggled. "It may look easy, but any good painting looks easy, as if no struggle was involved . . . If you look at a Matisse, it looks like he just picked up a brush and did a few strokes, as if by magic. That's the mark of a good painting."

Simon Wilson, the Tate Gallery's Head of Interpretation, agreed that "it's wrong to say it's a blank canvas. It's a monochrome. There's a great deal of incident in it . . . Well, maybe it's wrong to say a *great* deal of incident. But it's not blank. It's got a canvas on which there is paint . . . It's a painting as much as a Rembrandt is . . . Anyone can paint a Rembrandt once Rembrandt's done it." Really?

"Yes, well, I'm exaggerating slightly to make a point . . . Ryman's playing games with what a picture is . . . He's thinking about paint, questioning the nature of paint. It's a painting about painting, questioning the nature of reality. A great deal of modern art is about that." They are, he explained, a logical extension of the other works.

Ryman, born in 1930 in Nashville, Tennessee, has lived and worked in New York since the 1950s. He didn't follow a conventional route to becoming an artist, never attending art school. After National Service, in the US Army Reserve Band, he went to the capital to study with a jazz pianist. He took odd jobs to support himself. Inspiration to become an artist came to him at the Museum of Modern Art in New York – where he worked as a guard for seven years. He spent most of the day taking in Cézannes and Matisses, as well as American abstract painters such as Rothko, Stella and Pollock. Then, one day, he decided to buy some paints and have a go himself – "just seeing how the paint worked, and how the brushes worked".

"The disadvantage of not going to art school", he said, "was that it took longer to work things out. I've had to learn myself about the paint, through books and asking other artists. But then you really know it."

'People expect pictures to have some meaning. There isn't that problem with music. They don't think: Where is the meaning?'

He picked up one of several small pictures, waiting to be hung. "This is the first painting I ever sold," he said. "I sold it for $70, it says on the back." He giggled. "That was a lot for me." He refused to discuss the prices his work fetches these days. "It dilutes it." In fact, his auction record is $2.3m, paid in 1989 for a 1978 painting called *Summit*.

Changing the subject, he walked over to *Orange Painting*, from the 1950s, which he considers his first professional work. It is, unusually, not white but orange. He giggled. Asked why, he said, "Well, it's so . . . er, orange." As with several of his works, he could not recall the technique used. "I don't remember the process. There are probably all kinds of things going on there. It didn't start off orange, I'm sure." Indeed, specks of green paint show through the orange, and round the sides of the canvas. "That's important," he said, pointing them out.

Several times, he mentioned that seeing his work this way – propped up against the wall, awaiting hanging – didn't do it justice. "On the wall, it completely changes. It comes alive." Indeed, the hang is so important, he came to London early. "As they're paintings, not pictures, they must work with the space, the walls and each other." Not pictures? No, he insisted. "Because they're not representational, they're not pictures. They're not abstract either, in that they're not abstracted from anything . . . There are no frames like on pictures . . . When you look into my paintings, you expect to see something. But there isn't a picture."

He understands, though, why people have difficulty with such a concept. "They're approaching the work in the wrong way, thinking: What is it? What does it represent? A symbol? People expect pictures to have some meaning. There isn't that problem with instrumental music. They don't think: Where is the meaning . . ? This should be easier than works with symbols . . . where you have to study it and figure it out. With this, it's more immediate."

Time was up and Ryman was whisked away for a television interview. A guard had been watching us, looking at the paintings. Would he be inspired by Ryman's show to take up painting too? What did he think of the work? He smiled inscrutably.

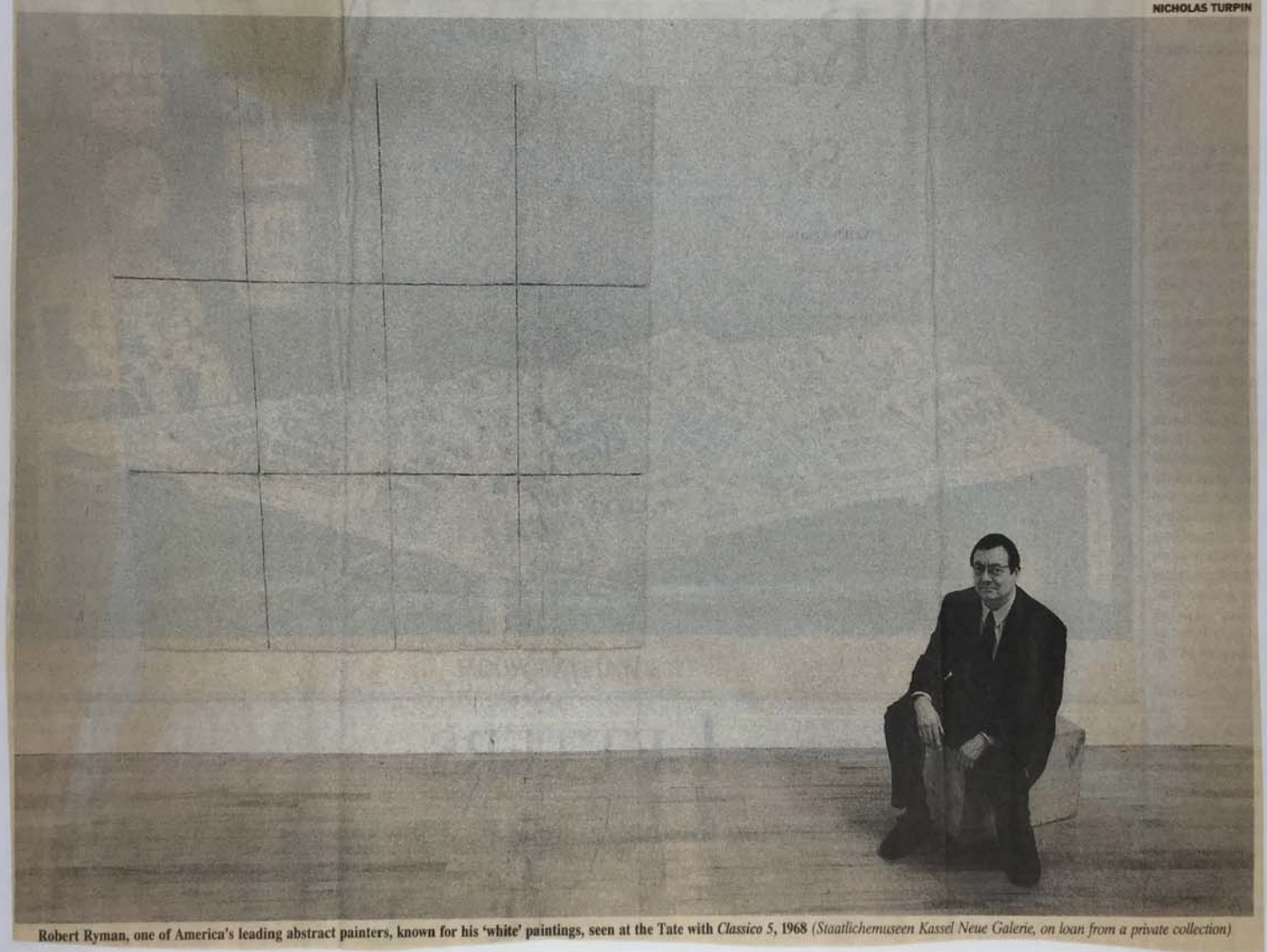
□ *Robert Ryman: Tate Gallery, Millbank London SW1 (071-821 1313) 17 Feb-25 Apr; £3, concs £1.50*

THE INDEPENDENT
London, England
16 February 1993

IL SOLE 24 ORE
Milan, Italy
31 January 1993

Robert Ryman paints in any colour, so long as it's white. **Dalya Alberge** met the artist and drew a blank

NICHOLAS TURPIN



Robert Ryman, one of America's leading abstract painters, known for his 'white' paintings, seen at the Tate with *Classico 5*, 1968 *(Staatlichemuseen Kassel Neue Galerie, on loan from a private collection)*

IL SOLE 24 ORE
Milan, Italy
31 January 1993

LONDRA

Robert Ryman alla Tate Gallery

Alla Tate Gallery di Londra si annuncia per il prossimo 2 febbraio l'inaugurazione dei nuovi acquisti; una parte delle opere esposte durante gli ultimi mesi tornerà nei depositi per fare spazio a opere diverse: tra queste lavori di Barbara Hepworth, di Jan Hamilton Finlay, Christian Boltanski, Jannis Kounellis e, tra gli autori già classici, Piet Mondrian, Henry Matisse, Auguste Rodin, Henry Moore e Mark Rothko. A partire dal 17 febbraio avrà inoltre luogo una grande retrospettiva dedicata al minimalista americano Robert Ryman, nato a Nashville nel 1930 e stabilitosi definitivamente a New York agli inizi della sua carriera artistica. Attraverso una formazione composita, che lo vide come jazzista e come custode del Museum of Modern Art di New York, ha "eletto" a propri maestri i pittori della corrente espressionista astratta e dell'action painting, giungendo in tempi molto precoci a una ricerca di stampo preconcettuale: le sue opere utilizzano solamente il colore bianco, scelto tra le composizioni chimiche più diverse e soprattutto steso con pennellate differenti per dimensione, intensità, spessore. Duplici le finalità: da un lato l'artista desidera indagare il processo della pittura in tutti i suoi aspetti tecnici e artiginali, riducendo al minimo l'aspetto rappresentativo e cromatico; dall'altro egli intende provocare nell'osservatopre una piacevole sensazione di assoluto, di benessere e verità, come accade nell'ascolto della musica. La mostra, organizzata di comune accordo anche con il Moma di New York, si trasferirà in quella sede oltre che nei musei di Madrid, San Francisco e Minneapolis. (*Angela Vettese*)

51

La Tate Gallery a Londra

BRUSHSTROKES

WHILE working as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Robert Ryman was soon on intimate terms with the work of early modern masters.

Cezanne and Matisse made a particular impression. He was drawn to their technical virtuosity and sensuous immediacy. Then he looked closely at American abstract painters, from Rothko and Stella to Pollock and Kline. He decided to become an artist.

He is renowned for his controversial "white" paintings, which hang in a retrospective show of his work at the ***Tate Gallery*** *until April 25. There are 75 pictures from the mid-'50s to the present day. The show has been jointly organised by the Tate Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.*

Born in Nashville, Tennessee, Ryman first loved music, particularly jazz. It was while he was studying with a jazz pianist in New York that he became a guard in the museum.

In the ***Clore Gallery*** *at the Tate, the last show in the series of Turner's work is open until May 17. Turner: The Final Years examines his output in the 1840s. Most know such works as Rain, Steam and Speed and there were numerous other revolutionary watercolours, although, physically, the artist was declining.*

As though in sympathy, he painted Venice as it crumbled; hazy, crisp and suffused by the setting sun. He also painted the Alps with various atmospheric effects.

Among the current spate of watercolour exhibitions, that selected by Joan Key at the ***Curwen Gallery*** *in Windmill Street, Bloomsbury, until March 13, emphasises the abstract use of colour.*

Nine artists including David Austen, John Copnall, Marilyn Hallam and Lucia Nogueira, show work that has not been chosen for its genteel qualities of delicacy and design nor for its meditative and ritualistic nature, but for its affinity with colour.

Key says: "Watercolour is the most transparent of media and must be handled with considerable strategy if it is to retain the freshness of surface that is innate to its character.

"As it dries and the water evaporates, there is only the finest residue of pigment deposited, and watercolour is highly dependent on the colour and surface of its ground for its physicality and luminosity."

In the last century, Walter Greaves and his brother Henry took James McNeill Whistler on sunset trips along the Thames at Chelsea. In gratitude Whistler gave the brothers art lessons. Now Walter's paintings, drawings and etchings of the river are on show at the ***Michael Parkin Gallery*** *in Motcomb Street, Belgravia, until March 5.*

Greaves was friendly with Whistler for 20 years but then came the break, leaving Greaves virtually destitute for the rest of his long life.

This show documents his memories and remaining aspects of historic Chelsea.

HAMPSTEAD & HIGHGATE EXPRESS
London, England
26 February 1993

FINANCIAL TIMES
London
23 February 1993

Minimal into the invisible

William Packer reviews Robert Ryman at the Tate

9415

The Robert Ryman retrospective, jointly organised by New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Gallery, which opens its international tour with its showing at the Tate, is as important as it is timely. It is sure to puzzle quite as many as it will irritate, and as many again both at once, but it also comes at a moment when the serious questioning of the received wisdom and prejudices of the avant garde has risen to the surface, to be aired on all sides.

We can safely disregard the nine-days'-wonder school of journalistic response, with its instinctive anti-modernism which amounts to a profoundly anti-art philistinism – all art was modern in its day. But what seems to have happened is that a number of the more serious commentators have come quite independently to a broadly similar conclusion. For all the creative energy and excitement generated by the modern movement, in all its forms, over the past century and more, for all the profound truths of human experience it has realised, and for all the very real creative achievements that have marked its course, we have come at last to recognise that when the avant-garde becomes academic, it is more than time to take stock. It should be the stuff of serious and constructive debate.

What must be challenged is the assumption that whatever may be identified as *avant-garde* is of itself important and significant: from which it follows that the common curatorial and international dealing view that all too patently finds interest, so far as contemporary art is concerned, only in art of such a kind, is dangerously narrow, partial and unfair. The real usefulness of this Ryman exhibition is that it is both wonderfully even-handed and particular, offering both sides of the question, the radical and the academic, in the clearest terms. Such considerations were doubtless far from the Tate's mind when arranging it, seeing the show simply as the celebration of an established and respected modern painter. But it is exactly what it should be doing, presenting the work at issue, holding the ring.

The justification for a great deal of modernist activity has always been not so much the actual production of great art, or of art at all, but rather as the necessary experiment and investigation into what Art is, or might be, and into the mechanics, actual or potential, of its achievement. What has always bedevilled the debate has been the mindless subsequent acceptance that the fruits of such activity, whatever else they are, are also, without question, works of art. Art is what artists do, or propose, and so it follows that a walk in a field, a bare canvas, a beer can, a proposal, a mere idea, may itself be elevated to the status of Art. It is a seductive heresy, but heresy still.

In Robert Ryman we have an artist who was actively engaged with what was, in the 1960s, one of the central issues of painting. Following upon the more intuitive indulgences of abstract expressionism, the tougher questions were addressed, of what a painting was, and how to make it more itself. If an image is but an illusion, leave it out. If a painting is but a coat of paint upon a surface, leave it at that. And if variations of colour or surface-texture begin to seem arbitrary and unnecessary embellishments, then reduce the variation to uniformity, and drain the colour away until only white is left.

The most fascinating part of the show is indeed that given to this earliest phase in

FINANCIAL TIMES
Page 2

Robert Ryman's 'Untitled', 1958: one of the few pictures you can actually see

Ryman's progress – he is now 62 – when he was wrestling with these problems, simplifying and recomplicating his surfaces and, in the process, achieving results that were highly personal, inimitable, and often, in the sensuality of the paint itself, very beautiful. But just how reductive, how simple, could he afford to be? The deceptive aesthetic of simplicity too soon seduced him, and he has been playing the game of elegant, pseudo-radical simplicity ever since, sustained it must be said (and good luck to him) by the enthusiasm of the museums and the market place.

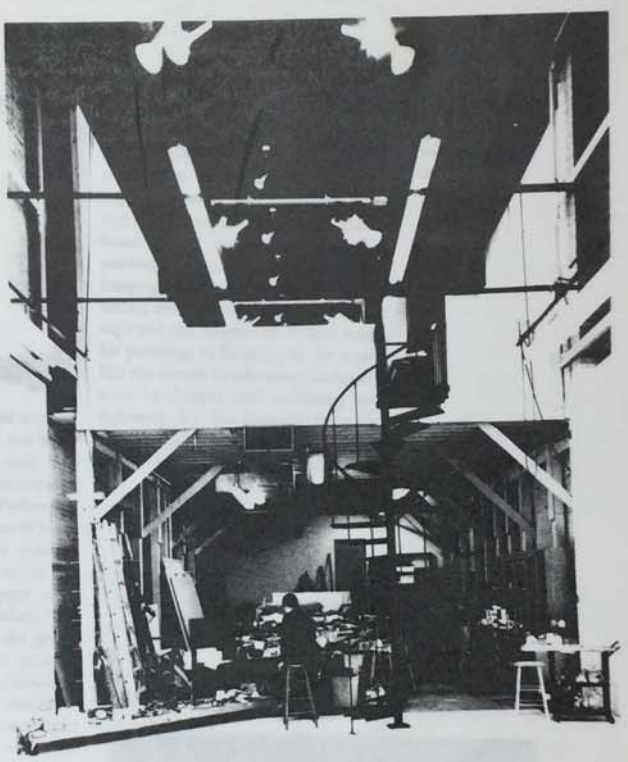
Successive stripes of paint cross the canvas, leaves inevitably a record of every insensible variation of touch and pressure. Every painter who ever primed a canvas knows the wonderful thrill of that first loaded brush, and has played the game of leaving it that, or just one more, and just another – but it is only a game. We all know that to put anything, anything at all, on a bare white wall is to invest it for the moment with an aura of cosmic significance. A blank sheet of paper, four pins to describe a square, a length of aluminium beading – to go through the later rooms of this retrospective is to see the radical minimalist become but an aesthete working his endless decorative variations, and wondering to himself: whatever next? A sad business.

★

The Lisson Gallery's *Out of Sight: Out of Mind* is another salutary and entirely justifiable historical exercise, but again the fundamental issue is inescapeable. It is an ambitious group show which deals rather more comprehensively with the graphic, photographic and cerebral manifestations of 1960s and early 1970s conceptual art than *Gravity & Grace*, at the Hayward, has lately done for sculpture of the time.

From Carl André and Art & Language to Bob Law and Bill Woodrow, it offers a stimulating and enjoyable trawl through the fashionable and technical preoccupations of the time, a ferment of ideas and possibilities. But as Art? Bruce Maclean at his most ironical, with photographs of his evaporated puddle, and of himself as Henry Moore's "Fallen Warrior", says it all.

Robert Ryman: Tate Gallery, Millbank SW1, until April 25, then on to Madrid, New York, San Francisco and Mineapolis; sponsored by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation and the Patrons of New Art. "Out of Sight: Out of Mind": Lisson Gallery, 67 Lisson Street NW1, until April 3



Ryman at work in his studio 1984
Photograph: Doris Quarella

CATALOGUE
Includes a full-length essay by Robert Storr, with new information from the artist. Approx. 240pp, 80 colour illus. Paperback £19.95 at the exhibition (£25 thereafter). NB These prices are provisional

BROADSHEET
Written by Simon Wilson. 8pp, black and white illus. £1

RELATED EVENTS
See pp16 and 18 for details of lectures and p24 for films.

With assistance from the Horace W Goldsmith Foundation and the Patrons of New Art

Robert Ryman

17 February – 25 April 1993
Admission £3/Concessions £2
Free to Friends

Robert Ryman (b1930), known for his 'white' paintings, is one of the foremost American abstract artists of his generation. This retrospective exhibition, which brings together some seventy-five works, covers his career from the mid-1950s to the present day.

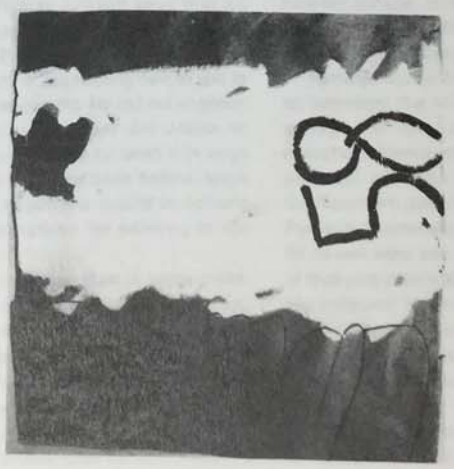
The exhibition has been jointly organised by the Tate Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Following its showing at the Tate Gallery, London, it will travel to Madrid, New York, San Francisco and Minneapolis.

Robert Ryman (b1930) 'Archive' oil on steel 1980 Robert Ryman (left)

Ryman, who has lived and worked in New York since the 1950s, was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and his earliest artistic inclination was towards music, particularly jazz. Following National Service, Ryman went to New York to study with a jazz pianist, financing himself with a variety of jobs. A number of years spent as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art allowed him time to study the great masters of the early modern period. He admired Cézanne, and particularly Matisse, whose paintings combine technical virtuosity with a sensuous immediacy of surface, echoes of which may be found in his own work. A number of American abstract painters, particularly Rothko, but also Stella, Pollock, and Franz Kline also inspired him. He was soon experimenting with the medium himself, 'seeing how the paint worked'.

Ryman has said 'white painting is my medium'. But this is in no sense limiting, as this exhibition illustrates. His paintings from the mid-1950s to the present day explore a huge catalogue of possibilities. They range from rich and succulent surfaces to equally beautiful but more coolly sensuous paintings. Edge, relief, methods of wall hanging, synthetic and natural materials, delicate and tough surfaces, are explored and juxtaposed. Ryman wants his paintings to be enjoyed. He would like the viewer to take away 'an experience of delight and wellbeing, and rightness. It's like listening to music. Like going to the opera and coming out . . . feeling somehow fulfilled.'

Robert Ryman (b1930) 'Untitled' casein and graphite pencil on paper mounted on board Robert Ryman



ATELIER
Tokyo, Japan
January 1994

Robert Ryman at MoMA

Kay Larson

"ROBERT RYMAN"
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
September 26 through January 4, 1994

PHOTO: KEN COLLINS, NEW YORK

「ケース」
"Case" 1993
Oil and Enamelac on Lumasite
121.9 x 121.9 cm

In American art, Robert Ryman is known as a master of modesty. He is one of the four most important painters who emerged at the end of the 1950s to challenge the influence of Abstract Expressionism. (The others are Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella.) Unlike the other three, Ryman was never a dramatic figure, and he did not present himself with the personal or intellectual flair expected of a leader. His role, instead, has been a quiet one. His career offers a fine example of the steadfast pursuit of materiality and faith. The faith lies in Ryman's expectation that the eye, stripped of all the distractions urged on it by the interpreting mind, offers an experience rich enough to sustain his art through nearly forty years of patient elaboration. The faith is definitely rich enough to sustain itself through nine large rooms of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where his retrospective (which was jointly organized with the Tate Gallery in London) is being shown.

Though Ryman began painting in the last half of the 1950s, he has been most influential in his relationship to the Minimalism in the 1960s. The reasons are partly historical and partly embedded in Ryman's working methods. In the late 1950s, Abstract Expressionism was beginning to disintegrate from over-use. Artists his age realized that the painterly gesture, in the hands of third-generation abstract painters, had become a muddy cliche. Ryman himself says that he appreciated such first-rank artists as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, but he felt he had nothing new to add to their achievements. He did not abandon the gesture (neither did Johns or Rauschenberg) but he used it in ways that had not been seen before, ways that would become crucial in defining new alternatives for painting in the 1960s.

Ryman's medium is white paint. There is so much of it at MoMA that you would expect it to exhaust itself well before the last room. Just when it seems impossible to do another variation on white, Ryman manages. The only painting in this exhibition that is not white is his first professional canvas, which he worked on between 1955 and 1958, and which is mostly orange. Immediately after, Ryman began to cover his background colors under a layer of white. Each white painting, from then until the present, exploits a single type of stroke, repeated to give each picture a particular kind of character. The endless virtuosity of white-on-white depends on how the paint is laid down: quickly, slowly, broadly, thinly, thickly, transparently, horizontally, vertically, on a grid, on a hard-flat surface, on a soft-flat surface, on a thick box, on a thin panel, on linen, on aluminum, on fiberglass. And so on.

Ryman's work is based in a materialist optimism: the belief that seeing is enough, if one does it without metaphors, literary references, or metaphysical crutches. Since Abstract Expressionism used all of those devices, Ryman's determination to lay down paint for its own sake was part of a revolution of changing beliefs about the role of art. His personal history encouraged this kind of literalism. Born in 1930, Ryman grew up in Tennessee and began playing the jazz saxophone in college; after serving in the army in the Korean War, he left school, without graduating, and came to New York in 1952 to study with a noted jazz pianist. The following year, he became a guard at the Museum of Modern Art, and spent several years studying the great modern paintings up close, without a guide. He would spend a week with Matisse, then a week with

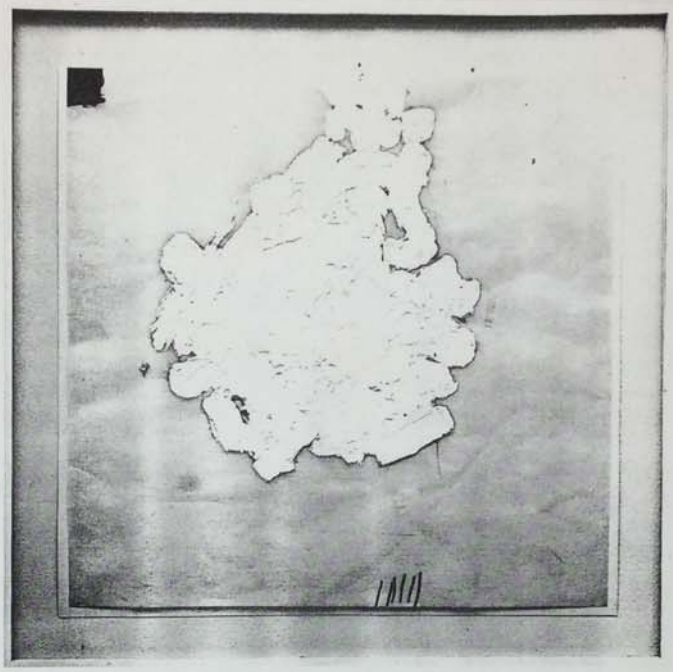


PHOTO: BILL JACOBSON

「無題」
"Untitled" 1960
Oil, gouache, casein,graphite pencil, and red crayon on tracing paper on plain paper
33 x 33 cm

Cezanne, educating himself by carefully scrutinizing their ways of handling paint.

During the last half of the 1950s, Ryman taught himself to paint, while working alone, without encouragement. It was the era summarized in Stella's famous comment: "What you see is what you see." Ryman's career finally took off in the 1960s. Though his first work pre-dates true Minimalism by nearly a decade, he became a hero in the mid-1960s to Minimalist artists who discovered important precedents in his work. Minimalism emphasized the material presence of the art object, and rejected any signs of the artist's emotions or personality; the style is epitomized by Donald Judd's industrially-milled, high-gloss boxes. In the 1960s and 1970s, Ryman's carefully constructed paintings framed the discussion (and there was endless discussion) about the painting-as-object and its physical support. Besides being a virtuoso of white paint, Ryman has been a fecund inventor of ways to attach the painting to the wall. As uninteresting as that sounds, it's probably the most important half of Ryman's contribution, and certainly the most luxurious of his varieties of physical inventiveness.

Over nearly four decades, Ryman has used an astonishing range of supports for his white pigments. These include paper held to the wall with bandaid-sized pieces of masking tape. Canvas framed by wax paper and stapled to the wall. Wood pegs stuck into the wall to support a piece of stiff composition board. Plastic bands stretched across the object like a headband. Aluminum bands sanded so they glitter like rhinestone dust. Copper sheets, both green and coppery. Anodized aluminum sheets held by rivets. Lumasite (a sheet synthetic akin to plastic) held by black oxide steel bolts. Or painted bolts, or cadmium bolts, or even bolts that have been moved once so they leave holes. And so on.

Consider the works reproduced here. In 1959, he put down a thick layer of gestural white paint on a small (20.5 by 21 centimeters) pre-primed canvas, leaving the deep edge of the canvas partly unpainted to reveal the black and orange pigment underneath the white. The painting was clearly not a vehicle for metaphor or fancy; it emphasized its literal thickness, its kinship to other real objects in the world, even to sculpture.

In 1960, just a year later, Ryman began to dislike the look of the 1959 works, which too closely resembled standard oil paintings. He began his radical experiments with the physical condition of the works. The 1960 drawing here—done in subtle layers of oil, gouache, casein, graphite pencil, and red crayon—is laid down on a simple sheet of tracing paper, which is mounted on a plain sheet of white paper. Both the paint and its support share the same caliber of reality and the same physical stature, and they fuse into a single experience that is entirely created by the object—by its elegance as well as its material stubbornness.

By 1965, Ryman had begun his earnest investigation into the expressive qualities of objectness. The small picture here (19.7 by 20.6 centimeters) is made of white enamel horizontally applied to Bristol board, a kind of cardboard. By 1976, Ryman had advanced to sand-blasted Plexiglas, held to the wall with black oxide steel bolts; the Plexiglas is covered with a dense, textural cross-hatching of white pastel crayon, almost like little waves breaking in a sea of whiteness, as though you were riding over them in a helicopter. In 1991, he cut a sheet of fiberglass matting—a felt-

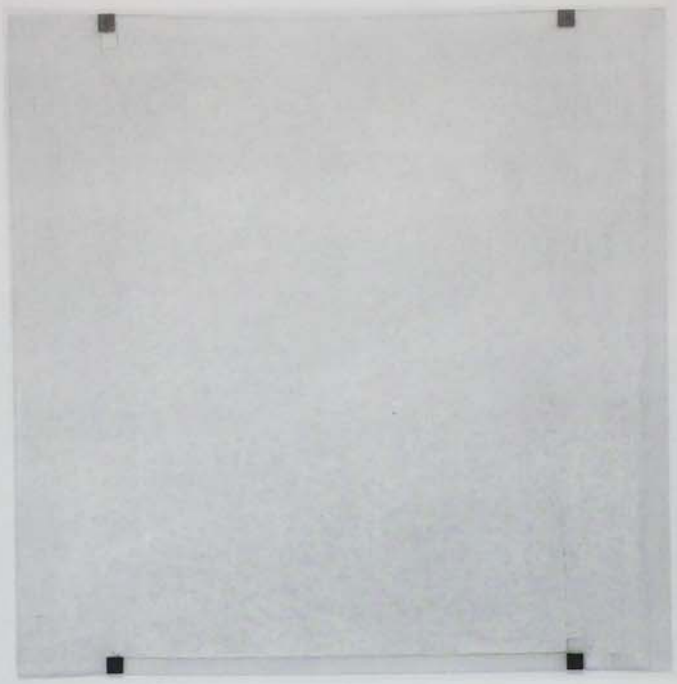


PHOTO: BILL JACOBSON

「無題」
"Untitled" 1976
Pastel and graphite pencil on sandblasted Plexiglas with black oxide steel bolts and fasteners
126.1 x 126.1 cm

like material laced with individual strands of fiberglass—and fixed it to a thin, transparent backing of wax paper; the oil pigment is laid down on the matted Fiberglas surface, and glides over the vivid, gnarly weave.

It is a testament to the power of Ryman's work that so much effort must be expended on describing it. These objects are notoriously difficult to reproduce, because the experience of viewing them is so critical to conveying their true nature. However, the principle is easy: try anything at least once. Ryman's art evokes the starry-eyed glee of a kid let loose in the hardware store the day before Christmas, where every bin holds some awesome new possibility, some exciting new substance.

Ryman applies himself to each discovery with the precision of a surgeon. The subtlety and beauty of the products of this investigation testify to the rewards of the material side—its sensuosity, its gratifications, its sustaining excitement. To enter this place of simplicity and tranquility, one must empty one's mind of mental distractions and must adopt a kind of meditative state of suspension.

Though the descriptions of Ryman's work are somewhat clinical and technical, the experience is not. Between whiteness and its support, there is an infinitely nuanced and lyrical exchange. Each painting is a new encounter with a particular kind of transcendence offered by the material presence of the natural world, or the industrial world, or both. Just as Eskimos are said to have many words for types of snow, there are many categories of white: There is a thin, glittering white, like ice crystals swirling over icy pavement. A fluid, melted-vanilla-ice-cream white, puddling at the end of each stroke (as in the painting here from 1966). A dense, foggy, whiteout white, as thick as a California coastal fog bank. A tough, no-nonsense industrial enamel white, close to the color of cream. A glossy toothpaste white laid down in a crescendo of commas, like the choppy waves of a storm-tossed white sea.

There is a white so thin it soaks into its linen support, like a stain. There is a broad white wash laid down in long horizontal strokes with a foot-wide brush, sometimes in uninterrupted gestures, sometimes in gestures that clearly halt in the middle. There is a white with the satiny-hard texture of ice cream that has dried out overnight on the countertop. There is an oily white that has been sanded and resanded to a silkiness that resembles parchment. And so on.

So much whiteness eventually cleans out the brain, like a blizzard whose chill finally seeps into your bones. It's actually a disappointment when Ryman gives in to a slight colorist impulse and does something with gray steel or aluminum.

As an artist, Ryman is a classicist. He had no preconceptions when he started, and he knew almost nothing of art history. He arrived pure, and he stayed that way. The experience he offers is thus primally simple: just the materials of art, and the opportunity they present the mind to get outside itself, to open out, to clean up its act. That this process is transcendent is not Ryman's concern. But it is our concern, because it offers the route to what Ryman once called "the paradoxical absolute." Musing on philosophy, in 1958, Ryman inscribed that phrase on one of his paintings. He has never used it again, yet it suggests the kind of thing that gives him pleasure: the real, and only the real, in all the sublime beauty and glory it paradoxically offers.

BURLINGTON MAGAZINE
London
December 1993

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

New York, Museum of Modern Art
Robert Ryman

In the 1950s Robert Ryman, a self-taught painter, appears to have been influenced by Motherwell, de Kooning and Pollock. Although he certainly studied Matisse's and Rothko's work, which he came to know while working as a guard at the **Museum of Modern Art, New York** – where eighty-three of his works are now presented in nine rooms in this glorious retrospective (to 4th January) – almost from the start he was highly self-sufficient. There are no wall labels; the only view out looks toward the Rothko in the galleries containing the New York School paintings. The show, basically in chronological order, demonstrates his enormous range. We see both classical pure paintings, and extreme expressionist pieces; his robust tiny works as well as his great, delicate monsters. After 1965, he has said, he experienced no further doubt. That remarkable claim is true.

Ryman is a very direct painter. Why then, as Robert Storr eloquently asks in his unusually good catalogue[1] – an effective (and essential) polemic against much misguided commentary – have so many critics (myself, in several earlier reviews, included) misunderstand him so badly? Partly this is because too many writers approach him with preconceived ideas; but perhaps, also because we Americans, too easily cynical, have a hard time responding to such direct work. Early on Ryman was often identified with the minimalists and the reductive monochrome painters. More recently, admired by people who hated painting, he was called the last painter. Both these views are essentially wrong-headed. Malevich or Reinhardt or Newman do not anticipate Ryman, who really has nothing to do with Johns or Rauschenberg, or with Beckettesque despair. He discovered that to overcome the crisis of New York painting in the late 1950s required abandoning the self-consciously heroic rhetoric of the Abstract Expressionists (Fig.94). But this did not mean that artists had to give up the pursuit of painterly pleasures.

'Like so much of painterly art before it, Abstract Expressionism has worked in the end to reduce the rôle of color . . . .'[2] What Greenberg failed to realise was that accepting his 'two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimination of flatness' made it possible for Ryman, who is in this way much more radical than the formalist colour field painters, to extend this modernist tradition (Fig.93). When Ryman said, 'White paint is my medium', did he not signal his relation to Abstract Expressionism? His art teaches the value of persistence, and the importance of never being distracted by fashion. In the 1980s, many critics were hostile to the idea of aesthetic pleasure, judging it politically incorrect. And yet, Ryman persisted. Like Matisse, who also can appear narrow, he is an absolute believer in the essential importance of continuity in art history. The greatest artists are necessarily self-sufficient in this way, for only someone who is genuinely undistracted is capable of forming a highly original individual style.

93. *Untitled*, by Robert Ryman. 1965. 19.7 by 20.6 cm. (Collection of the artist; exh. Museum of Modern Art, New York).

In a long series of brilliant, justly influential essays, Arthur C. Danto has argued that Warhol's great achievement was to deconstruct the traditional conception of the aesthetic. Even if he be correct, Ryman's greater, more surprising achievement is to demonstrate that the aesthetic pleasures of painterly painting can be preserved within an art of radical simplification. How is it that from these slender means, such banal things as his fasteners, supports, and signatures – elements which in themselves are in no way 'aesthetic' – he can construct these highly poetic objects? In his many interviews, Ryman seems straightforward, willing and able to explain himself. And so the enormous gap between the very literal ways he paints, and the highly imaginative results he obtains is all the more striking. His transfiguration of his materials appears magical. Perhaps here a broad historical perspective is required. Just as Chardin showed that grand or romantic subjects were not necessary for great figure painting, so Ryman, whose style no one could have imagined had they not seen his works, demonstrates that without any false heroism or brash assertiveness completely abstract paintings can take their true place in the grand tradition running back from modernism to the old masters. These are grandly happy paintings.[3]

94. *Untitled*, by Robert Ryman. 1959. 20.5 by 21 cm. (Lucy R. Lippard collection; exh. Museum of Modern Art, New York).

DAVID CARRIER
Carnegie Mellon University

[1] *Robert Ryman*, by Robert Storr. 236 pp. + 81 col. pls. + 126 b. & w. ills. (Tate Gallery, London, 1993), $29.50 PB; $49.50 HB). ISBN 0-8109-3771-9; a good eight-page text by Robert Storr, 'Robert Ryman, Painting 1955-1993' is distributed in the gallery.

[2] CLEMENT GREENBERG: 'After Abstract Expressionism' (1962) reprinted in his *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 4. Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, Chicago [1993], pp.129, 131.

[3] This review borrows ideas from an interview at the Garner Tullis Workshop, New York, 12th July 1993, discussing Rymans to be shown at Pace Gallery scheduled for 1995.

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH
London, England
21 February 1993

Any colour as long as it's white

ART

John McEwen on Robert Ryman and Sol LeWitt

WHY is there such continuing suspicion of abstract art? After all, our Celtic artisans made a considerable contribution to its genesis; and our first watercolourists, currently so well served by the exhibition at the Royal Academy, can make serious claim to be the founders of modern abstraction as the expression of personal liberation — from "ink blot" Cozens and his arbitrary landscapes to the passionate identification with the forces of nature of Turner and Constable.

Turner immediately recognised the problem posed to depictive art by photography, and his doubts have been fully justified. Faced with the onslaught of mechanical reproduction, moving pictures, television and now computerised "virtual reality", who can wonder that the art of depiction has withered?

It is challenged on the one hand by unsurpassed standards of excellence, and consigned, on the other, to a minor role in matters of record. What more natural than that many artists, confronted with a world controlled by our understanding of largely invisible forces, should resort to a parallel line of more specialist enquiry, albeit intellectually parochial beside the monumental advances of science?

It would be nice to think that the storm in a teacup over little Carly Johnson's doodle, which has had the unfortunate effect of suddenly daubing all abstraction with the same dismissive brush, will be scotched by two pleasing and rigorously logical exhibitions of formalist art currently to be seen in London and Oxford: the retrospectives of **Robert Ryman**'s paintings at the Tate (until April 25) and **Sol LeWitt**'s drawings and constructions at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford (until March 28; sponsors: Nina Ricci and BT).

The shows were not planned to be concurrent but could not be more mutually sympathetic, and should be seen in tandem. Both artists pursue a formal ideal expressed with a refined aesthetic pleasure in the making and appearance of their work, which together add up to an undeniable romanticism. Both strip their arts back to basics with a purgatorial zeal. And both share much the same history. They are in their early sixties, spent half a dozen formative years as menial members of staff at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and made their names in the 1960s.

I have found that people suspicious of the non-depictive are usually placated if they can identify some logical progression in its evolution. This is understandable. Abstraction as evasion is worthless. Ryman's mature ambition is to produce painting arising solely from the means of its making. Controlled, that is, by the size and nature of the brush; the weight, consistency and type of paint; the surface material; the gesture employed. He has found white the most revealing colour and the most receptive to light; but there are plenty of other colours in his work, even if usually used marginally or secondarily.

He calls this painting "realist" to differentiate it from the illusionism of depiction on the one hand and its abstraction on the other. Realism, for him, means not an equivalent of the observable world, but the true grit of the practical application of paint itself. Ryman is the apotheosis of the painter-decorator, a fact not to be scoffed at. The French have rightly always acknowledged the connection — there is the *peintre* and the superior *artiste peintre*. Painting, in the end, is about painting, however lofty its functional purpose; and it is only a romantic development that has divorced the artist from the artisan.

All art invariably has an element of play, and Ryman's is no exception. He even has fun with his signature. Usually a signature is no more than a mark of authenticity, but he gives it an active, even folksy, role in the painting, ringing the changes from one to the next. The viewer who does not join in these games will miss half the point of his art. All his painting is one, but none of his paintings is the same.

At times the game can wear thin; variation becomes prissy rather than constructive. This is particularly true when he paints on small and irregular pieces of unstretched canvas. His largest works, too, are often the least sensual or resolved, and the entire show, for all the benefits of cumulative effect, could usefully be smaller. The last room is a particular anticlimax.

Still, what at first might seem boring or vacuous reveals itself to be a feast of visual experiences. Thirty years ago, when he began painting, materials were much as they had always been; but technology has changed all that. He has proceeded to adopt acrylics, polymers, resins, plastics and vinyl. Could depictive painting have exploited the physical potential of these so fully? I doubt it. And could anything but a "realistic" painting interact so delicately with the light from moment to moment, from angle to angle, and with these rooms as a whole? Indeed, could any picture of a winter scene so fill one with that wonder of white? Not in my experience.

Ryman dismisses the notion that "painting is dead". "Painting is too rich and too complex to ever be finished," he writes. In his quiet and devoted way he has already

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH
Page 2

Casein and graphite pencil on paper by Robert Ryman: 'the apotheosis of the painter-decorator'

done more than enough to vindicate such optimism; but the Tate should now give us a show which makes the same point on behalf of today's depictive painters. Too much art as acquired a minimalist taste as Ryman's will have the public justifiably up in arms.

LEWITT's attitude is the same. He too wants to make art with no strings attached, to make drawing itself the subject. "In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work," he wrote in 1967. "If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance." At times this even includes practice marks in the margins.

Unlike Ryman, LeWitt includes some of his novice efforts at figurative drawing, mostly copies from old masters. They are not distinguished and give little hint of his mature obsession with linear logic. It is more revealing that he once worked as a draughtsman in I. M. Pei's architectural firm. Pei built the "pyramid" in the courtyard of the Louvre and is mad about squares and triangles. So is LeWitt and he has the draughtsman's minuscule precision, with spidery writing to match.

Anyone commended for doing "neat work" at school will respond to LeWitt's lovingly obsessive early drawings of rulered sequences of lines in a variety of coloured inks. The fact that they are not quite "perfect" gives them warmth and personality. They glimmer and glow, and their determining logic is as pleasingly simple as its effect is visually complicated. "Pure sunlight," commented one onlooker of an immaculate specimen in yellow ink.

The spidery work is what brought LeWitt fame. Latterly he has tried his hand with poster paints and "autumn collection" colours. He trespasses on various artistic territories — even Ryman's in one brushily white instance. He has also realised his sequential interests in three dimensions. Here again the earlier efforts have a home-made charm, lacking once he turns it into the big business of his latest custom-built metal sculptures. One of these late pieces looks like an iceberg, and some wag had underlined the point by adding a toy penguin. The jape was a reminder that there was more wit in early LeWitt.

□ 'Robert Ryman Prints 1975-1991' at Victoria Miro, 21 Cork Street, W1, until March 19

Some dismiss his work as a gimmick. But Robert Ryman's square, all-white pictures tell inventive, colourful stories

THE GUARDIAN
London, England
22 February 1993

Artist drawing a blank

Waldemar Januszczak

SHORT of buying the other seven sets of Carl Andre's Equivalent VIII — which adds up to 840 bricks altogether, it is difficult to imagine how the Tate Gallery could have challenged current popular art opinion more stridently than by putting on a show of Robert Ryman's work. Ryman makes white paintings — often all-whites, often square and all-white. While Andre's name is now burned into our consciousness as the maker of the Tate Bricks, Ryman has an as yet modest public infamy as the producer of "blank pictures". Can an all-white painting be mistaken for a red rag? Yes, if the bull it is being waved at is the Great British public going through one of its more vocal philistine phases.

I used to keep a collection of letters from Guardian readers that began with the assertion: "Sir, reading your last article about modern art I was reminded of the story about the Emperor's New Clothes . . .", or words to that effect. Between 1979 and 1982 I filled a desk drawer with these ENC letters and gave up when my collection reached 50. In the past few months they have started again.

What is peculiar about this mass of ENC letters is the curious shared belief of their writers that they alone have made the analogy between the fairy-tale and modern art. Every ENC writer identifies furiously with the little boy who points out that the emperor is naked. Every letter-writer thinks he or she is bravely doing the same by claiming that modern art is a con.

In fact, of course, the opposite is true. The ENC letter-writers represent the consensus of public opinion, the mass, the crowd being led. In the Hans Christian Andersen fairy-tale the little boy's voice was the only voice of protest in a sea of social agreement. In Britain today, the crowd mocks modern art. In a tabloid world where parents think it is a good giggle to enter their four-year-olds into third-rate Manchester exhibitions, watch them get accepted, then phone the newspapers, it is hardly surprising that the ENC letters are being posted again. I have seven about the Turner Prize, one each about the little girl in Manchester and Mark Quinn's head made from his own blood, and two more about the re-showing of Andre's bricks. If Robert Ryman does his stuff then I could be up to 15 by the end of the month.

As I said, Ryman paints white pictures, or rather, all his pictures are dominated by whites. In the Tate show, only the earliest work on display, an all-orange painting from 1955, abstains from the pursuit of white. This pursuit — which, by the way, is more playful than dogged — then continues for the next seven galleries. Out of those seven galleries, two are rather dull and the other five are interesting.

Ryman has had one of those lively art careers which could only happen in America. In Britain, artists plop off the end of a conveyor belt by following the well-trodden path from school to art college to success or failure. In America they career from career to career; art is a light at the end of a tunnel. Carl Andre worked in factories and steel-yards. Ryman was born in Nashville, enlisted in the Army Reserve corps, odd-jobbed all over New York, wanted to be a jazz musician, and worked for seven years as a museum guard before deciding he would give this vision thing a try.

(The Tate, incidentally, could do with a few museum guards like him.

The existing crop of grumbling paramilitaries rarely has a good word to say about the art in its charge. These individuals do the Tate a disservice, and should be replaced by younger, better-informed attendants).

While guarding the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Ryman would have seen how Mondrian used white (delicate cross-hatches), how Picasso used white (thick smears), but my guess is that his all-white oeuvre owes its biggest debt to Cézanne because it was Cézanne who pioneered the image of an artistic career as the unwavering pursuit of a defined set of goals. Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire over and over again. Ryman paints white. No two Cézannes are the same, and neither are any two Rymans.

The exhibition begins with a series of tussles between thick white surfaces and the multi-coloured paintwork beneath them; the underneaths peep through like patches of bare ground in the snow. This is white being used as a power-colour, capable of obliterating all the other colours. The paintings, from the late 1950s, are essentially examples of muscular abstract expressionism. Their effect is emotional and manhandled rather than pure and cool. Some work, others don't.

Just to underline how impure the artist's ambition is, Ryman plays a variety of cheeky picture-games with his signature. Mondrian signed his canvases on the back so as not to interfere with the delicate purist balances he was attempting. Ryman prefers the Van Gogh approach (what do you expect from a MOMA's boy?) signing himself in Vincent-size letters at curious angles, making a big deal of his name. Sometimes he even signs and dates a picture twice. The formal argument for this is that the artist is using his signature as another element in the picture-making process. But I sense the heady bravado of an army-reservist turned painter; hey MOMA, look at me!

Purity does become a Ryman goal but it takes several more years of white-exploration and in any case it never becomes an end in itself. The least interesting rooms in the show, the two dull ones out of seven, are situated on the cusp of the 1970s when minimalism was all the rage and Ryman was first of all mistaken for a minimalist, and then started trying to paint like one.

Seven white panels called VII are unusually boring. Earlier on, Ryman had underlined what a full-blooded colour white could be. Here he allows it to go all pale and insipid and bloodless and is content to arrange it in neat squares and rectangles. Andre's bricks work because their geometry strikes you as ruthless. Ryman's minimalism cannot get that tough: his earlier abstract expressionism has been bleached and thinned but is not yet discarded altogether. In the Veils sequence it goes all limp and poetic on us.

From then on the show becomes notably inventive. I particularly admired the last two galleries, set in the mid-eighties onwards, where several new kinds of white, most of them man-made, enamel on fibre-glass, Lascaux acrylic on Lumasite, go in search of mechanical finishes that are quietly beautiful in the way that the paintwork on a classic refrigerator can be quietly beautiful. If you do not like the whiteness of a white Cadillac then you will not like Transport from 1985.

There is no doubt that this career-long pursuit of a single colour could have become a mere painterly gimmick. Ryman avoids that trap by proving that there really are a million whites, each with its own tale to tell, and by treating the pursuit of white as a useful discipline rather than an artistic obsession, white provides him with starting points rather than endings. This, therefore is a useful discipline that could run and run.

Robert Ryman is at the Tate Gallery until April 25.

White magic . . . Robert Ryman's Untitled (1961). His biggest debt is to Cézanne, who pioneered the image of an artistic career as the pursuit of a defined set of goals.

THE TIMES LITERARY
SUPPLEMENT
London, England
12 March 1993

Ur-white

JAMES HALL

ROBERT RYMAN
Tate Gallery until April 25; then Madrid, New York, San Francisco and Minneapolis

Robert Storr
ROBERT RYMAN
236pp. Tate Gallery. Paperback, £25.
1 85437 114 2

In the White Cube is the title of an influential series of essays by Brian O'Doherty which was published in *Artforum* in the mid-1970s, and has since appeared in book form. O'Doherty's contention is that when entering a modern art gallery, the first thing we see is not the art, but the space: "An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art."

At first sight, Robert Ryman would seem to have deferred to the authority of the white cube more than any other artist. From 1953–1960, while working as a guard in the New York Museum of Modern Art, he experienced the world's principal purveyor of white-cubism at first hand; and since the late 1950s, he has made abstract pictures that are predominantly white. Yet Ryman's *oeuvre* is far from being a solipsistic confirmation of the pure Platonic white of the gallery, or (where reproduction is concerned) of the page. The huge range of techniques, media and configurations that he deploys throughout his Tate retrospective suggest an artist who dreams of, but never quite finds, *ur*-white. In Ryman's work, we witness white in its decadence, as much as in its ascendancy.

"Untitled 1958" is an atypically bumptious early work. A crude rectangle of white casein paint has been daubed across the middle of a squarish piece of tan-coloured paper, leaving a thin strip of bare paper at the top, and a larger strip at the bottom. In the lower section, Ryman has inserted a signature written in pencil. Elastic, wiry capitals, the letters bend a little, as though they were hard-pressed caryatids supporting a crumbling white wall. Meanwhile, the date (a "58" in blood-red paint) has crawled half way up the right-hand side of the picture; and so too, on the left, has a butterfly-shaped patch of black.

Few artists since Whistler have made such a song and dance about their signature, and the similarity does not end there. Ryman's work also makes Whistlerian points about evanescence: what is most simple, lucid and refined is seen to be fragile, under pressure.

In the early 1960s, Ryman produced a number of paintings on squares of linen. "Untitled 1962" has flecks of rust-red and blue breaking through a wriggling mass of plump white brushstrokes. The square format, which Ryman almost always uses, serves both to coalesce and actualize the image's radiant whiteness. Set against the white expanse of the gallery wall, Ryman's brilliant squiggles become like invisible worms. They attest to a good gallery, a good colour, going bad.

Much of the fascination of Ryman's work stems from the way it teeters on the edge of insipidity and nausea. His pictures wear their pallor on their sleeve. Several from the late 1960s and early 70s consist of canvas or paper that is taped and stapled directly to the wall. "Adelphi" (1967) is a huge haunting fog of white oil paint on unstretched linen canvas, stapled in place. It is framed by strips of translucent wax paper, fixed with masking tape. A makeshift, wafer-thin membrane, we suspect it could collapse or tear at any moment. This drastic form of pictorial enervation, blown up to an architectural scale, is at once soothing and discomfiting.

Ryman's work is the culmination of a cult of whiteness that starts in the eighteenth century. Winckelmann believed that the calm and limpid perfection of Greek sculpture was bound up in its whiteness, the colour to which "the eye is most sensitive", while painters like Jean-Baptiste Oudry advocated the use of different kinds of white to develop tonal subtlety. Much later, in *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater quoted a German mystic who speaks of "the mystery of so-called *white* things . . . but half-real, half-material – the white queen, the white witch, the white mass". In his essay "White and Gold", Mario Praz lamented the decline of St Petersburg, with its delirious white-on-whiteness. No longer do "capricious consumptive girls dress in white in drawing-rooms adorned with white plasterwork", and nor do women exclaim, like Marie Bashkirtsev: "Beneath this white wool, my white arms, oh, how white!" Then, of course, there is Malevich.

Sometimes one's attention wanders, but for the most part Ryman explores the mystery of so-called white things with great resourcefulness. In his hands, white can be capricious, consumptive, healthy, sickly, sacred, profane. Above all, perhaps, his work provokes a disconcerting increase in sensitivity on the part of the viewer.

NEW YORK MAGAZINE
13 September 1993

MUSEUMS

The Little Prince vs. Tiny Tim. All you need is a rag doll and a dream....

At 63, **Robert Ryman** is—or so the Museum of Modern Art will argue—an Abstract Expressionist born too late. Ryman is known for Minimalist-era white paintings in obsessively nuanced variations of gesture, touch, support, and material. His retrospective—organized by the Modern's Robert Storr and the Tate Gallery's Nicholas Serota—begins in 1953, years before Minimalism *or* Pop. (11 West 53rd Street; September 26 through January 4, 1994.)

ROBERT RYMAN, UNTITLED.

HARPER'S BAZAAR
New York, NY
September 1993

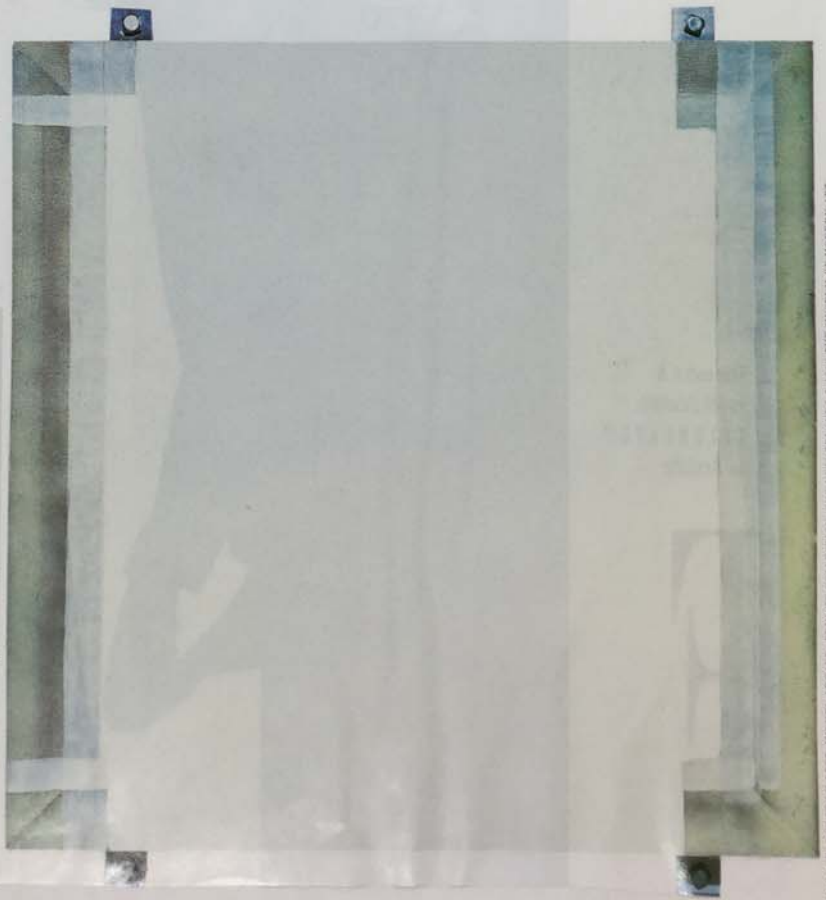
Single WHITE painting

Robert Ryman's Museum of Modern Art exhibition shows that when the artist paints a blank, amazing things start to happen. By Deborah Solomon

Over the years, many an abstract artist has gone for the color white in a big way. Yet only one artist ever has spent his entire career producing variations on the all-white rectangle. His name is Robert Ryman, and he is one of the most interesting painters around. White, for Ryman, carries none of the usual heavy-handed, chest-thumping symbolism. It's not the stuff of mystical longings or heroic renunciations but, rather, something humble and unassuming: a whiteness that's more like a whisper.

The retrospective of Ryman's work that opens this month (September 26–January 4) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City surveys the work of one of America's best-known yet least-seen artists. Over the past 20 years, he has received far less attention in America than in Europe, where audiences feel at home with the cool, hermetic elegance of Minimalist art; the artist has already been feted with major exhibitions in Basel, London, and Paris. In America, by contrast, we haven't yet seen him for what he is: not just a fabricator of blank white canvases but an artist who has worked his narrow area with an intensity—an obsessiveness, even—that may turn out to be the most memorable part of his art.

Why does Ryman insist on using white at the expense of other colors? "White is a minor part of the work," he replies nonchalantly. "I use white because it's a neutral color and allows other things to be seen." It's a shining summer day, and the artist is working in his studio, which occupies a weathered red-brick building on the fringes of Greenwich Village. A diffident man of 63, he conducts himself with a courtly air and speaks in a soft, measured drawl that betrays his Nashville upbringing. He's dressed casually in a green cotton jumpsuit, which looks strangely like a uniform and reminds me that he began his career with a seven-year stint as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art. ➤



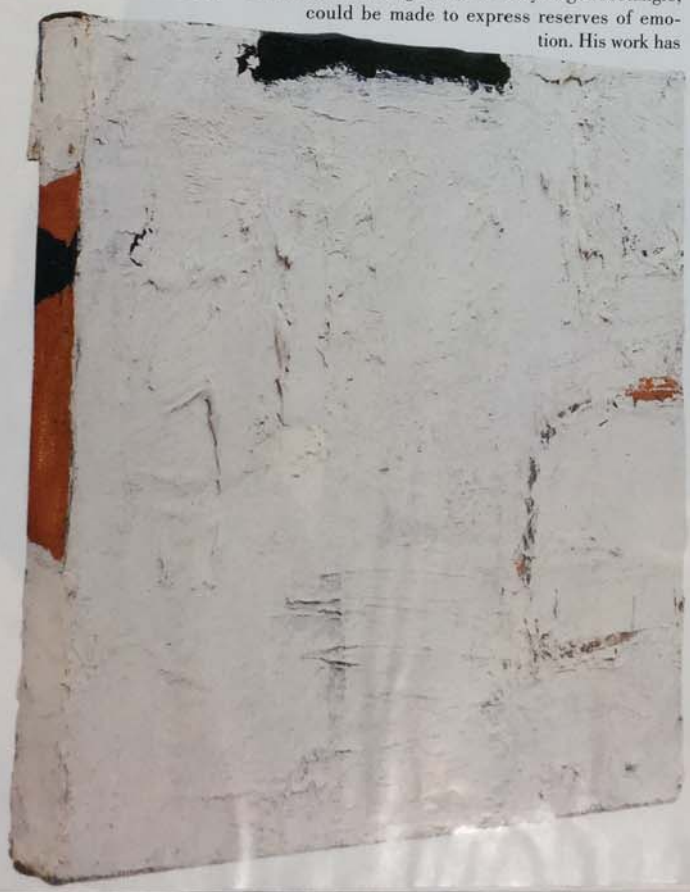
Above, the artist in his studio; right, "Access," 1983, painted on a fiberglass panel attached to the wall with steel fasteners.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM LEFT: MICHEL ARNAUD; PRIVATE COLLECTION, THE NETHERLANDS © 1993 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The Ryman retrospective might seem to indicate that old-fashioned painting is suddenly new again.

The Ryman retrospective is likely to startle because it comes at a time when the art of painting is widely presumed to be extinct. This is the year, after all, that brought us the infamous 1993 Whitney Biennial, which turned the museum into a politically correct theme park complete with video screens blaring slogans against pornography. Ryman's work is an antidote to all that action. No contemporary artist better epitomizes the rewards of pure painting. Drained of the distractions of color, stripped of all plot or figurative imagery, his work affirms the richness to be found in the deceptively simple act of daubing white pigment on a flat surface.

Not that most people think of Ryman as a painterly sort. In the mid-'60s, when everything went minimal and galleries were filled with sleek metal boxes that sat on the floor, Ryman was grouped with artists like Donald Judd and Carl Andre. Yet he's no card-carrying Minimalist. He started painting in the '50s under the spell of Mark Rothko, who taught him how a neutral and even boring form, the fuzzy-edged rectangle, could be made to express reserves of emotion. His work has since undergone many incarnations. There are small pictures with short, curly strokes applied in allover rhythms; there are paintings in which thick horizontal bands emit a landscapey light; there are later paintings on sheets of metal bolted to the wall. What remains constant is the clarity of feeling. Ryman can be described as a closet Abstract Expressionist who got swept up in the Minimalist shuffle.



An important work from his early years, "Untitled," 1959, is on exhibit for the first time and is a cornerstone of the artist's career.

His retrospective might seem to indicate that old-fashioned painting is suddenly new again. The show was organized by Robert Storr, who in 1991 gave us "Dislocations," a forerunner of the current vogue for politically inclined museum shows. There's a chance that his Ryman show, which has already been seen at the Tate Gallery in London, will be equally influential. As Storr says, "In terms of plain painting, there's a resurgence of interest." Don't be surprised if the banners flapping outside of MoMA are soon announcing a group show called "Plain Painting."

Ryman himself is loath to coin phrases or make any aesthetic prophecies. And he's definitely not someone you're likely to find on the *Charlie Rose* show. "He's the least self-promoting artist I know," says Storr. "He doesn't have a rap to give you." Instead, he stays home and does his work. His wife, Merrill Wagner, is also an abstract painter; the second of the artists' three sons is the painter Cordy Ryman.

In conversation with Ryman, one is never quite sure whether he is being stubbornly evasive or just plain reticent. He might be described as passionately neutral, if such a contradictory state is possible. He answers many of my questions with what appears to be his favorite phrase, if not his mantra: "It's fine." Do you like nature? "I don't mind nature," he replies flatly. "Nature's fine." What is it like being married to another artist? "It works out all right," he says. "It's fine."

Ryman can sound a bit technical when talking about his work (tellingly, his favorite magazine is *Science News*). He tends to refer to his paintings not as self-contained objects but as elements impinging on the space surrounding them. On the day of my visit to his studio, he had six paintings under way, each done on Lumasite, a thin sheet of translucent plastic he had nailed to the wall. While the paintings were loaded with downy white strokes and emitted a glowing blur of light, Ryman offered only this exegesis of them: "I work with the wall all the time."

I told him that I preferred to see his paintings as more traditional abstractions, in the vein of lyrical and expressive art. Did that bother him? "Those are good words," he replied with his usual equanimity, then uttered the inevitable: "It's fine." ■

TIME MAGAZINE
New York
11 October 1993

ART

A Paler Shade of White

In a retrospective, the nuanced but narrow Minimalism of Robert Ryman casts a spell

By ROBERT HUGHES

TED THAI FOR TIME

Two of the three *Surface Veil* canvases, 1971, hung in a chapel-like installation

THE MOST UNDERSTATED ART SHOW of this or any recent year must be the retrospective of paintings by Robert Ryman now on view at New York City's Museum of Modern Art. Curated by Robert Storr, it covers about 40 years of this American painter's work: a parade of 83 mostly white paintings on entirely white walls, with nary a label or a number to break the chaste spell of Ryman's strikingly unoxygenated imagination. (It was a good curatorial idea not to have wall labels, since anything verbal would have trapped the vacillating eye of any but the most determined Ryman fan. Besides, his titles don't tell you much.) Not since Kazimir Malevich's famous white square on a white ground, now somewhat yellowed by the passage of 80 years, perhaps not even since the 1890s in Paris, when a French satirist exhibited an all-white picture called *First Communion of Consumptive Young Virgins in the Snow,* has any painter come close to Ryman's enthusiasm for white.

Ryman, 63, is self-taught, a condition that may be said to show in the narrowness of his work. Born in Nashville, Tennessee, he never went to art school, never learned to draw in the formal sense, and turned to painting only after some years of trying to make it in Manhattan as a jazz saxophonist. His main exposure to painting came from working as a guard in the Museum of Modern Art during the 1950s. There he saw the work of the American Abstract Expressionists, getting a bit here and a bit there from each of them—Jackson Pollock's all-over paintings, Bradley Walker Tomlin's decorative gestural drawing, the blacks and whites of Franz Kline, Mark Rothko's hovering rectangles. What impressed him most of all was Matisse. With Matisse, Ryman says in the catalog, "there was his technical mastery, the way he could paint. When he worked, there was no fussing around. He was always direct."

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

***Untitled*, 1960: no American painter more attached to art for art's sake**

Matisse's work, however, was also underwritten by an immense flexibility and inventiveness of shape and, above all, of space-creating color. This cannot be claimed for Ryman, whose desire to create an art of Matissean elevation and sensuousness is blocked by his rudimentary sense of form and his confinement to white. Autodidacts are apt to do whatever they can do, over and over, with refinements. This may not make them negligible artists, but it can cramp the range of their work. Barnett Newman was a patriarchal example of this fact; Ryman is a filial one.

He is not given to saying much about his art, but if there is one theme to which his utterances constantly return, it's the self-sufficiency of painting: "I wanted to paint the paint, you might say." And nothing outside the paint—no figure, no landscape, no depicted space, nothing but the stuff itself. The results of this ambition can pall quite swiftly, but it's curious to note how Ryman has come to represent the last flicker of French Symbolism, as codified in the 1940s by the critic Clement Greenberg in the idea that the essential subject of art is the medium itself: that "means *are* content." There cannot be an American painter more stubbornly attached to the idea of art for art's sake than Ryman. Here is the final emergence of the beautiful nuance, not as an embellishment on some larger pictorial project but as an end in itself.

Ryman's obsessive purity of means has made him rather a cult figure in the American art world and even more of one in Europe. He is, on current charts, the chief exponent of what one might call soft Minimalism, as distinct from the hard, polemical, no-fingerprint variety of a sculptor like Donald Judd. Which is to say, Ryman's paintings are not absolutely programmed; they leave room for unforeseen effects and even accidents, and the individual traces of the artist's hand are

crucial to their visual effect. If these nuances are lost—as they almost always are in reproduction—the residue, a white or whitish square sometimes inflected with edging strips of tracing paper and tabs of masking tape, looks ridiculous. With Ryman, once the picture is transposed into another medium, it loses whatever point it may once have had.

On the wall, matters are otherwise. Some of Ryman's big pictures are thin and vacuous—the set of seven loosely brushed 5-ft. squares called *VII*, 1969, is as weak a painting as has ever been shown inside the Museum of Modern Art. But there is a kind of Ryman surface that is thoroughly pleasurable if you approach it on its own terms. It begins in the early '60s, with his way of laying a field of juicy, wriggling white marks (sometimes squeezed straight from the tube and then squished down with a blunt brush) over strokes of brown, red or blue that play hide-and-seek and create an explicit space behind the surface.

He can also, though much more rarely, create a sense of mood and evocation through white alone that seems to go beyond the medium-fixated gaze of his other work and is all the better for it. The most impressive work in this show—benefiting from a slightly theatrical, chapel-like installation—is a trio of mural-size canvases titled *Surface Veil*, 1971, in which huge, soft intrusions of denser white on a diffuse ground suggest depicted light in a way distantly related to Rothko, vaguely suggesting the large space of landscape.

Nevertheless, one is left with the impression of an artist stronger in taste than in imagination. This show—and the claims made for Ryman's work in general—recall the immortal quatrain of the late South African poet Roy Campbell:

You praise "the firm restraint with
which they write"—
I'm with you there, of course:
They use the snaffle and the curb, all
right,
But where's the bloody horse? ■

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

***Untitled*, 1962: juicy white marks over strokes that play hide-and-seek**

FINE ARTS TABLEAU MAGAZINE
Amsterdam
September 1993

Robert Ryman, Untitled, 1959, oil on pre-primed canvas, 20,5 x 21 cm., Collection Lucy R. Lippard, at the Museum of Modern Art

ROBERT RYMAN

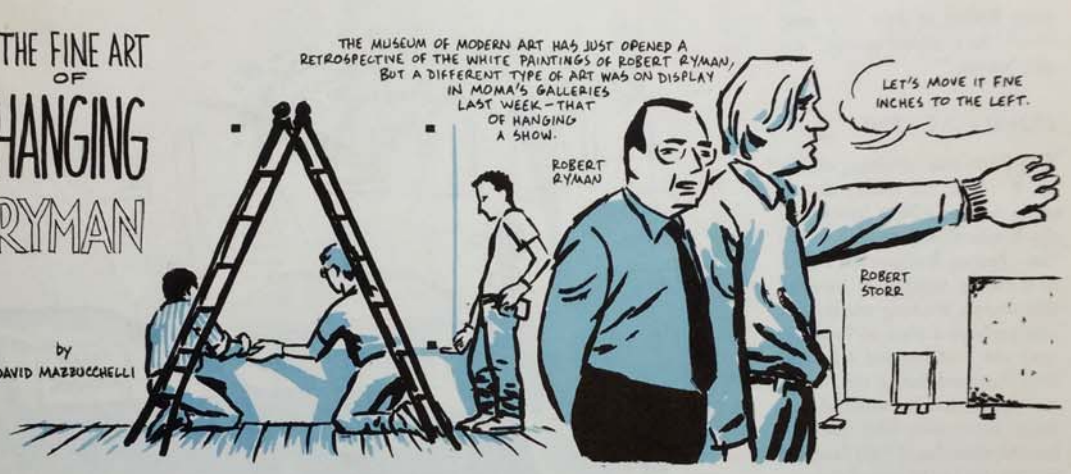
American artist Robert Ryman (born 1930) is often described as a Minimalist and associated with such artists of the 1960's and 70;s as Sol Lewitt, Robert Mangold, and Donald Judd. Nevertheless his roots are in the 1950's and the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism. Thus while often thought of as severe and cerebral, Ryman's 'white paintings' are nonetheless sensual, dealing with color, texture, touch and form. This retrospective, the largest and most comprehensive American showing of Ryman's work ever held includes 80 works and examines the artist's career from its beginning in 1955 to the present. His 1959 oil on preprimed canvas 'Untitled' for example though small (20.5 x 21 cm.), shows the influence of Abstract Expressionism in its use of color on the predominately white and thickly impastoed surface. Later he moves, in 'Surface Veil 4' to a much more minimalist style, retaining his touches on color on the edges of this large square 1970-71 oil on fiberglass on fiberboard. There's a glimpse of color, too, on his 1991 'Versions VII', an oil on fiberglass with wax paper. His 'white paintings', which though indeed seemingly minimalist evoke color and are so often seen in series.

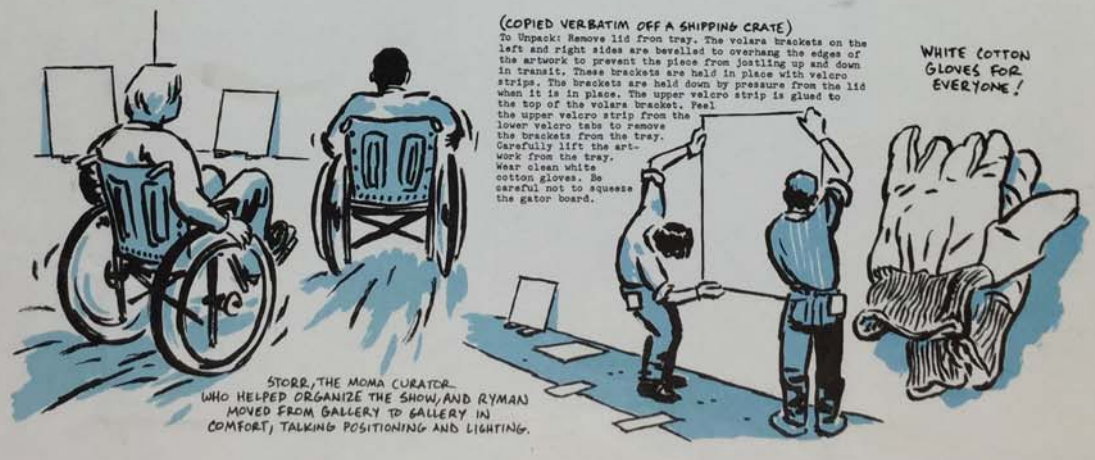
26 September - 4 January
Robert Ryman
The Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53rd Street
New York, 10019

THE NEW YORKER
4 October 1993

THE FINE ART OF HANGING RYMAN

by DAVID MAZZUCCHELLI





THE NEW YORK TIMES
24 September 1993

Review/**Art**

Robert Ryman Derives Poetry From White on White

By ROBERTA SMITH

Robert Ryman's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art is too perfect for words, and this is mostly good. The exhibition, which opens to the public on Sunday and occupies nine specially built galleries on the museum's second floor, is the largest devoted to Mr. Ryman's quietly ravishing white-on-white paintings in this country. Its 83 works span almost 40 years, from the mid-1950's, when the artist was exposed to the tenets of Abstract Expressionism while working as a guard at the Modern, to the present, when he is widely considered one of the most important painters of the postwar period.

But contrary to the usual display methods at major museums, there's not a single label or text panel in sight, a condition that even the most seasoned art viewer may find a bit disorienting. It's akin to being tossed into the deep end without one's water wings. The only typeface visible will be found in the hands of those visitors who pick up a checklist and exhibition map at the beginning of the show.

Robert Storr, a curator for painting and sculpture, who organized the show with Nicholas Serota, director of the Tate Gallery in London (where it was seen last season), is determined to let nothing distract from total immersion in Mr. Ryman's subtle, endlessly varied art. Even the windows overlooking the museum's sculpture garden have been walled up.

Despite the galleries' labyrinthine layout, as well as a certain visual and mental aridity that accrues from seeing so many spare white paintings in so many spare white rooms, the exhibition has a perfection rare in museum shows of work by living artists. It forms a self-enclosed world of painting, and visitors who look carefully can come away with a renewed sense of the medium: as a discipline, a craft and a vehicle of profound enjoyment and sensuality.

Bill Jacobson/The Museum of Modern Art

Untitled 1959 painting by Robert Ryman, at Museum of Modern Art.

Mr. Ryman's art rewards such exceptional conditions. Despite his association with relatively intellectual movements like Minimalism, Post-Minimalism and Conceptual art, he is an intuitive artist whose work is lovingly made by hand, and for the eyes alone, as Mr. Storr asserts in his catalogue essay. He has said that he concentrates so exclusively on white because it "allows for a clarification of nuances in painting," and he has played with these nuances with consummate flexibility, continually expanding without transgressing the narrow confines of his art.

Mr. Ryman was born in Tennessee, and after serving in the Army, came to New York in 1952 hoping to make his way as a jazz saxophonist. But between music lessons and occasional playing dates, he found that he had a lot of time on his hands and that the window display of his neighborhood art-supply store exerted an inexorable allure. He bought painting materials and began experimenting. The next year he started guarding art at

the Modern, and his education began in earnest.

It helped that by the time he began working, older artists like Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Philip Guston had already reduced painting to its essences. But the purity of his beginnings — free of mentors and art school — may account for the way he set out to examine the basics of painting, and with remarkable quickness turned this examination into his art.

Over the years Mr. Ryman has focused on the diversity of whiteness — of different kinds and tones of white paint on different whitish surfaces — as relentlessly as Constable pursued his different skies: that is to say, with a determination that the facts, examined carefully enough, could yield poetry.

He has painted on canvas, linen and various papers as well as on corrugated cardboard, fiberglass, aluminum, Bristol board and steel. He has painted with oil, enamel, enamelac, casein, gouache and even pastel, applying these materials in marks that can be fat and juicy or barely discernible and achieving expanses of white that range from creamy vanilla to palest gray. He has also considered the wall to be an integral part of his efforts and has experimented with ways of installing works so that they are closer to or farther from it than is traditional, using everything from fancy metal fasteners or oxidized screws to humble staples or masking tape, all of which become part of the final image.

•

One of the most striking paintings in the exhibition, for example, a large brushy white canvas of Rubenesque proportions titled "Adelphi," is stapled to the wall and framed in bands of folded wax paper fastened to the wall with masking tape. As usual with Mr. Ryman's work, such logistics announce that everything about a painting should be available for visual consumption, and that the commonest materials can be used if they look great, and great is just the word for the play of the silvery, shimmering frame of wax paper against the drifting cloud bank of brushwork at the expansive center of "Adelphi."

The show is installed in a loosely chronological fashion that alternates between the scientific and poetic sides of the artist's sensibility. In the show's first gallery, where everything dates from the 1950's, the work has a compressed emotionality. You can sense Mr. Ryman turning the components of painting over in his mind, carefully deflating the large scale and charged gestures of the Abstract Expressionists while intensifying their emphasis on paint.

After making one orange painting, he settles on white, usually applying it over other colors so that bits of yellow or black, blue or red peek through enticingly. He makes serious jokes about how much of the object should be considered part of the painting, extending his brushwork to the canvas's sides, making his signature and the date conspicuously thick or large and sometimes putting them on the sides. Nothing is out of bounds.

In the second, and most sensual, gallery, which features works from the early 60's, the characteristic Ryman surface comes into focus: a patchy field of short, quick crisscrossing strokes, sometimes curved like fat commas, that convey a frolicking, joyful, atomistic energy. In the subsequent two galleries, which culminate in "Adelphi," the Minimalist Ryman emerges. In works like "Mayco," from 1966, paint is applied with a wide brush in once-over, edge-to-edge horizontal bands that are a far cry from the atomistic surfaces that came before, but that provide an undiminished sense of lushness and pleasure.

•

Mr. Ryman is seen at his most clinical in the seventh and eighth galleries of the exhibition, in which he paints on shiny aluminum and cantilevers a painting to the wall so that it resembles a spindly-legged modern table (although these works are balanced by others painted on fiberglass, which gives their perfect white fields margins of luminous green).

And he is perhaps at his most poetic in the sixth gallery, a tiny and almost chapel-like space that holds only three looming paintings: "Surface Veil I," "Surface Veil II" and "Surface Veil III." In the similar canvases on one's left and right, huge muffled shapes of white protrude from the right like crashing waves, bringing seascapes of Marsden Hartley and Milton Avery, highly distilled, to mind. In the center work, an even field of white breaks slightly, creating the sensation of a calm horizon of land, sea or air.

If the stripped-down approach succeeds in the exhibition, a similar exclusivity hampers the catalogue. After an excellent start, Mr. Storr dwells too long on the physical details of Mr. Ryman's work and then needlessly and rather righteously corrects other critics whose views he finds wrong or narrow. This kind of inside-baseball approach may be interesting to the art world, but it will not be much help to the uninitiated viewer who is intrigued by the paintings.

What is finally so uplifting about this exhibition is how much other, often earlier painting, and even how much nature, seeps unexpectedly into these almost hermetically sealed galleries. Mr. Ryman's art reminds us that it is paint, scale and color that we look at first and last in all painting, but that at its best, painting also leads us inexorably outward toward the world.

•

"Robert Ryman" opens to the public on Sunday and remains at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, Manhattan, through Jan. 4. It will travel to the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco from Feb. 3 to April 17, and to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis from July 23 to Oct. 2.

NEWSDAY
New York, NY
24 September 1993

REVIEW

Ryman's Riches in White

ROBERT RYMAN: Paintings 1955 to 1993. An almost perfect exhibition of pure painting, Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53rd St., Manhattan. Opens Sunday, through Jan. 4.

By Amei Wallach
STAFF WRITER

REMEMBER PAINTING? Just the pure, sensuous — and sometimes transcendent — satisfactions of paint on canvas? Multitudes reveled in its pleasures during the Museum of Modern Art's Matisse show last season. But there was a certain bittersweet nostalgia in the exercise — as though painting was THEN, in the less complex and harried half of the century. Contemporary art NOW, if you're to believe the big international shows and the Whitney Biennial, is all about socially engaged, politically correct, in-your-face concepts and installations.

And there is an argument to be made that the art of the future is in walk-in art that's more than just an object on the wall and concerns things that people are worrying or passionate about. The Modern itself made that point with it's "*Dis*locations" exhibition of installations organized by curator Robert Storr a few seasons back. But now Storr is presenting the other side of the argument — and so persuasively that it promises to revive the climate for painting just when we thought that it really was time to administer last rites.

On the surface, Ryman is a perverse candidate for Storr and co-organizer Nicholas Serota, director of London's Tate Gallery, to have chosen to make the case for painting. For virtually all of his 38-year career, Robert Ryman has limited his palette to white. His canvases are abstract and minimal. There is not a whisper of hype to this artist with the demeanor of a Nashville insurance executive (which is what his brother, John, is), his shyness in the face of effusion, his intensity of concentration.

He came to New York to be a jazz musician, happened on painting only by chance because there was an artists' supply store across the street and apprenticed himself to the great painters of the century by taking a job as a guard at the Modern for six years, until he turned 30. And then he distilled everything he had seen and felt and learned into essences.

The miracle is that this exhibition of 82 all-white paintings (and one orange, but that's a story for later) is richly varied, with satisfactions to compare with Matisse. The difference is that Matisse had the answers. Ryman's paintings suggest a way of posing questions: What is paint's relationship to canvas, a painting's relationship to what it hangs upon?

And so these paintings make demands on a viewer. Particularly since there are no distracting wall labels and a viewer has to refer to a carry-along map. But the payoff is one luscious experience. Without sensuous color or a story to tell, these paintings have to work their magic on paint alone. Since most of us, including curators and critics, no longer really believe that paint has this capacity, most Ryman shows in the past have focused on the mystical properties all-white paintings have been thought to contain ever since Malevich painted a white square on white in the teens of the century.

Certainly there can be that kind of grandeur and mystery in a Ryman — as became all too clear at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh in 1985, when Ryman was hung in the same room with Kiefer for a kind of transcendent shoot-em-out and neither one blinked. The DIA Art Foundation exhibition a few years back hung recent paintings in dramatic light for maximum uplift.

But the Modern, like Ryman, if you take him at his word, has opted for the basics. This is a show for and about painting, that wants to conjugate the form's various possibilities, without frills or spiritual thrills. And it does so with a kind of storytelling that leads us eventfully on a journey through a painter's ideas about painting.

Ryman and Storr, who is also a painter, hung the show together, so the nine galleries in which the paintings are hung are conceived as a kind of giant walk-through painting. And the pictures are placed intuitively on the wall, the way a painter might place a form — something tiny and dramatic next to something large and uninflected, a diaphonous surface that rhymes oddly with one that is thickly built up.

The story begins in 1955, when young painters were looking for a way out from under the overwhelming shadow of abstract expressionism. That year, Ryman made a richly textured orange square with odd interruptions in the corner. His brother, John, took it home to Nashville and hung it over the fireplace, where it began to crack. In the meantime, Ryman tried to limit himself to the basics of picture-making: canvas, paint, signature, date. Date and signature play leading design roles in the early paintings.

In 1959, he took the orange painting back to New York for restoration, and it is about then that he found his language in white. It is a language of endless possibility, as it happens — the seven enamel-on-paper panels in the 1968 "VII" have the lyricism of a Monet water-lilies series; the 1979 "Phoenix" is elegant and high-tech with its steel plate, screws and tabs. And the promise at the end of the show is that the variations — and the paintings — will continue in endless permutations. The prognosis is good for painting at the end of the century. ■

Photo by Peter Moore, New York

Robert Ryman with one of his 82 paintings in the Museum of Modern Art exhibit; it's a retrospective of his work since 1955.

ARTFORUM
New York
February 1994

CULTURE VULTURE

Target for Tonight

Now that the right has made it acceptable to bash the arts, here comes that courageous, crusading television show "60 Minutes" to join the bandwagon. In last week's edition, Morley Safer took it upon himself to prove, in his immortal cliche, "the emperor has no clothes" — the emperor this time being contemporary art... all of contemporary art, from Cy Twombly and Robert Ryman to Jeff Koons and Michel Basquiat. Safer got an old-master critic to trash modern art — not just some modern art, but all of it. And Hilton Kramer, the Pat Robertson of art critics, to do his usual damn-them-all act.

Safer dismissed Robert Ryman as a hyped trickster, when all he'd have to do would be to catch the Museum of Modern Art's new Ryman show to experience the infinite possibilities of white — and painting. He was particularly apoplectic about some Robert Gober urinals explained by collector Elaine Dannheiser, whose verbal gifts are no match for her eye. But Morley Safer knows urinals are part of the history of modern art, thanks to Marcel Duchamp, who, early in this century, showed a urinal as a way of closing the gap between art and life.

Indeed, Morley Safer knows more than he let on about modern art, through his anthropologist wife, Jane. She was an insider in the West Islip world of Tatyana Grosman and the Print Workshop, where Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Barnett Newman, James Rosenquist, Susan Rothenberg, Elizabeth Murray and other great names in contemporary painting have made some of their best work, and where, Robert Motherwell once wrote, "the world of the spirit is as real as lemon yellow or woman's hair."

But "the spirit" apparently doesn't make good television; cheap shots do. By jumbling the good, the bad and the ugly, Safer made himself guilty of the very hype and cynicism for which he's blaming the art world.

—Amei Wallach

Morley Safer of '60 minutes' has joined the art-bashing bandwagon.

NEW YORK NEWSDAY
"FANFARE"
26 September 1993

ARTFORUM
New York
February 1994

ROBERT RYMAN

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

It's all in the name—the stubborn consistency of tact, vision, and method, the economy of means, the paradoxically anti-systematic system of repetitions, the governing law of tautology. Moving through over thirty years of Robert Ryman's production in this show was akin to taking the same commuter train over and over again but never having the same experience twice—and never actually reaching a destination. This work thumbs its nose at the protocol of formal progression articulated in Modernist rhetoric while simultaneously beckoning the viewer to perform a thorough "formal" analysis.

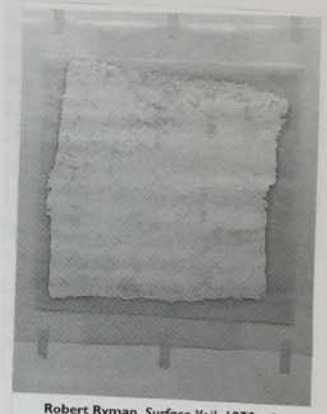
The putative simplicity of Ryman's work is deceptive, and this is precisely what enthralls. Unlike Donald Judd, who eventually rejected painting in favor of sculpture's literalness, Ryman has apparently delighted in the exhaustion of abstract painting. Nothing and everything changes in this artist's oeuvre, and one is struck by the sheer obstinance of his will to drive painting into a corner, allowing it to occupy that space with a quiet, mundane grace.

There's a poetics of blankness here that defies a congruous articulation in the verbal realm. Indeed, this is the main paradox that Ryman himself confronted early on, with works such as *The Paradoxical Absolute*, 1958, and other paintings from that period in which he uses his name and the date as a compositional element within an essentially abstract antispace. These suggest the frustration of an attempt to reconcile the naming function of language with the zero degree of nonobjective visuality. Evidently, this dilemma can find no actual resolution, since it is only a constructed, discursive paradox that has been rehearsed over and over again.

Is it still necessary to ask the same question of Ryman's work: does his painting indicate the final "end point" of the Modernist narrative? In his 1981 essay "Ryman's Tact," Yve-Alain Bois poses what still must be considered the most pertinent question regarding this artist: "Why is it so hard to write about Robert Ryman's work?" Ryman's paintings set a visual and ideological trap for the critic: what you see is what you get, and what you get is profoundly what you see. Faced with Ryman's richly ascetic sensibility, the writer feels compelled to fill in the whiteness of these paintings' imaginary voids even if this means descending into the treacherous nether regions of metaphorical or metaphysical language.

Pushing back the limits of pictorial space, destroying pictorial illusionism, destroying space itself, obliterating depiction, signaling the tautology of practice through a syntax of repeated tactics, issuing forth gesture as the index of bodily presence, offering repetition as the most sensual strategy possible. Tautology heaped upon tautology, laying waste to meaning beyond the painting-as-thing. Painting as the sensuous science, a perceptual cancellation that only prompts speculation—a fecund emptiness. Do these paintings really speak to us at all? And how do we speak for them? Ryman's work is straightforwardly there—present—in its ineluctable yet understated materiality. They are both prior to and beyond thought, an exhaustion that is finally inexhaustible—perhaps a poetry born of boredom.

—Joshua Decter



Robert Ryman, *Surface Veil*, 1970, oil on fiberglass with waxed paper frame and masking tape, 13 x 13".

Contemporary Artists Review
: TOKYO
~~Dec 8, 1993~~
Autumn 93

From New York
by Sanada Ikkan

ロバート・ライマン展ほか

眞田一貫

ロバート・ライマン回顧展

戦後アメリカの抽象画家のなかでも異色の存在，ロバート・ライマンの回顧展がニューヨーク近代美術館（MoMA）で開かれている．この展覧会は，テート・ギャラリー（ロンドン）とMoMAの共同企画になるもので，MoMAでは絵画・彫刻部門のキューレイター，ロバート・ストーが担当した．

この展覧会は，これまでに企画されたライマンの作品を紹介する試みのなかでもっとも傑出したものとなった．まず，展示作品83点のうち32点がライマン本人のコレクションで，今回はじめて公開されたものがほとんど．1950年代の作品のすべてと，1960年代前半の大部分を占めており，ライマンをいわゆるミニマリズムの画家として区分してきた従来の評価を覆すに足る新しい光をあてる結果となった．

展示作品のなかでもっとも古い，1957年から60年頃にかけて制作された作品は，ミニマリズムとはほど遠く，きわめて表現主義的で熱情がこもっている．デ・クーニングやフランツ・クライン，クリフォード・スティルなどの抽象表現主義の画家たちが主流であった1950年代の傾向を，ライマンの初期の作品は色濃く反映している．ライマンはMoMAの監視員として働いたことがあり，1940年代から50年代の絵画を連日観察して勉強した．この時代のライマンの仕事は，ロバート・ラウシェンバーグやジャスパー・ジョーンズが試みていた実験的な絵画とも共通しており，「同世代の感受性」といったものに根ざしていることがよくわかる．何かモノをカンヴァス上に描くためにペインティングを制作するわけではない．また，出来上がった絵画が何かのモノや思想を表現するわけでもない．彼が尊敬していたマーク・ロスコの絵画に共通する点でもある．とくにライマンの場合その傾向は徹底していて，「何を」ではなく「いかに」描くかにこだわり続けてきた．そのため彼は色彩を排除して，ほとんどの作品を白一色で描き，カンヴァスも正方形を多用する．自らに課したこの制約が，一見ミニマリズム的と映ったのであるが，白という色彩にしても，展示されている作品のなかで同じ白はほとんど見つからないほど，その範囲は広い．

最近作に至っても，画面上の表現主義的な絵筆の動きは相変わらずアクションに満ち，視覚的に豊かなニュアンスが深遠な世界をかたちづくっている．サポートに選ぶ素材も，伝統的なカンヴァスから段ボール，そして壁紙，鋼鉄板まで，実験的な制作を続けている．何もないものの上に描きたいとの思いから，彼は1971年前後にファイバーグラスに描いた小品のシリーズを試みている．

MoMAの回顧展会場は，特筆に値する美しさで，微妙なニュアンスに富んだライマン芸術を評価するための最高の舞台となった．中庭に面した大きな窓を密閉して特設された会場には，大きな白い壁に作品だけが浮き上がるように並び，目の邪魔になりかねないラベルや説明書きは一切ない．ライマン自ら参加して行なわれたこの展示は，作者の意図どおり，理屈ではなくあるがままの存在としてのペインティングを堪能できる環境を提供している．ライマンの絵画は，背後の壁や部屋全体との一体感のなかで鑑賞されるときその真価を発揮することがよくわかる．会場の入口には8ページのタブロイド判の印刷物が置かれ，そこに掲載されている会場の配置図からすべての作品の内容まで把握できるようになっている．

またカタログも素晴らしい出来栄えである．また美術館では，ロバート・ストーの司会によるパネルディスカッションを，会期中2回予定している．本展は来年1月4日まで開催している．

■広大な自然のなかにあるパビリオン[中央奥]
Photo., Ikegami Chikako

時空間から異なる世界への横断ですし，建物自体が存在感のある作品ですね．

ミュラー　そうそう，いいフィーリングしてるよ．無の感覚は極東の人には親しみのもてる精神性なのだろうが，記号的な世界に慣れているヨーロッパ人にはわかりにくい．でもこの最初の空間でなにかを感じとれればとれるほど，次々に現われる展示室の宇宙に入りこめる．

――その後の散歩はまるで時間が止まったみたいでした，豊かな生きた自然に包まれているのに．ロシアの映画監督タルコフスキーの映像のような，まったく異なる時空間のゾーンに置かれたような感じでした．映画を見ていると，よく過去の時空間に吸い込まれたような時間を過ごしますが，現実世界や美術館ではそれほどありませんよね．

ミュラー　日常のなかでそうした感覚をたくさんもてる人は幸せだよ．夜，森のなかを歩いていたりすると，感じることがあるけどね．あなたがここでそう感じてくれたなら，私たちの仕事がひじょうにうまくいっているということだ．

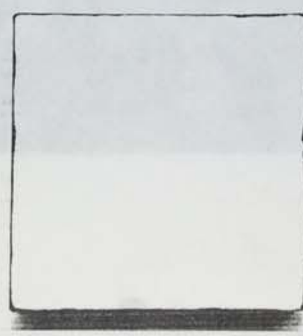
――庭園自体がじつにミステリアスで，まるで2世紀ほど前につくられて放置されてきたような廃墟の感じもあります．ただだれかがその雰囲気を保つために，ひそかに世話をしている．アート・スペースを含めてこの場所全体が自然みたいにとてもアノニマスであり，精神的で，その背景にいる人間の姿がつかめなかったために，私はぜひ一度ここをつくった人に会ってみたいと熱望したものでした．

ミュラー　一人の人間がやっていたら絶対にこうはならない．つまりここでは庭師のコルテばかりか，アナトールやキューレイターのキティやすべての人間が，ひじょうに繊細な感覚で自然をふくめたすべてのものを見ている．私もその一員だが，修道院のような共同体の場合だけ，こうしたことが可能になる．みんなが好きでやっているわけで，そうでなければこんな雰囲気は出てこない．こうした生活態度は将来とても重要になると思う．そうでなければ私たちは金銭やメディアによる宣伝のためにばかり生きるようになる．

――コレクションそのものが人生のように変化するわけですし，この場所自体も芸術精神のコミュニティとして存在しており，生きることとアートが一体化している．東洋思想に影響されている面はあるのですか．

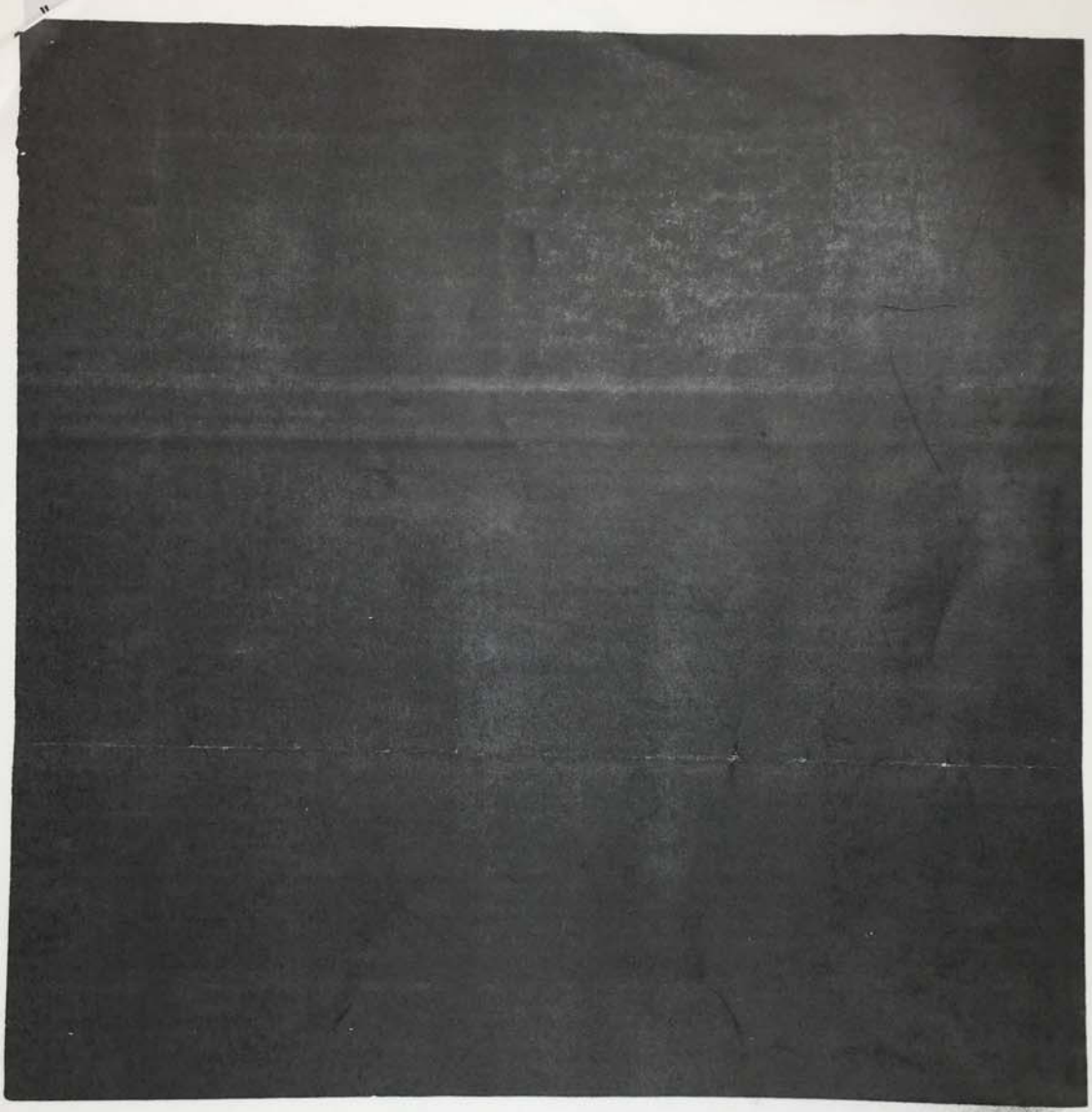
ミュラー　欧米人にとってはキリスト教が無意識のレヴェルまで浸透している，日本人にとって神道などがそうであるようにね．だから思想的にも感覚的にもまったく違う背景があるわけだが，高度工業化社会に生きてきた人間は，すべて資本主義的エゴイズムに毒されている．こうした状況から私たちを救ってくれる思想はおそらくアフリカやインドにもあると思うけれど，実際には口承だったり，奥義が秘密にされていたりして学ぶことができない．それで私は中国の道教に期待している．中国に旅したときに，共産主義に染まってはいるが，老子の伝統的な教えが国民の心のなかに連綿と生き続けていると感じた．道教では教会とか寺社は必要でなく，自分の自我とかかわるだけの見えない世界だから，だれにも禁止することができない．道教ゆかりの山に行く途中，小さな村を通り過ぎた．感銘を受けたのは，そこでお茶を飲んだり市場で商売をしている何百人もの小柄な老人が，驚くほどたくましく立派な顔立ちをしていたことだった．デュッセルドルフの美術館で一日待っていたって，残念だけどあんな強烈な老人を一人でも見かける幸運には出合えないね．

［インタヴュー・構成＝池上千加子］　［インゼル・ホンブロイヒの自宅で］



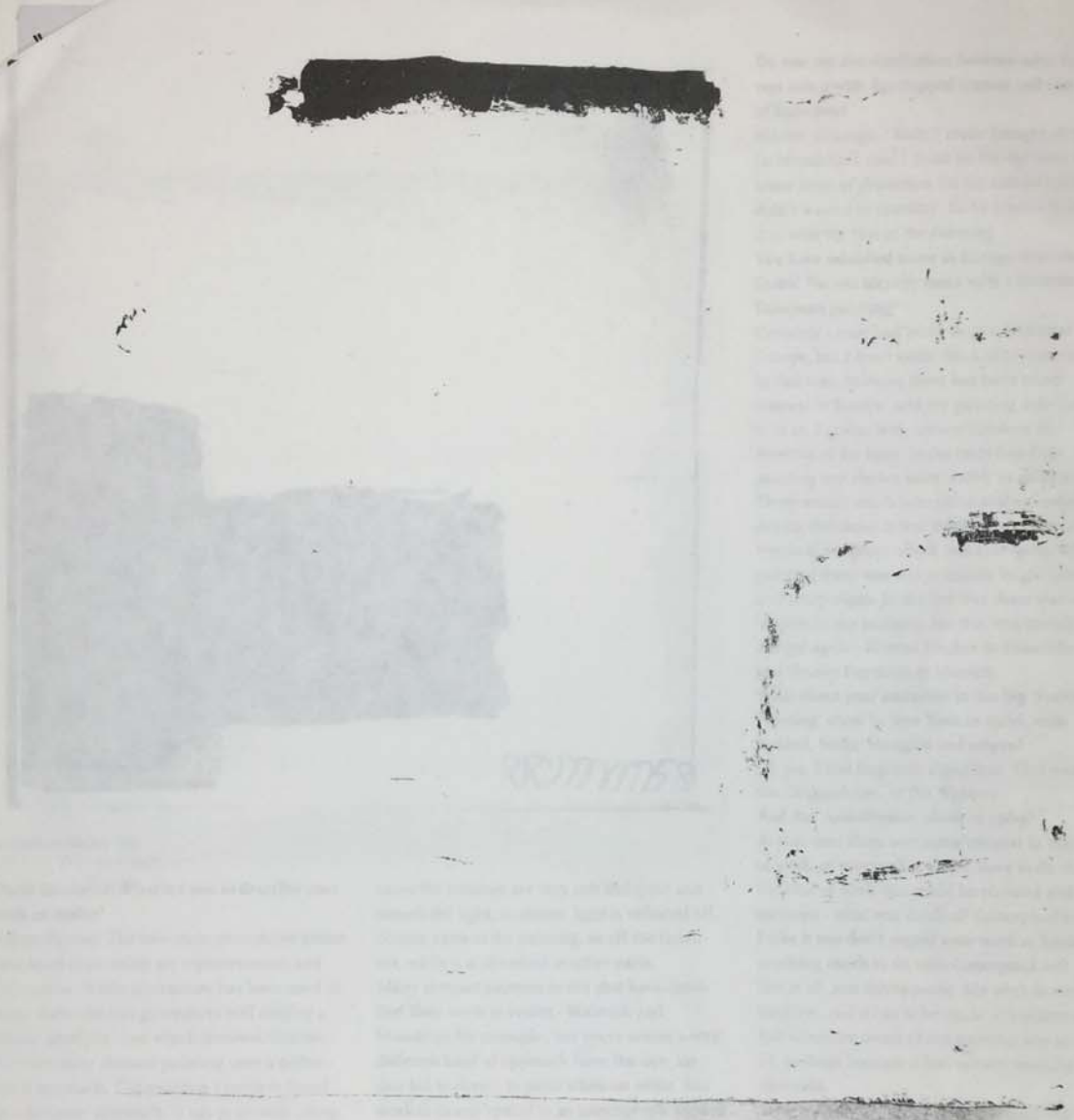
on paintings

■上——所見Ⅶ　紙,ファイバーグラスに塗彩　112.4×104.2cm　1991
Coll., Constance R. Caplan, Baltimore, Maryland.
Photo., Jean-Pierre Kuhn
■下——無題　カンヴァスにエナメル　25.8×25.8cm　1965
Coll., The Artist. Photo., Bill Jacobson



Untitled (Orange Painting) 1955 & 1959

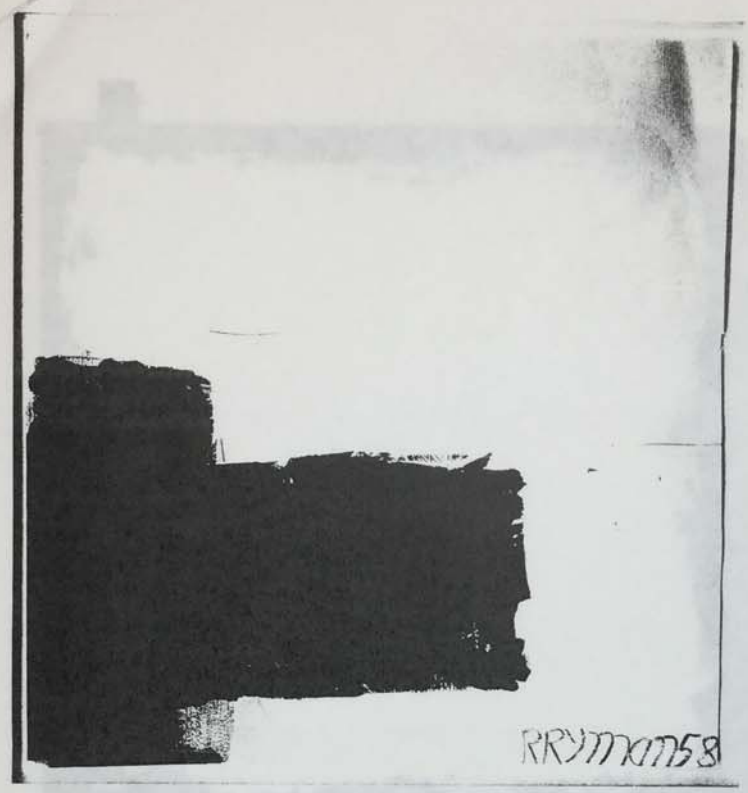
on paintings



Untitled 1958
Oil on pre-primed canvas

and pictures

Robert Ryman interviewed



To Gertrude Mellon 1958
Oil on gesso on paper

David Batchelor: What led you to describe your work as realist?

Robert Ryman: The two main procedures artists have used in painting are representation and abstraction. While abstraction has been used in many ways, the two procedures still employ a similar aesthetic, one which involves illusion. Even the most abstract painting uses a picture-based approach. The painting I make is based on a different approach. It has to do with using real light on real surfaces, rather than creating an internal illusion of light. If I use line in my work it is to do with line itself, not line as a representation of something else. I think of this as working with an outward aesthetic rather than with an inward one. I work with the painting plane in relation to the wall plane. Everything points to an approach which is a real situation rather than an illusion of the kind you get in pictures. I also have to consider the way light works. In most paintings we think of light in terms of an illusion within the picture. In my painting light is used differently without any illusion. The light in the painting, so to speak, is modified by the different surfaces and how the light acts upon those surfaces. In some cases the surfaces are very soft and quiet and absorb the light; in others, light is reflected off certain parts of the painting, or off the fasteners, while it is absorbed in other parts.

Many abstract painters in the past have classified their work as realist - Malevich and Mondrian for example - but yours seems a very different kind of approach from the one, say, that led Malevich to paint white on white. His work is clearly spatial in an atmospheric kind of way.

I think Malevich's work had a lot to do with Symbolism, to do with meaning outside the painting itself. Mondrian, though, was certainly a realist painter, more of a realist than Malevich. The mid-period works did not refer to anything other than painting, and that is what I would think of as realism.

Mondrian was also an artist who took a lot of care about how his paintings related to the walls, in his use of those shallow stepped frames.

Very much so. But most of his paintings have been altered, boxed in by other frames and covered in plastic. It's unfortunate, but it's rare to see a Mondrian the way he wanted it to be.

Do you see any similarities between what he was doing with the stepped frames and your use of fasteners?

Maybe, although I hadn't really thought of that. In Mondrian's case I think he felt the need for some form of protection for the canvas but he didn't want it to interfere. So he tended to paint it in with the rest of the painting.

You have exhibited more in Europe than the States. Do you identify more with a tradition of European painting?

Certainly I have had more large exhibitions in Europe, but I don't really think of my painting in that way. At times there has been more interest in Europe, and my painting didn't seem to fit in, I guess, with certain fashions in America at the time. In the early 60s Pop painting was shown most widely in galleries. There wasn't much interest in abstract painting during that time. It was mostly sculpture, and Minimal sculpture which was emerging. What painting there was was primarily bright colours and sharp edges. In the late 60s there was some interest in my painting, but this was mainly in Europe again - Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf and Heiner Friedrich in Munich.

What about your inclusion in the big 'Systemic Painting' show in New York in 1966, with Noland, Stella, Mangold and others?

Oh yes, I had forgotten about that. That was at the Guggenheim, or the Whitney.

And the 'Anti-Illusion' show in 1969?

At that time there was some interest in that type of work, of course. But it was more to do with the kind of work that could be planned and not executed - what was it called? Conceptual art.

I take it you don't regard your work as having anything much to do with Conceptual art?

Not at all. Just the opposite. My work is very intuitive, and it has to be made. It's painting. But somehow some of my painting was accepted, perhaps because it had certain modular elements.

Your work doesn't look at all preconceived in the manner of Minimal and Conceptual art.

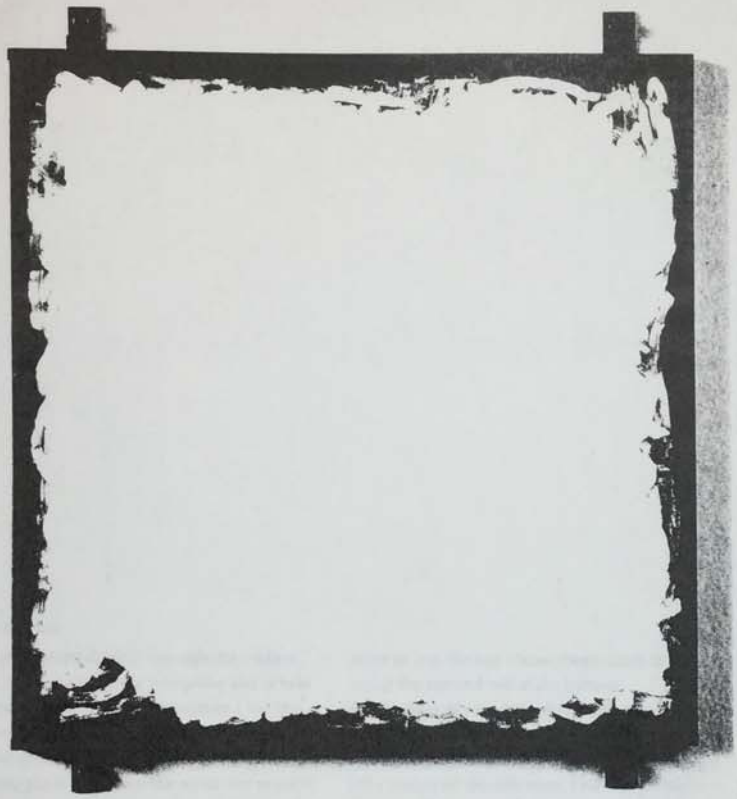
The idea that you could have your work fabricated by someone else was an aspect of Minimal and some Conceptual art of the period which became acceptable as modern art.

Which makes your work look, by comparison, like rather traditional painting. Are you happy to be seen as a traditional painter?

Yes. I have always thought of myself as a traditional painter.

I believe this is the first time your work has been hung chronologically in a gallery.

In the larger exhibitions I have had, the work has not been hung chronologically, rather the different years have been jumbled together. The exhibition here at the Tate is the first time I've



Archive 1980
Oil on steel

seen the work arranged in a more or less chronological order. This has been quite interesting for me.

Basically my painting works with the wall plane and with the environment. As I said before, it has what I think of as an outward aesthetic. Unlike pictures where you look into the space, space in my work is used differently. There is an interaction between the painting and the wall plane. So what is placed next to a painting can affect it. In the past my paintings have been hung in a strictly visual capacity. There might be a contrast between a smaller work and a larger one where it benefits both paintings. The question of light is also important here. If you are hanging several different paintings together which react differently you want to take this into consideration so that each painting benefits from the one next to it.

It seems to me that you tend to counterpoint paintings - small and big, absorptive and reflective, solid and fragile. That is still the case in this show, isn't it?

There is still a certain leeway within a group of years so I was still able to use some of that.

You mentioned this is the first time you have seen your work hung chronologically. Did this reveal anything to you?

Well, there were a number of paintings I hadn't seen for years, so it was nice to see them again and to see them in the context of the more recent paintings. That was interesting. If this exhibition had been hung less chronologically, certain of the relationships between the paintings could have been made more clear. But overall the show has worked very well.

Does the variety in the way the show is hung indicate something about the way the work is made? Do you work small one day and big the next, or on steel then linen? Do you use any kind of systematic procedures?

No, as I said, there isn't any system and there isn't a plan in that sense. It's more intuitive. Maybe there is a particular problem I am trying to work out, or I may need to work on a larger format or a smaller one just depending on how things are at the moment. I can't really say much more than that.

This is going to sound like a dumb question, but was there a particular point at which you decided you were going to use primarily white paint, or did things just turn out that way?

There wasn't any conscious decision. Like all painters I began to experiment with form and colour. Early on I often used a lot of white to paint certain things out. I don't know exactly why I did that. As a few years went by this became more concentrated. The white, you might say, was beginning to take over. I could see that it was beginning to make little nuances and other colours more visible. It evolved.

In the earlier work the white looks more like overpainting. There are reds, ochres and other colours which are masked out but still visible.

It was a matter of making the surface very animated, giving it a lot of movement and activity. This was done not just with the brushwork and use of quite heavy paint, but with colour which was subtly creeping through the white.

It's clear from this show that you have never really made white paintings, so much as used white in painting. There are always other colours in the work, the colour of the support or the fasteners, as well as other relationships between textures, degrees of reflectivity and so on.

I don't think of my work as white paintings. There is a lot of white used, but the purpose is not to make white paintings. The painting would be quite different if that was my aim. There's only one work about which you could say that it is a single colour painting and that's the orange one.

As for the surfaces, they depend on the kind of support I'm using. If I'm working on aluminium which reflects light or has what I call light movement, perhaps I will counter it with a soft surface which absorbs light. I do tend to use these types of opposites.

After making some steel paintings in 1967 which were very heavy, I was looking for something light and thin. This is when I began to use the brown corrugated paper which has very different properties. I painted these with a more reflective, shellac-type paint.

As well as the relationships between surface and support you have also mentioned the relationship between the painting and the wall it sits on. You seem to put a lot into mediating that relationship with your use of fittings and fasteners. How did you come to introduce this as a visible part of the painting?

The first time I exhibited paintings with visible fasteners was in 1976. Since then I have used visible fasteners in one way or another. They have taken many forms. Sometimes the paint

Phoenix 1979

plane is fastened directly through the surface. Other times it sits on the wall plane and is held by some exterior means. Sometimes I use the fasteners to move the canvases off the wall plane slightly. Curiously, when the structure of the paint plane is thicker, the more you move it away from the wall plane, the more clearly you see it as attached to the wall. With the very thin materials, they logically go very close to the wall.

How did this come about? Obviously all painters have to find ways of attaching their work to the wall, but generally these means remain hidden.

It was very simple. I was just thinking that most paintings are fastened to the wall invisibly because we aren't interested in that aspect of the work - they are pictures that we look into. You are not concerned with how it is fastened to the wall or with the wall itself for that matter. Since I was working with the wall plane and the paintings were not pictures, I felt, well, why not show that part of the work, why not let it become a part of the composition?

Was this a liberating experience?

Well, it opened up more possibilities of course. They are very much used as compositional elements. Later on it became even more directly compositional. It's always a question of 'where do I put these fasteners?' It seemed logical to put two at the top and two at the bottom, the way you would pin something to the wall. That's more or less the way I have always used them, two at the top and two at the bottom.

Do the titles of your work tie in with your type of realist approach?

These have no representational meaning, they are a means of identification. I have often taken the titles of the works from the names of the materials or the brushes or the supplier. I try to choose words which can't be associated with very much. I wouldn't title a painting 'Clouds' for instance. That would be really disastrous. They are more names than titles, a means of identification. I try to keep the word simple and familiar. It's a lot easier than using numbers.

Another rather traditional element which often crops up in your painting is your signature, both in the earliest works and right across the centre of a big structure from 1988.

I've used my name as a compositional device, and for its value as line. I often turn the name on its side to make it more abstract. In the 1988 painting it is a solution to a compositional problem. There is a bar across the centre of the painting, which is structural, but it needed to have some other reason for being there apart from the structural reason. It needed some movement across it. I couldn't put dots or something across it without getting too much into the manipulation of paint. I allowed myself to put my name across it because that was signing the painting. I go through these kinds of aesthetic problems: it was signing the work and it gave it compositional movement. I also raised the centre of the painting.

This show covers three decades of work. Are there any obvious nodal points for you where important changes of emphasis or direction have taken place, or is it all more of a flow from one thing to another?

It's pretty much a flow except around the mid-60s the paintings became more radical, you could say. That was when I made *Adelphi*, which included waxed paper and was fastened directly to the wall with masking tape. There were a number of paintings around 1966-69 in which I used very thin surfaces, and it was the beginning of the visible fasteners. In 1969-70 there were the corrugated panels which were more radical than the paintings from before 1965. It was during the mid-60s that I began to use different materials more.

The catalogue lists 31 different types of support and 25 different types of paint, over the years.

Could be. Over the years I have come to use a wider range of materials - plastics, fibreglass, metals - but I also continue to use canvas.

Are the surfaces as physically worked these days as in the 50s and early 60s?

Probably not, although some of the very recent work have been worked on over a series of months.

The catalogue essay also stresses the significance of music in your work.

Well, I tend to do that also. Music is a medium that people are more tuned to, so to speak, than painting. Vocal music, which is more popular, I see as more like representational painting, because it conveys meanings outside the music itself. Instrumental music, which is rather less popular perhaps, is more abstract, but still projects feeling and emotion. I think painting can project the same kind of sense as music, its just a different medium. I sometimes listen to music while I'm painting, as long as I'm not doing some technical measurement or something. Modern jazz mostly.

Have you looked at much recent painting in the States or elsewhere?

I haven't seen much recent painting. A lot of the younger artists seem to be doing more environmental constructions and kinds of social abstractions, I guess you could call them that. I haven't seen much painting I could get too excited about, although some of it is quite confident. I may be wrong but I always think there is not that much going on in painting at the moment. I thought the *Gravity and Grace* show at the Hayward was quite interesting. If you didn't see the dates on some of the works from the 60s you might think they had been done by young artists right now.

HI FASHION
Tokyo
December 1993

"白が創るアート"ロバート・ライマンと、"自然を紡ぐ"アンディ・ゴールズワースイ。

Robert Ryman at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Andy Goldsworthy at Galerie Lelong

田中弘子 文
text:Hiroko Tanaka
たなか・ひろこ●東京生れ。広告写真、イラストレーションの雑誌の編集を経て、'85年、フリーランスのライターとなる。アート、政治、映画、食べ物、旅行、人間について書く。テレビニュース・ウォッチング、新聞を読むのは趣味のうち。'86年以降、本誌にニューヨークのアートシーンを連載。著書に「アートは素敵だ」(河出書房新社刊)、「ニューヨークは好きですか」(PHP研究所刊)。

展示スペースには一枚のレーベルも用意されていない。

作品のタイトルとか制作年代とか材料とかいった類の表示である。会場には注意深く計算された間あいを置いて作品だけが置かれている。さほど高いとはいえないミュージアムの天井、室内の光源は壁の白を温かくしていて、白、白、白、のライマンの作品に全体としてやさしく応えている。

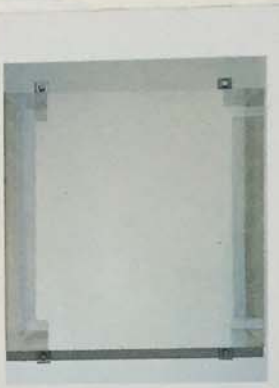
小さな白いレーベルさえ作品に影響を与える、邪魔なものだ、とロバート・ライマンは主張しているのである。

つまり、それほどのニュアンスの追求、がライマンのアートの本質ともいえるし、他方名札などのない展示は確かにあっけらかんとさっぱりと作品を美しく見せ、作品により集中させてしまう、という効果もある。

とはいえ展示場入口に別に用意された会場見取図と作品索引パンフレットに首っぴきで、作品をつきとめようとしている人々がいるのも相変らずだけど、それを最後までやり通すのは相当の苦痛だといっていい。

'55年の全面がオレンジの1点の作品を除いて、現在に至る残り82点はすべて白い作品である。厳格にいえば白の間からこぼれてくる他の色彩はいろいろと存在はする。

平ったい白、すべすべした白、かすれた白、階調のある白、障間のある白、透きとおった白、密閉された白、幾何的な白……ライマンは考えられるあらゆる素材、キャンバスから始まって、麻、板、紙、トレーシングペーパー、ボール紙、メタル、セラミック、アルミ、プラスチック、白い塗料のさまざまの種類、ときにわずかの色彩を使って、それぞれ周到に決められたサイズと共に、ひっかいたり、盛り上げたり、重ねたり、水のように薄く塗ったり塗らなかったり、切ったり貼ったりはがしたりくっつけたりと、あらゆる動作を画面に反映しながら一枚ずつ表情の異なる白い画面を作りあげてきた。


"Access" (1983年)。グラスファイバーにオイルとエナメラック、金具使用 (50.8×45.7センチ) photograph: Tom Haartsen


"Untitled" (1959年)
下塗りされたキャンバスにオイル
(20.5×21センチ)
photograph: Bill Jacobson

しかし、それは実は白についてではないのだ、とライマンはいう。

白に興味があるわけじゃないんです。白を使うことで他の事物をより明快に際立たせる、そのことに興味があるんです。白が目的ということじゃないんです。

麻のキャンバスの上に引かれたオイルの白の平行の刷け跡は、濃密な白でありながらその材質の特長のゆえに気泡のようにかすれた障間を自然に与えているし、黄色味を帯びた麻の茶色がマットな絵の具の白の間からこぼれて、特別の色と響きを与えている。例えばコテコテにペインティングナイフで表面を塗られたキャンバスは、それが白い画面であるために、絵の具の厚みのデコボコのパターンをいっそう引き立てる。あるいは白はそれ自体、材質とのからみで多様な色彩にもなり得る。ろう紙の白、ガラス繊維の上の絵の具の白、テープの白はみんな違うし、ろう紙の白だ。つまり白は限りなくニュートラルで、ライマンにとっては限りなく可能性に富んだ基本メディアというわけだ。

このアートの実験室で、ホワイトというミクロな道具を使って表現の限界みたいなものに挑戦しているひとは、医者のような白い上っ張りを着た詩人、というイメージが浮かぶ。

白い空間に入れられたライマンの作品の間を通り過ぎてゆくと、それはとても気分がいい。白のさまざまの表情が見せる気配が不思議と気持ちを落ち着かせるし、障子紙越しの微妙な光線を理解する日本人にとってはライマンの世界を楽しむことは意外に容易ではないだろうか。

ロバート・ライマンは'30年、テネシー州ナッシュビルの生れ。大学では音楽を勉強し、'52年にニューヨークに移ったときはジャズミュージシャンになることが目的だった。

'53年アルバイトにニューヨーク近代美術館のガードマンになったことがアートへの目を見開かせた。ジャクソン・ポロックらの抽象表現主義の活動はすでに頂点に達していた。'54年以降独学でペインティングを始め、'57年にはすでに白い作品が現われている。'93年の現在まで40年近く、白に白の仕事を続け、ミニマリズムとかコンセプチュアルアートとか、区分けされることを嫌っている。

わたしの作品はアブストラクトだとは思わない、というのもライマンの言葉だ。何か具体的なものを抽象化しようとしているわけじゃない、と彼はいう。

世界のアートの中でも独自な地位を占めるライマンだが、そのディテールとニュアンスの美は、同時代の他の文化のジャンルとも深く共鳴するものがありそうだ。(ニューヨーク近代美術館にて、9月26日か


"Surface Veil" (1970年)
ろう紙のフレームとマスキングテープ、グラスファイバーにオイル (33×33センチ)
photograph: Bill Jacobson

THE NATION.
New York
November 22, 1993

ART.

ARTHUR C. DANTO

RRyman

I have never seen, outside photographs of them, the legendary "White Paintings" Robert Rauschenberg did in 1951 while a student at Black Mountain College. Rauschenberg was 18 at the time, and though the "White Paintings" have a distant affinity with Kasimir Malevich's Suprematist masterpiece *White on White*, one would hesitate to describe someone as a prodigy who (merely) covered squares of canvas with white housepaint, laid on with a roller. And Rauschenberg (who disclaims having known of Malevich at the time) had so wild and exuberant an artistic personality in his youth that it would have been easy to dismiss them as some kind of high-spirited prank, like dyeing one's hair chartreuse or wearing a nose ring. But I am sufficiently sensitive to the aesthetics of monochrome painting that I would withhold making an a priori critical judgment; for the all-over white paintings of different painters, even when also in the square format, may turn out to be crucially different from one another. The paintings of Robert Ryman (on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York until January 4, 1994), at least in what one might think of as his classic phase, are all more or less white monochromes, invariably in square formats of differing sizes; but they are, when one tunes one's sensitivities to nuance, astonishingly different from one another, as they are from his earlier work, and certainly from Malevich's all-white painting (which in any case is of a square *in* a square, set at different angles from one another, and has in consequence a content quite lacking from at least the defining works of Ryman's corpus, which have almost no imagery as such). And I am convinced they would differ as well from Rauschenberg's early achievements.

In an interview, Chuck Close once described the painstaking preparation of the canvases on which he executes his colossal portraits:

> I'll spend three weeks gessoing and wet-sanding a canvas—ten to twelve coats—getting it all smooth and getting it perfect, and it reminds me of those apartment signs you see on the highway, "If you lived here you'd be home now." If I were Robert Ryman, I'd be done.

Rauschenberg did not set out to make an all-over white painting: Like Close, his intention was to go on to paint something on top of the white, which was to have been ground. But unlike Close (who of course was being impish), he experienced the white as so pristine that he could not bring himself to sully it, rather in the way any of us pauses before scarring the hushed whiteness of new-fallen snow. (It must be remembered that the presence of Josef Albers at Black Mountain created an artistic atmosphere in which purity was a prized attribute.) But in fact Rauschenberg's "White Paintings" turned out less to be objects of aesthetic experience than occasions for it. They served as screens for trapping ephemeral phenomena, like shadows and passing lights. They enabled one to tell what time of day it was. Rauschenberg said he was interested in seeing "how much you could pull away from an image and still have an image." What he did was put himself into collaboration with the world in producing an endlessly varied play of light and shadow. It was precisely in this that the "White Paintings" had a fateful impact on Rauschenberg's colleague at Black Mountain, the composer John Cage, who was inspired by them to compose their auditory analogue, *4'33"*, in which the performer drops his or her hands for exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds to produce an interval of silence just that long. During the silence, the sounds of the world invade musical space to become music rather than noise, exactly as the passing shapes of the world invade the space of Rauschenberg's paintings to become art. And indeed Cage held a sort of Zen philosophy that enabled him to view this as a task for art. That view is handsomely expressed by an artist with somewhat similar objectives, Robert Irwin, who writes in the Epilogue of his text "Being and Circumstance" that "the wonder of it all is that what looked for all the world like a diminishing horizon—the art-object's becoming so ephemeral as to threaten to disappear altogether—has, like some marvelous philosophical riddle, turned itself inside out to reveal its opposite." Of course, a true performer is required to create silence, as is a real painter to create emptiness.

It is important to stress that it is never a relevant observation to make in front of an all-over white painting—or any painting for that matter—that "anyone could do that," even if it is true that no great skill is required to cover a surface with housepaint, using a roller (Ryman's paintings are, if sometimes but marginally, more complex than that). But it requires more than being an artist to "do that" as well. Close is a major artist, with gifts of an altogether different order from those possessed by either Ryman or Rauschenberg; and he is certainly capable of achieving a smooth white surface that, had he been Ryman, would already be a painting. But he would not stop there, unless he underwent a conversion as radical as the one he recalls having caused him to give up his version of Abstract Expressionism to do the gigantesque portrait heads that have made him famous. Nor is prior intent a requisite: Rauschenberg merely meant to paint the surfaces white, not make white paintings. *That* intention was formed, so to speak, only once the painting was done. What it requires to make a monochrome painting out of a uniformly painted surface is the kind of atmosphere of experiment and transformation that defined the artistic mentality of Black Mountain as an institution. Rauschenberg participated in that atmosphere, through which he saw in all-over white canvases possibilities and meanings of the kind he had learned to see in painting in general. And once he saw them, he decided to "let the painting be"—a perfectly Zen-like gesture. Black Mountain constituted a world in which such decisions were a matter of course, and though Close knows about those worlds, he does not live in them. In the Black Mountain world, it was natural to progress to the "Black Paintings," which, though also monochromes, exemplified a wholly different aesthetic: They were heavily textured and inches thick, virtually as if Rauschenberg had *paved* the canvas, or tarred it like a roof. It says a great deal about the differences between him

and Ryman that it is no part of Ryman's project to have gone on next to black paintings. White came to satisfy most of his chromatic needs, as the square format came more or less to satisfy his formal needs. That left him free to experiment with size, texture and other properties of works, to which I shall turn below.

There is in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre a fascinating if heavily criticized concept he designates "original choice." This is the basic choice each of us makes that colors all the subsequent choices our life consists in, and to which what Sartre calls "existential psychoanalysis" finally directs us. The "White Paintings" of Rauschenberg, and Ryman's white paintings, spring from distinct "original choices," though this might be invisible in the paintings themselves. Only when one sees that Rauschenberg went on to do thick black paintings and then combines, including the famous paint-smeared goat with a tire round its neck, can one see that he must have been getting at something quite different from Ryman, whose entire evolution has consisted in making painting that takes the all-over white square as a kind of Platonic ideal. How would one know this on the basis of just the paintings that might outwardly so resemble the ones Rauschenberg did? The meanings of works that look just alike often turn out to be available to us only when seen in the historical afterlight of what led up to them, and what the artist then went on to do. That is why, in addition to "anyone could do that," it is so pointless to say "somebody else already did that."

Beginnings are endlessly fascinating. Ryman was a jazz musician, holding down odd jobs in New York, when, out of what must have seemed an impulse, he bought paint, canvasboard and brushes. "I was just seeing how paint worked," he told Robert Storr, who curated the MoMA show. "I was just using the paint, putting it on thinly with turpentine, and thicker to see what that was like, and trying to make something happen without any specific idea what I was painting." To me this sounds as if the original choice was thick-and-thin, and seeing what would happen when. . . . Ryman was not an art student, and he never became one in any formal sense. Yet, while he lacked the supportive world of Black Mountain, he was clearly in some sort of art world, for one does not merely make a decision to think of paint *first*, without reference to what one is going to paint, or to think of the possibilities of thick-and-thin. These would have been fairly advanced ideas in the fifties, and not something that would just come to someone. To think of art in terms of the materials of art, for example, was exactly the directive Clement Greenberg was putting forth as the mark of the Modernist avant-garde. It tells us something that Ryman took a job as guard at the Museum of Modern Art, where he would have been able to see *White on White*, if he had not indeed come to know it already. The roster of guards and other lower-echelon employees at MoMA in those years would compose a Who's Who of today's major artists. For Modernists, it was the kind of school the Louvre was for the artists of Paris. The important point to stress is that Ryman should, from or as the beginning, have found himself almost exclusively concerned not so much with abstraction, as such, as with what we might call the *material abstract*—where paint on whatever it was to be applied was the entire focus of his thought. White pigment may not have been chosen for any special meaning—its purity, its potentiality for spiritual metaphor—but because it facilitated the paint-surface interactions that absorbed him in those years, and indeed ever since. (He did at first experiment with green, and with orange.) What one might say is that from the fifties to the present there have been variations in Ryman's paint styles, from the worked and impastoed surfaces of that era through the quietly uniform and uninflected surfaces of Minimalism, to where the paint might be applied virtually the same way it goes onto automobile bodies, with reversions and excursions and advances reflective of the ongoing evolution of painting elsewhere in the art world.

A good example of paint-surface interaction is the fourth painting in the show, done in 1958 and, like so many, titled *Untitled*. It is not as yet a white monochrome square, but it contains a squarish expanse of white paint that does not go quite to the edges of the space it occupies. It is on a surface that is the brown of paper bags, which not only shows through where the edges of the square give out before reaching the lateral and top edges of the surface, but forms a large space below the square. The painting thus has two main components, the painterly squarish form, notched by a small black rectangle at the half-point of its left edge; and then the expanse of paper-bag brown below. It struck me, for whatever it is worth, that this is the color scheme of MoMA's gal-

leries: white walls descending to brown (wooden) floors. So it is difficult to avoid the thought that it is a visual memorial to Ryman's years as a guard in those very galleries. There is one further element, what is less a signature than a graffiti consisting of Ryman's name, painted in the same white pigment as the square, in large letters, along with the numeral "58," with no space between it and the letters. The letters and numerals are strikingly large, as if, when a guard, Ryman had wanted to write his name somewhere in the gallery. And it is impossible not to notice the double R: The whole inscription reads, RRYMAN58. Of course, he is entitled to the double R, being Robert Ryman, but Marcel Duchamp's *nom de femme* was Rrose Selavy; and while I have no support that an art-historical pun was intended here, the mere fact that it is thinkable is underwritten by the spirit of playfulness in this work, and in most of its contemporaneous peers in the show. Thus the black notch, slightly crooked, the ambitious but failed square, the very large letters, suggest a certain sense of humor, a kind of formal wit, an absence of the kind of austerity that "white monochrome" might suggest of Ryman's artistic personality. The spirit of play is consistent with a dedication to material abstraction. Just because one has forsworn chromatic indulgence does not mean one cannot have a good time painting, or is forbidden to allow one's pleasure to show through. One can be reductionist without being dour.

The paintings, from the late fifties at least, form a loose set of wry caprices, in which, as with the signature and date, Ryman integrates into his compositions elements usually looked past as not belonging to the work (Van Gogh also used his signature this way). In one, "58" is painted in large careful numerals, sideways on a patch of canvas left bare by the surrounding paint. In another, "58" is loosely scrawled in huge red numerals, again spread sideways across the painting, which consists in a wobbly white rectangle brushed across tan paper but which leaves enough space for RRYMAN in tall skimpy letters of the kind associated with Saul Steinberg. A patch of black seeks to balance the red numerals that have taken over its space. These are deliciously crazy paintings.

My favorite among these early *scherzi*—and one of the rare titled paintings in the show—incorporates the title into the painting: THE PARADOXICAL ABSOLUTE is lettered, with studied ineptitude, into a black cartouche at the bottom of the painting, and to the viewer's left. It is of course an exceedingly pompous title, one scarcely in keeping with the scruffy lettering, unless indeed the paradox is sparked by that discrepancy. Given the wit of the placement of dates and signature—and now the title—there is scarcely a limit one can assign to the painterly self-consciousness of this artist. He is reported, in the catalogue, as saying: "I was interested in the word 'absolute' and its meaning, and how things were not exactly that way"—were not, one might say, *absolutely* absolute. Ryman says, "I think I was thinking at that time about philosophy," and I was bound to ask him what philosophers he might have been reading. The British metaphysician F.H. Bradley was about the last serious thinker to write admiringly of the Absolute; most philosophers have used the term derisively, as an example of a term "devoid of meaning," as Carnap would say. Ryman told me he thought he might have been reading Heidegger, but Heidegger would have had little use for traditional philosophical vocabularies, inventing his own. My conjecture is that he may have been looking into Schopenhauer, just the sort of philosopher apt to turn up in artists' libraries. Schopenhauer was precociously dismissive of the term, and here he gives it a sneer with a nice Rymanesque image: "We cannot imagine an absolute absolute like a blank wall in front of us." *The Paradoxical Absolute* is far from a painting someone unsympathetic to monochromy might compare to a blank wall—Ryman did not begin his all-over white squares until the middle sixties. With those, color and shape were fixed values, but that left plenty of other variables in a painting to play with, leaving room for as much caprice as one desires. It might incautiously be suggested that there is some parallel with Ad Reinhardt's all-over black squares, but Reinhardt really did believe in an absolute absolute, where values for all painterly variables were eternally fixed and there was no room for play at all. Ryman is a much freer spirit, an *open* absolutist, fiercely inventive within the domain he has left for himself, having restricted his shape and color as he has so far done.

Color and shape may be fixed values for Ryman, but still he shows as much caprice as one could desire.

I suppose it is consistent with the impulse to play with the marginalia of painting in our culture—with signatures, dates, mountings, titles and the like—that the artist should have turned his attention to the relationship between the work and the surrounding wall space. Ryman has evidently decided upon a kind of counter-Rauschenbergian course, excluding everything extraneous from one's experience. In the present show, this has meant an interdiction of wall labels, believed, for whatever reason, to be distracting. Since it is a one-person exhibition, of course, we do not require labels to tell us who executed the paintings. On the other hand, if one is eager to know the title, when there is one, or the date, or the materials (one will be surprised by Ryman's use of waxed paper!), the staff has printed a sort of newspaper with diagrams of the rooms and the numbers of the paintings, which correspond to texts that ordinarily would be on wall labels. Now, inasmuch as habituation has made the label as invisible as the signature commonly is to those not specifically interested in it, I imagine the decision to eliminate labels belongs to the same overall impulse as the decision to enlarge a signature, or make a painting out of a date—for in fact the absence of the labels is more distracting than their presence possibly could be. But even if one resolves to face the blankness of unlabeled walls stoically, one's fellow visitors will be rattling their programs and asking which particular *Untitled* they might be looking at. In a true spirit of caprice, the proper gesture would have been to play with the labels, enlarging them, printing them backward, pasting them at crooked angles. On the other hand, if the artist really believes they distract from his work, he may be here overtaken by the dangers of the absolute absolute after all!

Just over a year ago, I saw a magnificent installation of Ryman's painting in the *Espace d'art contemporain* in Paris. The *Espace* is a Parisian presence of the renowned *Hallen für neue Kunst* in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, where the visionary figures Urs Rassmüller and his wife, Christel Sauer, have created a space for showing art of the kind Ryman's work, at its best, exemplifies. They opened the Paris space in a missionary spirit, to

show the French by example how work of this kind and order ought to be seen. It was a tremendous experience. I don't remember whether or not there were wall labels, but it hardly would have mattered. In those spare gallery spaces, under natural light, the paintings were arranged in such a brilliant way that they communicated with one another: The air was alive with painting-to-painting dialogue. Sometimes a wall held only a single painting, sometimes two or three. But one experienced the exhibit as one would have one of the great philosophical conversations.

Urs Rassmüller and Christel Sauer might consider establishing a didactic space in New York, where those who practice installation might find an inspiration. The MoMA show is for the most part hung in a very routine way, and its premise is chiefly chronological. Since temporal succession is the principle of its organization, the internal references from painting to painting, unless they occur sufficiently close together in time to hang in the same gallery, are left to the viewer to provide. But chronology then makes the absence of wall labels pretentious, and in a way contradictory: A Rassmüller-like installation brings out the *timeless* qualities from which the wall labels are assumed to distract. There *is* an impressive gallery with three large paintings, *Surface Veil I* (and *II* and *III*), which, because of their scale and, let us face it, the iconography of half-raised veils, imply the space of a chapel. The spiritually minded collector of Minimalist art who once owned them, Count Panza di Biumo (whose collection was in part sold to the Guggenheim to wide consternation), at one time had them installed in this way. But that would be an easy call: The gift of the installationist consists in juxtaposing paintings to bring things out that would not be seen in them separately or, for that matter, serially. So this is a flawed exhibition. But for those with an appetite for painting that is subtle, spare, evocative, spirited, witty, deep, playful and beautiful, what the show contains is a treat. It is a treat even for those who think the art world has moved beyond painting. That it was not a treat for Morley Safer, who could barely suppress his giggles before one of Ryman's white squares in his recent savaging of contemporary art on *60 Minutes*, is but one of many signs of a sadly underdeveloped critical sense screened by a dangerously ill-justified complacency. As Safer reaches a vastly larger audience than I, this column is offered as a contribution to his aesthetic rehabilitation. I look forward to some less boastfully regressive program by him on art, in which he does a certain justice to his subject, his audience and possibly himself. □

Minimal Talent at MoMA: White on White

Continued From Page One

Robert Ryman retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art is the passage in the exhibition catalogue that lists the materials that the artist has used in the creation of his Minimalist abstractions. Robert Storr, the curator at MoMA who organized this retrospective in collaboration with Nicholas Serota, the director of the Tate Gallery in London, provides us with a comprehensive inventory of what might be called the maximalist material foundation of Mr. Ryman's Minimalist esthetic.

"The pigments and primer [Mr. Ryman] has used," writes Mr. Storr, "include: oil, oil-based ink, Interference, casein, gouache, Lascaux acrylic, synthetic polymer, gesso, commercial enamels, baked ceramic enamels, Impervo enamel, Enamelac, Gripz, Elvacite, Varathane, vinyl acetate, rabbit skin glue, charcoal, chalk, India ink, ballpoint pen, graphite pencil, coloured pencil, pastel, and silverpoint."

"For surfaces and supports," Mr. Storr continues, "Ryman has employed newsprint, gauze, Chemex coffee-filter paper, Kraft paper, wallpaper, wax paper, tracing paper, Bristol board, corrugated cardboard, handmade rag papers, cotton duck, linen, jute, Featherboard, plywood, hollow-core panels, polystyrene fabric, Plexiglas, Mylar, vinyl, Acrylivin, Gator board, fibreplate, fibreglass mesh, honeycomb fibreglass panels, Lumasite, anodized aluminum, cold-rolled steel, copper, plaster walls."

"For fasteners," Mr. Storr goes on, Mr. Ryman "has turned to masking tape, plastic straps, plastic stripping, staples, steel screws, steel flanges, steel pressure plates, aluminum tubing, and various other metal fixtures." And these lists, Mr. Storr hastens to add, are "constantly being augmented."

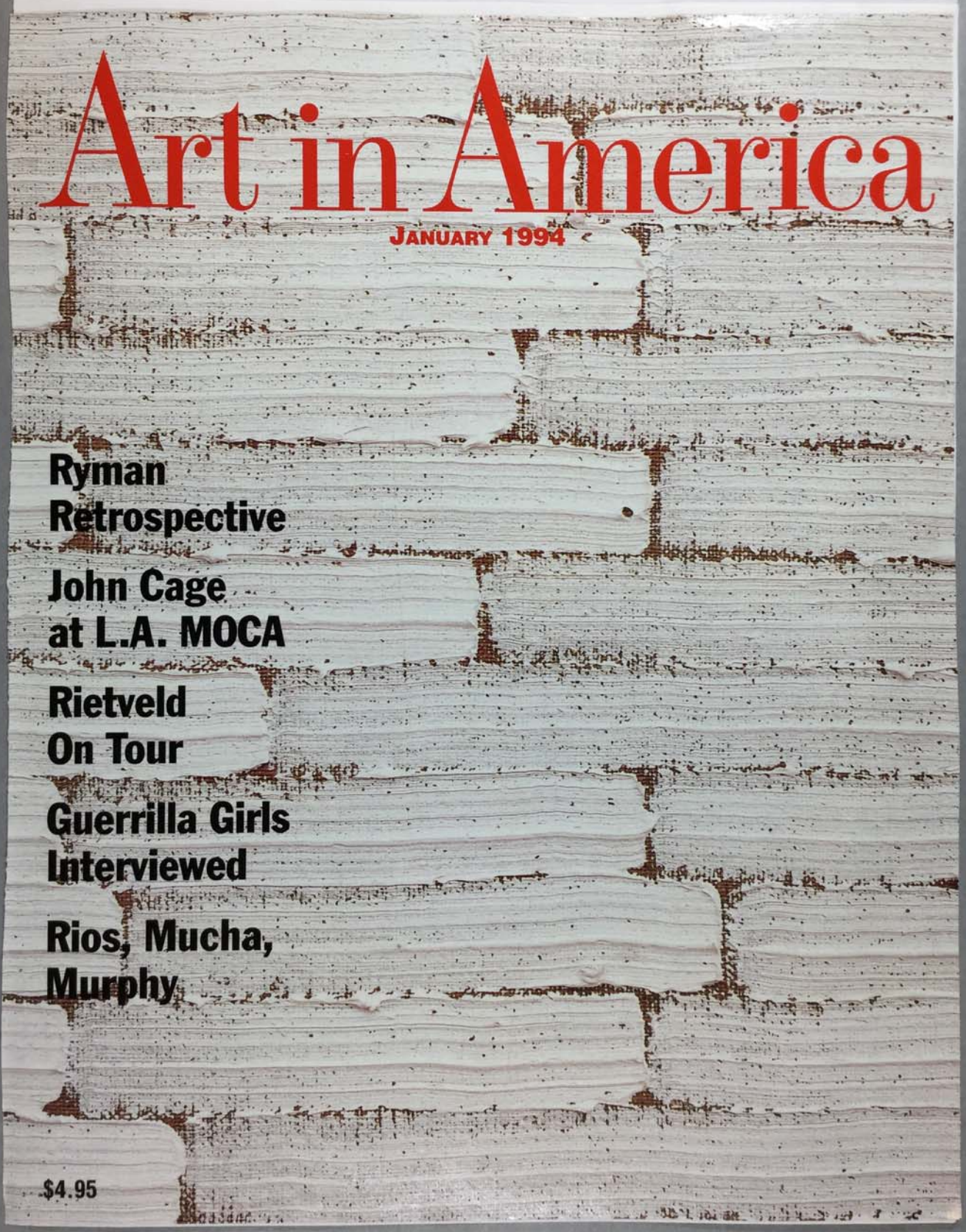
James Hamilton

At a show of Robert Ryman's work at MoMA, a viewer takes in the artist's white-on-white paintings, *Surface Veil III*, left, and *Surface Veil I*.

Yet despite this amazing variety of materials, it is still as a painter of Minimalist abstractions that Mr. Ryman makes his principal claim on our attention. So why are the materials so important? They are an important clue to the artist's need to find minimal ways in which to vary his approach to what is often the same Minimalist picture. For what is basically repeated in one work after another in Mr. Ryman's retrospective—once we get past the art-schoolish imitations of Abstract Expressionism in the first gallery—is an art that favors white paint and a square format.

There are around 80 works in the current retrospective, and while they vary in size, texture and materials, and in the way in which their surfaces are (minimally) divided, they are mostly white and very square. At times some black lines are introduced into this world of white squares, or some bits of masking tape are artfully deployed, but these minimal variations only underscore the insistent whiteness and obsessive squareness of the basic design. Some of the squares are limp, some are stiff. Some are in series, and many are little squares isolated on a large expanse of wall. Some are highly textured, and some are not. It gets to be a bit of a game, a game of very minimal pleasures, to see what the next variation on the theme will be, but in the end it all degenerates into what can only be described as academic modernism.

Yet because Mr. Ryman is now something of a cult figure, even more lavishly admired in European art circles than in the American art world, this retrospective is presented to us as a big event. Well, it isn't. A handout from MoMA describes the work as "intensely expressive and visually rich," but this is precisely what Mr. Ryman's art is not. It is coldly manipulative and visually arid. Mr. Storr goes even further, as he can usually be depended upon to do, in risking a comparison with Matisse. He notes the artist's "gentle craving for Matissean '*luxe, calme et volupté*,'" and claims that Mr. Ryman's painting is "as exquisite in its way as Matisse's—and as unapologetic in its direct appeal to the senses." Which would be contemptible if it were not so hilariously the opposite of the plain truth. This is the kind of thing that gives art writing a bad name, and this is the kind of exhibition that reminds us that there are some aspects of modernist painting that cannot be endlessly repeated without collapsing into sterility, no matter what new materials are on offer in the art-supplies bazaar, the hardware store and the lumber yard.



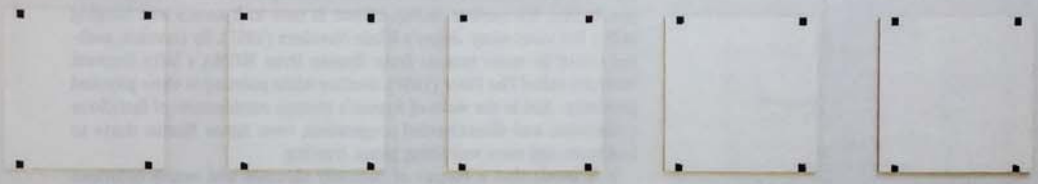
Art in America
January 1994

Cover: Robert Ryman, Untitled (detail), 1965, oil on linen, 10¼ inches square. Courtesy Pace Gallery. See article beginning on page 62.

Ryman's Poetics

The Robert Ryman retrospective now at the Museum of Modern Art shows that his white paintings are not pure or disembodied but contain many nonspiritual traces of the "creaturely world."

BY CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD



Exacting intellects traditionally mistrust colored paint. "The most beautiful colors," Aristotle observed in his *Poetics*, "laid on at random, give less pleasure than a black-and-white drawing."[1] Kant dismissed color outright as an element of a painting's "charm," recognizing drawing alone as "the proper object of the pure judgment of taste."[2] Color is meretricious, narcotic, manipulative, deceitful. The thinking viewer—if we are to believe the philosophers—is secretly dreaming of a white canvas.

Lately there have been plenty of pale paintings on display in New York. In 1992, the Whitney Museum staged the critically acclaimed Agnes Martin retrospective. Last summer and fall, the Guggenheim SoHo hung "Singular Dimensions in Painting," a show in which the whites of Martin, Rauschenberg and Ryman were juxtaposed to the more glamorous blacks of Reinhardt, Stella and Serra. And this fall the Museum of Modern Art exhibited an entire career's worth of white work by Robert Ryman, more than 80 paintings.

These exhibitions appear to belong to a more general reappraisal and re-embracing of monochrome and Minimalist painting. Yet, in all this activity, there has been surprisingly little theoretical enthusiasm of the sort that radical colorlessness and emptiness once inspired. This time around, the absence of color and image is not provoking grave existential reflections. And the Christian-Romantic tradition of metaphysical interpretation seems to have all but petered out. No longer is painting a mirror for self-scrutiny or a luminous

Robert Ryman: Untitled "Study for Brussels," *1974, polymer paint on vinyl on masonite, 10 panels: each 21 inches square. Photo D. James Dee. Courtesy Pace Gallery.*

Untitled, 1959, oil on canvas, 8 ⅛ by 8 ¼ inches. Collection Lucy R. Lippard.

aperture onto the divine. No one is philosophizing the blankness.

Quite to the contrary, most of the talk around Ryman these days is about the sensual friction of encounters with his surfaces. And, in truth, the overwhelming impression of the MOMA exhibition is the fervid pleasure provoked by Ryman's wrought whitenesses, the buzzing flurries of brushstrokes, the square opaque ponds of wet-looking pigment, the tracery of fiberglass threads pushing up through sallow skins of paint.

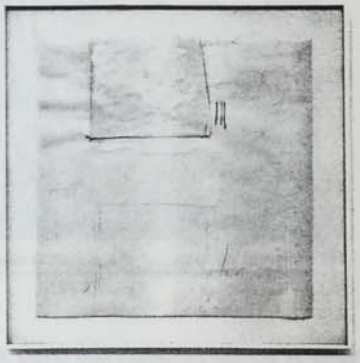
Ryman's career moves across an entire gamut of such effects. In a tight, savory group of square paintings from 1959-61, including *Untitled* (1959), he juxtaposes coarse white strokes and exposed support, either flaxen-yellow canvas or tan paper. By the mid-1960s, Ryman had established his distinctive style, focusing on various permutations of white paint (with occasional coy glints of color) on square canvases, involving variations on a theme, seriality, close attention to materials and exclusion of figurative references. In the 1970s he started working on metal: for example, *Untitled* (1973), a group of five copper squares each with a corner blocked out in baked white enamel; in each case, ground and figure are divided by a lurid stripe of green oxidation, with the untreated metal support contrasted to the obdurate milky gloss. Later in the '70s, Ryman began experimenting with metal hardware and mounting devices. These works have the feel of sculpture; they proclaim, rather ceremoniously, their weight, poise and precision. The painted surfaces, upstaged by the self-confidence of the hardware, sink back into a smooth, obliging hush.

Philosophy is mortified by these worldly traces. The white painting was supposed to liberate the image from its bodily shell. Instead, the beholder who takes pleasure in applied white paint broaches an illicit chaos of convulsive, colorful meanings. These various metaphorical affiliations of paint to actual things in the world disrupt the detached cycle of meditation that the picture ought to support. The white painting that seduces the viewer (even with antiseptic color and cold metal hardware) betrays itself, like a painted idol that overlays the features of Eros onto its representation of the true god.

A sensual friction is evoked by Ryman's buzzing flurries of brushstrokes, his opaque ponds of wet-looking pigment and the threads emerging through his paint.

Many American viewers seem relieved to confess delight in Ryman, and in monochrome painting in general. The objects are not so puritanical and pretentious after all; they are playful idols rather than domineering icons. Ryman's pictures look more and more at home alongside those of his exact contemporaries Jasper Johns and Cy Twombly. They belong in spirit to the late 1950s: the precise moment between the dissipation of Abstract Expressionist dreams and the assumption of the full Pop swagger. In fact, the work at MOMA closest in tone to Ryman's was hanging only a few yards away: Johns's *White Numbers* (1957). By contrast, nothing could be more remote from Ryman than MOMA's lofty Barnett Newman called *The Voice* (1950), another white painting in close physical proximity. And in the wake of Ryman's strange combination of fastidious estheticism and disenchanted pragmatism, even Agnes Martin starts to look more and more searching, pious, trusting.

It is ironic that a corpus of radically abstract and nearly colorless works should become a major site of the acknowledgment of pleasure in



Untitled, 1959, casein, graphite pencil, red crayon and ballpoint pen on tracing paper on board, on wood, 10 by 8 ⅛ inches. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

Untitled, ca. 1962, oil on linen, 6 inches square. Courtesy Pace Gallery.

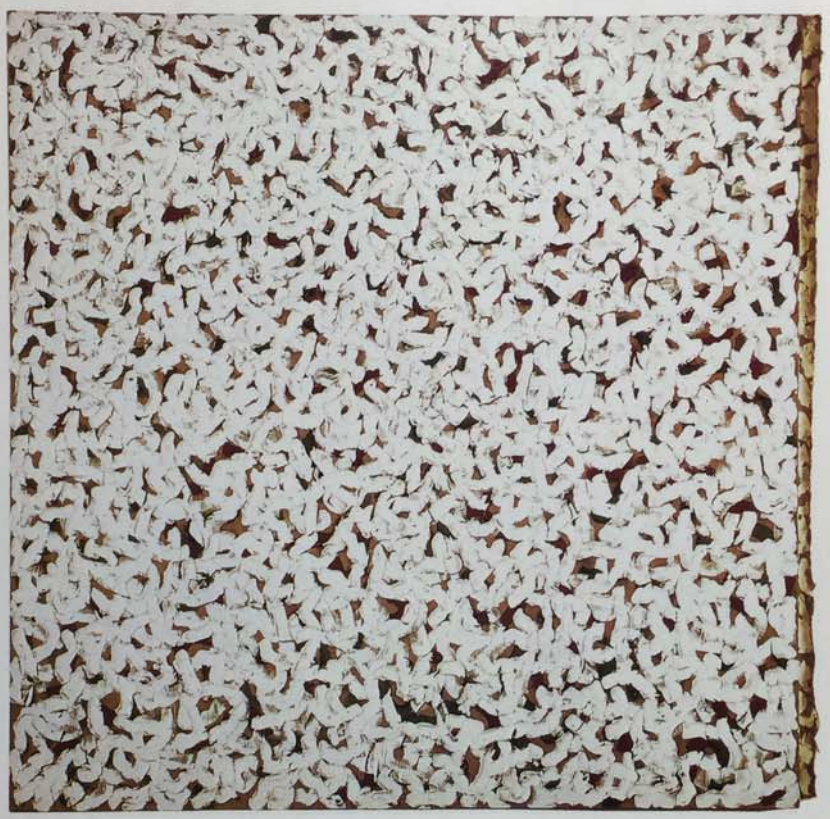
Untitled, 1959, oil on cotton canvas, 43 ½ inches square. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

painting. But against the foil of all the righteous, joyless art recently in the public eye, this seems to have become one of the functions of monochrome painting. Of course, if you really wanted to think about brushwork and desire, you could always go to the Met and look at an old master painting. But the works of Tintoretto or Rubens are laden with imperious cultural and symbolic associations. It is much less awkward to start all over again, with Ryman, at the beginning of the rainbow.

The Ryman retrospective at the Modern is exactly the place to conduct this inquiry. The show pursues an unusually consistent career over four decades, from the mid-1950s to the present. It surveys the full range of Ryman's bricolage, his famous tinkering with paints, brushes, supports and mounting hardware. Ryman proceeds prudently from one idea to the next, and from one shelf in the paint supply store to another. The visitor to the exhibition, silenced by the sterile train of specially constructed windowless white rooms, uncontaminated by wall labels or texts, slips easily into Ryman's glacial pace and his starchy, phlegmatic temper. The rhythm of the show is punctuated by several powerful multipaneled works: *VII* (1969), for example, a set of seven compositions in generous, breathy, flower-child strokes on large squares of corrugated cardboard mounted directly on the wall; or *Untitled* (1973), the set of five enameled copper panels. Both works were lent by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Meanwhile, *Surface Veil I, II* and *III* (1970 and 1971), huge canvases recently acquired by the Guggenheim from the Panza collection, are given a closed room of their own, imposing but perhaps a bit too much like a chapel. Ryman risks introducing meaning whenever he works on a monumental scale. Dimensions are not neutral: any beholder would be cowed by a 12-foot white square.

This is Ryman's first full-scale American retrospective, succeeding a string of European tributes: Amsterdam in 1974, London in 1977, Paris in 1981 and again in 1991-92. The MOMA show (which actually opened last February at the Tate) is more comprehensive than the Dia Art Foundation's installation of 1988-89, which included 33 works, mostly from the 1980s. The Dia hanging emphasized the conceptual and architectural aspects of Ryman's works. It was also highly mannered and provocative: small pictures side by side with very large pictures, for example. The current retrospective is, by contrast, more straightforward, and emphasizes—even revels in—the painterly side of Ryman.

The exhibition, a collaboration of sorts between Ryman and MOMA curator Robert Storr, is a partial concretization of the shadow retrospective that Ryman keeps on the wall of his studio, in the form of 8-by-10-inch photographs of his work. One has the sense that he would like to have kept all the paintings for himself. Ryman clearly begrudges the open-endedness of the work's reception. He labors quietly to control that reception by helping to hang his exhibitions and by dousing brushfires of interpretation in his interviews. Ryman also paints with an unusually keen sense of his oeuvre as a whole, of the relationship of each new part to the whole. The pictures work best when they can interpret each other. Hung amid other artists' paintings in the permanent collections of museums, Ryman's pictures are often thrown off balance.



Untitled, 1962, oil and vinyl on linen, 63 by 65 inches. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

These paintings are vulnerable in another sense: they are frankly rooted in matter, in earthly stuff. In the earlier and the more recent works, especially, Ryman only minimally transfigures matter. The path from the picture back to the paint tube or the hardware store is easily retraced. And even the overprotective Ryman does accept that his works will have a physical history, that they will age and change color. Because the pictures are still so close to raw material, they look exceptionally mortal. And against all the sanitary whiteness, the signs of aging and decay are doubly conspicuous.

Untitled (1959), for example, was painted on jute sacking, and the seams of the cloth push up through the paint surface and participate in the picture. I focused on the the uppermost layer of paint, where a vertical hairline crack snakes along the left edge. In other pictures I found myself pursuing the web of craquelure in arbitrary counterpoint to the swift jottings of the loaded brush. One picture bore the scars of previous exhibitions: *Adelphi* (1967), an 8-foot square of unstretched linen canvas with a waxed-paper "frame," stapled to the wall. The many empty staple holes in the paper frame are like a historical record of the picture's past exhibitions. A painting on metal had suffered an angular dent at the lower left. Two hairs about an inch long were trapped in the paint in *Surface Veil III* (1971), otherwise pristine. On another of the paintings on metal I found an eyelash . . . and blew it away.

Yve-Alain Bois has written eloquently about the reentry of the "creaturely world" into the ostensibly closed and self-referential orbit of Ryman's paintings.[3] For Bois, the reducibility of these paintings to mere matter is simultaneously a termination and a redemption of a basically noble and idealistic historical episode: painting's dream of rootlessness, autonomy and self-sufficiency. The blinding stammer of Ryman's brush, his ingenious autism, revealed to Bois the flaw in the modernist argument. Paint and brush still belonged to the world. Bois called Ryman the "last modernist." It is easy to share Bois's elegiac ambivalence. One repudiates the dream only with regret. But the dematerialized image—Platonic, Christian or modernist—was always a contradiction, an impossibility. There is no way to bleach out matter from an oil painting.

Ryman's paintings are some of the simplest paintings imaginable. They reside at the core of the practice of painting. But at the same time they occupy a vantage point outside the tradition. For Ryman's oeuvre itself constitutes an implicit poetics of painting: a systematic, almost didactic analysis of the structure and rhetoric of the art form; something along the lines of Aristotle's *Poetics*, but in paint rather than words.

Painting's meaningfulness since the Renaissance has rested on fairly stable conventions of structure and presentation. It was only after the legitimacy of the traditional sacred image had been shaken that the familiar modern way of framing, mounting and signing was established. These conventions fixed the painting's precise place in the world, its rapport with its immediate surroundings, its derivation from an author, its distinction from other sorts of artifacts.

Medieval frescoes and altarpieces had blended conceptually into their architectural habitats—paintings, windows, walls and furniture formed

Frankly rooted in matter, in earthly stuff, Ryman's pictures have a physical history of aging and color change: their whiteness looks exceptionally mortal.

all-embracing settings for worship or public ritual. The modern "cabinet picture," by contrast, extracted from this niche and relocated in domestic spaces, needed to be distinguished from the merely functional or decorative objects around it. The modern frame did not simply attach the picture to the wall. It actually sealed the painting off from everyday life. It marked the picture field as the locus of fiction, figurative meaning and gratuitous beauty. The signature, meanwhile, linked the work to a governing intelligence and an executing hand. Frame and signature thus became the defining conditions of the categories "art," "work" and "artist." They are the equivalent to the modern literary conventions of typeface, page layout, titling, binding and copyright, which were also established in the Renaissance.

Such conventions make it possible for the portable painted canvas, regardless of its setting, to be all the various things we are accustomed to its being: fiction, allegory, confession, polemic, propaganda, meditation, esthetic icon and so forth. And they make it possible for beholders to interpret paintings intelligibly. Interpretation as a social activity must, after all, rest on conventions of some sort.

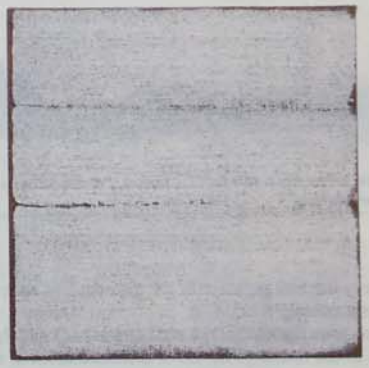
Ryman's career is an unfolding, slow-motion demonstration of the conditions of possibility of the painted work of art. He has expended considerable energy, for example, dismantling and explicating the institution of the frame. Normally, artists paint works before they are framed; the work is putatively complete without its frame. Yet once the work is hanging on a wall, the viewer's eye inevitably takes in the frame—and even the bit of wall surrounding it—together with the picture field. Frames are thus much more than mere furniture, or mounting devices. They are liminal zones that belong simultaneously to the work and to the surrounding space.

Ryman exposes this multivalent nature of the frame by forcing it in one direction or the other, inward toward the center of the picture or outward toward the architecture. In *Adelphi*, the waxed-paper frame is literally disposable; it openly belongs to the world. Yet at the same time we are encouraged to see the paper frame as a beautiful substance. It is salvaged and transformed by mere physical contiguity to the painting it surrounds. In other pictures, meanwhile, the bolts and brackets that attach the work to the wall are solidly part of the work. There is no possibility of mistaking them for run-of-the-mill hardware provided by the museum. In some cases, for instance in *Expander* (1985), the bolts have actually migrated to the interior of the picture field. Such a frame doesn't provide much insulation from the world. And yet the bolts and brackets resist complete transfiguration into art. The hardware is meant to look industrial and manly.

For the welded-steel support-cum-frame of *Archive* (1980), Ryman chose a flat red-brown paint, a disingenuously "neutral" color that reminded me of Joseph Beuys's preferred pigment, *Braunkreuz*. A more recent painting, *Journal* (1988), demonstrates the imperfect fit between the literal frame—the carpentry—and the conceptual frame. Two slightly bowed panels are mounted on metal flanges one above another so that they join at the middle and lean against the wall. The transverse seam is hidden by a horizontal band, in effect a strip of frame that has been swallowed into the interior of the painting. Across that band, in widely, evenly spaced block letters, runs the signature "Ryman 88."

Signatures on frames belong, in principle, only incompletely to the work. They gloss the work from a measured distance. But because *Journal* is a painting turned inside out, the curvy, childish letters of the signature become design, punctuation, practically the subject of the picture. Some

Untitled, 1965, oil on linen, 10 ⅛ inches square. Courtesy Pace Gallery.



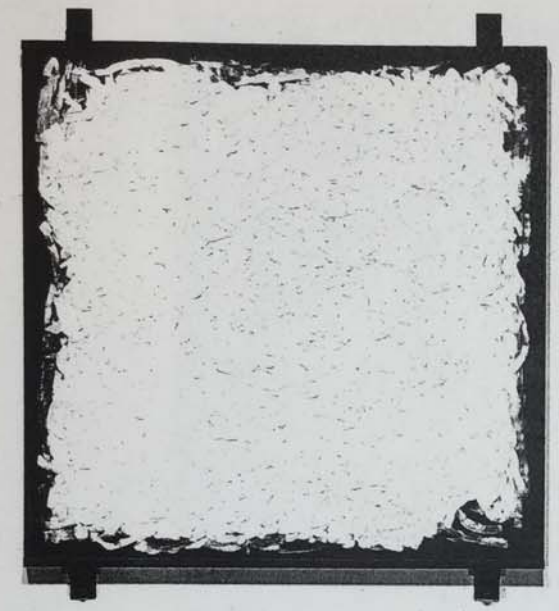
Untitled 1, *1965, oil on linen canvas, 11 inches square. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.*

of Ryman's early works carry two signatures. In *Untitled* (1959), a collage on a 10-inch square of tracing paper that bears both paint and pencil marks, the sloping signature is stuck on like a label, twice, in the lower right corner. The literal-minded explanation is that the artist finished the work, then returned another day and finished it a second time. But it is more appealing to think of the second signature as an acknowledgment that the first was more than a detached comment on the work, a marker ontologically distinct from the work. Rather, the second signature acknowledges the first signature's participation in the spare formal system of the collage. Thus the second name signs the work (*including* the first name), and in the process opens a prospect of an endless *mise-en-abyme*, a regressive nesting of signatures on signatures.

The great difference between Ryman's analytic tinkering and a written treatise or handbook is that it is conducted in the medium of paint. It enacts the effects of paint even as it describes them. This calls to mind the extraordinary passage on the pitfalls of versification in Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711), a suave 18th-century poetics composed in rhyming couplets. In order to mock pretentious and ponderous 12-foot verses, for example, Pope simply produces one:

> A needless Alexandrine ends the Song,
> That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along.
> (*Essay on Criticism*, 355-6)

Just like these verses, Ryman's paintings show and tell at the same time.



Archive, ***1980, oil on steel, 13¾ by 11¼ inches. Private collection. Courtesy Pace Gallery.***

In each case, the real presence of the sign doubles back and corroborates the very message it signifies.

In the end, even figuration (of a sort) creeps back into Ryman's world. It happens in the course of his clever demonstrations of the structural basis for figuration—the fundamental opposition of figure and ground—but is no less effective for it. A line is still a line, and a shape a shape, even with quotation marks around them. In Ryman's more recent works, a design principle which had in fact been active in many of his earlier works starts to assume the proportions of subject matter. We already saw the curving sigil, the signature, plant itself squarely *in* the work. Now single drawn lines appear in paintings, or in objects very like paintings.

On a surface of white enamel on an aluminum panel, *Courier I* (1985), a black string of ink wanders in from the lower left edge, caroms off the metal mounting bracket, drifts up and over to the opposite bracket, and at last—after pulling all the hungry eyes in the exhibition along with it—falls off the edge. *Spectrum II* (1984) is a single looping, tremulous line on a small aluminum plate. In fact, that beautiful line is just the initial "R" on its side. *Catalyst III* (1985), again on metal, composes mathematical rhythms out of bits of straight line: industrial Mondrian.

I found myself sharing with other people in the exhibition a guilty, grateful appetite for the play of figure, for dramatic tension, for temporality. And that appetite was then sated—for the time being, at least—by a group of late works with irregular but not exactly random patches of formed paint or exposed ground. In one of the last, *Versions I* (1992), a 7-foot-square work in oil on fiberglass, a vague elephantlike hulk emerges out of the ground. The great mammalian shape is not outlined, of course; it is just a mass of brushstrokes set off against a pencil grid. Still, before Ryman's primordial monster-emblem one suddenly feels the presence of the mythmakers, Picasso and Pollock. One has the sense that if this most deliberate of artists were permitted by the Fates to evolve and paint forever, he would after many millennia arrive at the very opposite of pure white canvases.

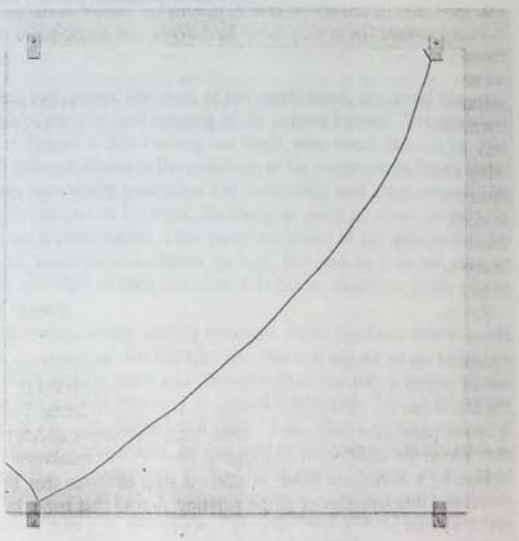
Ryman's career is an unfolding, slow-motion exploration of the post-Renaissance conventions of framing, mounting and signing.

The last chapter in Ryman's "poetics" of painting, his living demonstration of how the art form works, is about matter. In the pallid precinct of a Ryman painting, the least tremor or blemish looms large. Eruptions of kinetic gesture, the rubble of intractable matter, and physical imperfections are more conspicuous here. Ryman's blanched surfaces are, paradoxically, precisely the place to look for the "creaturely world."

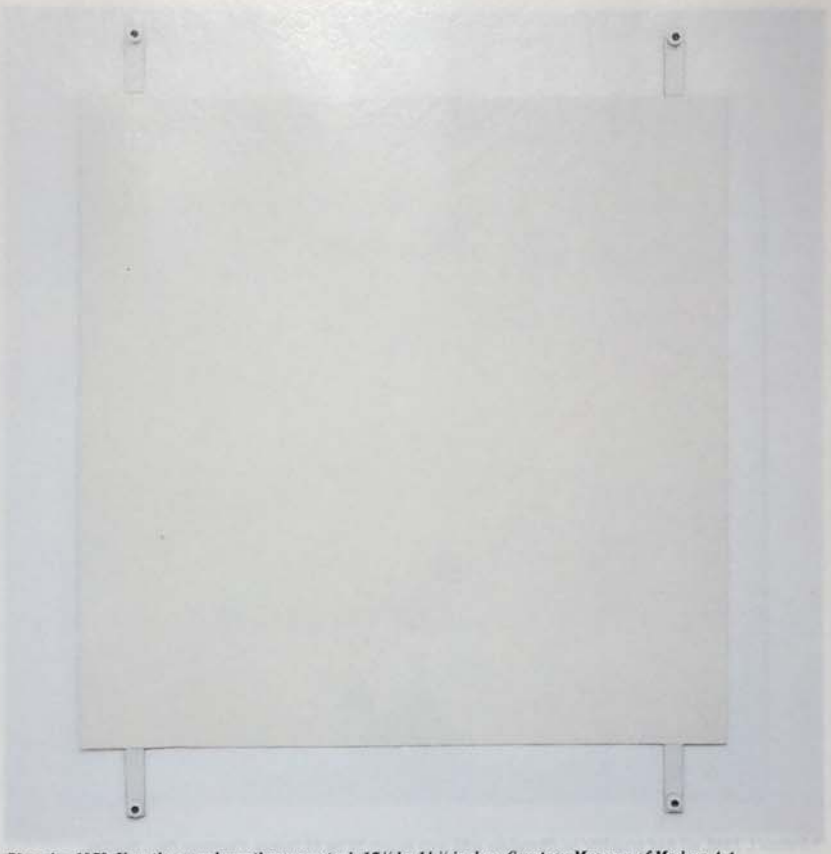
I learned this lesson from Mondrian, whose works in Holland are apt to be hanging not far from Ryman's. I found the mark of the world on the most hallowed modernist corpus. For the white quadrilaterals in Mondrian are cracked all over, and far from pure white. His paint layers age, and they get dirty. But in their very distance from hygienic white they are the emblems of what it means to be white in the world.

The marks of age, habitat and handling become part of the living image. So do the measures taken to retard decay and fend off damage: varnish, glass and the various mounting and framing devices. So, too, do the effects of lighting: alterations in perceived color, or the shadows cast by brackets or protruding bolts. Ryman actually welcomes such adventures. They become unpredictable extensions of his initial experiment with matter. Although he paints under artificial light, for instance, he has mused about daylight bringing his paintings to life.[4] He looks forward to the entire copper surface of *Untitled* (1973) turning green.

Abstraction implores us to look at the rest of painting *as if* it were abstract. In Meyer Schapiro's paradoxical formulation, realism itself re-created the world by a "series of abstract calculations of perspective and gradations of color."[5] Ryman's paintings are asking the opposite: they are suggesting we collapse abstraction back into the rest of painting. Abstraction, it appears, was never anything more than a



Courier I, ***1985, Impervo enamel on aluminum with aluminum fasteners, 47¾ by 44¼ inches. Musée d'Art Contemporain, Pully/Lausanne. Courtesy Pace Gallery.***



Phoenix, *1979, Varathane polyurethane on steel, 17 ½ by 14 ½ inches. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.*

refinement or a mannered distortion of the components of painted art, totally consistent with the previous history of painting, and capable of very many of its effects.

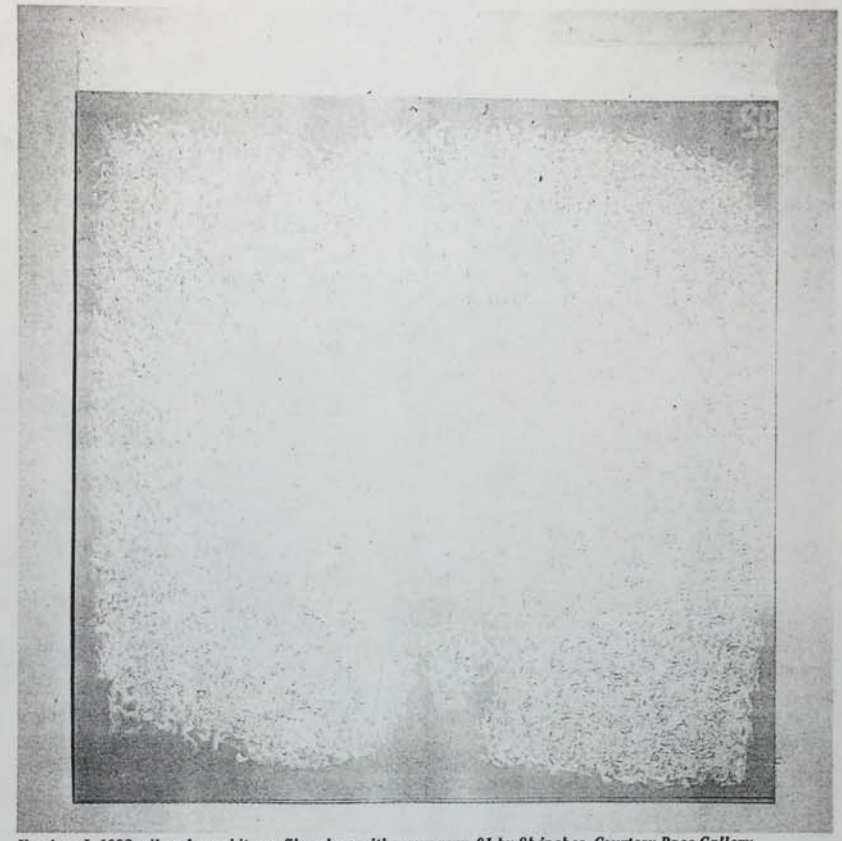
But isn't the "whiteness," in the end, going to insist on its special meaningfulness? Whiteness is the very emblem of modernism's abstract ambitions: its philosophical content, its openness to writing and text, its theoretical (divine) perspective. White is neither a simple attribute of nature nor a mere neutral blankness. When Malevich said he was stripping the sky of its color in order to reveal infinity, he was almost returning to a medieval notion of color symbolism. For the visionary modernist, white was fairly saturated with significance.

The alternative to this view was spelled out already by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On Painting* of 1435. For Alberti, white was just another color, albeit at the edge of the spectrum. He warned painters that "no surface should be made so white that you cannot make it a great deal whiter still. Even in representing snow-white clothing you should stop well on this side of the brightest white."[6] Alberti, for practical reasons, was interested in preserving the "distance" of painted whiteness from the absolute. In the same way we can understand Ryman's surfaces not as simulations of the sky or anything else under the sun, but as the measure of the gap between art and a possible infinity. The distinctions among his whites become the model for all distinctions. While discriminating between one white or another in his work, one rediscovers the truth of the earthbound, empirical observation, indeed the practical cunning of the painter himself. The attentive viewer of Ryman is like Vincent van Gogh, who could discern no less than 27 different blacks in the paintings of his countryman Frans Hals.

Ryman repeatedly proclaims the neutrality and emptiness—the meaninglessness—of his work. He chose to paint in white, in part, to discourage interpretation. Like many sculptors of his generation, he wants his materials to be taken literally. But just as it is not easy to exorcise materials of their meaning, it is not so simple to drain whiteness of its aura.

Alberti made another shrewd comment about the color white in his treatise on painting. He thought the extravagant application of too much white slightly more reprehensible than too much black, simply because our natural tendency is toward brightness: "We all by nature love things that are distinct and clear." Like Alberti, Ryman sooner or later reveals his true colors. He has said in interviews that his work is supposed to yield sensations of "well being and rightness," or an experience of "enlightenment."[7] These are esthetic criteria, rooted no doubt in simple empathetic responses, but they carry powerful ethical and spiritual connotations. So much for "paint is paint."

Jacques Derrida called the yearning for disembodied knowledge within Western thought its "heliotropism"—its turn toward the sun. In its eagerness for a bright and universal truth, metaphysics pretends that it can do without metaphor, rhetoric, myth, without all the imperfect



Versions I, *1992, oil and graphite on fiberglass with wax paper, 91 by 84 inches. Courtesy Pace Gallery.*

poetical coloring that animates ordinary language. According to Derrida, the white European replaced the ancient truths of storytelling and poetic transfiguration with pale and bloodless abstract philosophy—a "white mythology."[8]

It often looks as if Ryman is doing just this. But in fact no paintings are less metaphysical, less anemic. A little close looking pumps them full of blood. All their yearning is filtered through a human gesture, a web of cracks, a film of dust, a workman's thumbprint, and above all through the tracks of the hairy brush. Meaning never untangles itself from the physical phenomenon. And in the gestural traces especially, an old mythology—an earthy and sanguinary mythology—rises again to the surface. The agitated face of a painting like *Untitled* (1959) is a panorama of epic battle. The ridges and wedges of paint, all winging toward one another in the syncopated rhythms of writing and jotting, make for stupendous visual drama. In these lurches and dashings alone you feel the authentic hot-headedness, the impulsiveness, the eroticism of a mythological realm. This is the true affinity of Ryman with Twombly. And like Twombly's, these works are little fables of the rise and the fall of painting's philosophical ambitions. □

1. Aristotle, *Poetics*, chap. 6.
2. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, sect. 14.
3. Yve-Alain Bois, "Ryman's Tact," in *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1990, pp. 215-26. The phrase is taken from an essay by Walter Benjamin on Karl Kraus.
4. *Robert Ryman*, New York, Dia Art Foundation, 1988, p. 12.
5. Meyer Schapiro, "The Nature of Abstract Art" (1937), in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York, Braziller, 1978, p. 196.
6. Alberti, *On Painting*, Book 2, London, Penguin, 1991, pp. 83-84.
7. Ryman, interview with Gary Garrels (1986), in *Robert Ryman*, New York, Dia Art Foundation, 1988, p. 38.
8. Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy* (1972), trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.

The Robert Ryman retrospective was coorganized by the Tate Gallery, London, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibiton is currently on view at MOMA, through Jan. 4; it then travels to the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco [Feb. 3-Apr. 17]; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis [July 23-Oct. 2]. A catalogue with an essay by Robert Storr accompanies the exhibition.

Above and opposite (detail),* Versions XVI, *1992, oil and graphite pencil on fiberglass with wax paper, 14 ¼ by 13 inches. Crex Collection, Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

Author: *Christopher S. Wood teaches in the art history department at Yale University. He is the translator of Erwin Panofsky's* Perspective as Symbolic Form *(Zone Books, 1991) and the author of* Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape *(University of Chicago Press, 1993).*

ARTS

Minimal into the invisible

FINANCIAL TIMES
London, England
23 February 1993

William Packer reviews Robert Ryman at the Tate

The Robert Ryman retrospective, jointly organised by New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Gallery, which opens its international tour with its showing at the Tate, is as important as it is timely. It is sure to puzzle quite as many as it will irritate, and as many again both at once, but it also comes at a moment when the serious questioning of the received wisdom and prejudices of the avant garde has risen to the surface, to be aired on all sides.

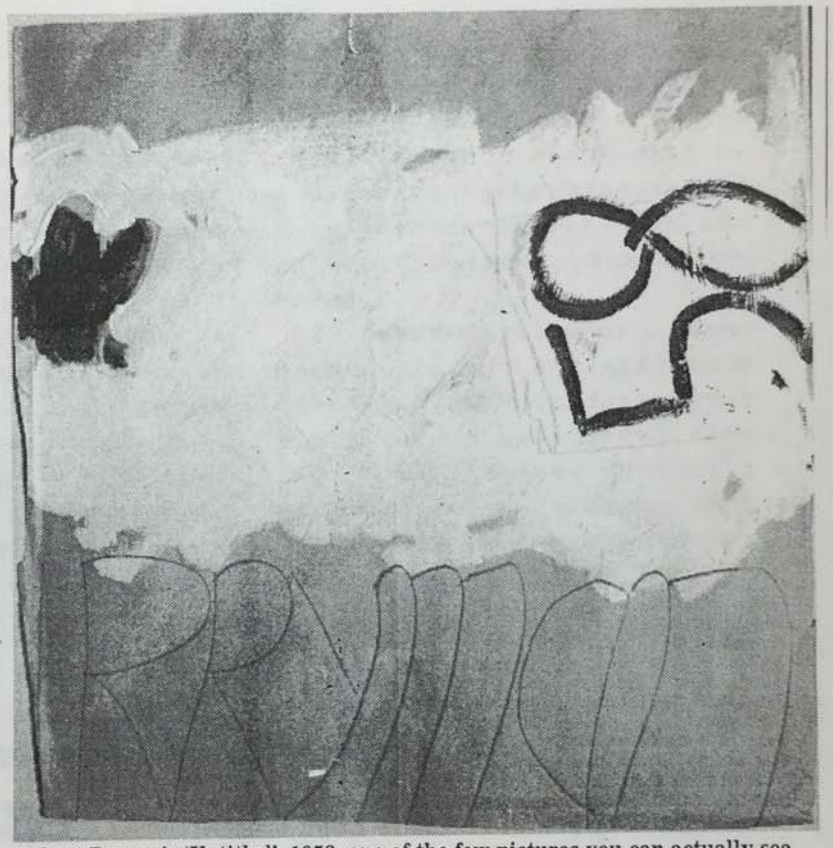
We can safely disregard the nine-days'-wonder school of journalistic response, with its instinctive anti-modernism which amounts to a profoundly anti-art philistinism – all art was modern in its day. But what seems to have happened is that a number of the more serious commentators have come quite independently to a broadly similar conclusion. For all the creative energy and excitement generated by the modern movement, in all its forms, over the past century and more, for all the profound truths of human experience it has realised, and for all the very real creative achievements that have marked its course, we have come at last to recognise that when the avant-garde becomes academic, it is more than time to take stock. It should be the stuff of serious and constructive debate.

What must be challenged is the assumption that whatever may be identified as *avant-garde* is of itself important and significant: from which it follows that the common curatorial and international dealing view that all too patently finds interest, so far as contemporary art is concerned, only in art of such a kind, is dangerously narrow, partial and unfair. The real usefulness of this Ryman exhibition is that it is both wonderfully even-handed and particular, offering both sides of the question, the radical and the academic, in the clearest terms. Such considerations were doubtless far from the Tate's mind when arranging it, seeing the show simply as the celebration of an established and respected modern painter. But it is exactly what it should be doing, presenting the work at issue, holding the ring.

The justification for a great deal of modernist activity has always been not so much the actual production of great art, or of art at all, but rather as the necessary experiment and investigation into what Art is, or might be, and into the mechanics, actual or potential, of its achievement. What has always bedevilled the debate has been the mindless subsequent acceptance that the fruits of such activity, whatever else they are, are also, without question, works of art. Art is what artists do, or propose, and so it follows that a walk in a field, a bare canvas, a beer can, a proposal, a mere idea, may itself be elevated to the status of Art. It is a seductive heresy, but heresy still.

In Robert Ryman we have an artist who was actively engaged with what was, in the 1960s, one of the central issues of painting. Following upon the more intuitive indulgences of abstract expressionism, the tougher questions were addressed, of what a painting was, and how to make it more itself. If an image is but an illusion, leave it out. If a painting is but a coat of paint upon a surface, leave it at that. And if variations of colour or surface-texture begin to seem arbitrary and unnecessary embellishments, then reduce the variation to uniformity, and drain the colour away until only white is left.

The most fascinating part of



Robert Ryman's 'Untitled', 1958: one of the few pictures you can actually see

the show is indeed that given to this earliest phase in Ryman's progress – he is now 62 – when he was wrestling with these problems, simplifying and recomplicating his surfaces and, in the process, achieving results that were highly personal, inimitable, and often, in the sensuality of the paint itself, very beautiful. But just how reductive, how simple, could he afford to be? The deceptive aesthetic of simplicity too soon seduced him, and he has been playing the game of elegant, pseudo-radical simplicity ever since, sustained it must be said (and good luck to him) by the enthusiasm of the museums and the market place.

Successive stripes of paint cross the canvas, leaves inevitably a record of every insensible variation of touch and pressure. Every painter who ever primed a canvas knows the wonderful thrill of that first loaded brush, and has played the game of leaving it that, or just one more, and just another – but it is only a game. We all know that to put anything, anything at all, on a bare white wall is to invest it for the moment with an aura of cosmic significance. A blank sheet of paper, four pins to describe a square, a length of aluminium beading – to go through the later rooms of this retrospective is to see the radical minimalist become but an aesthete working his endless decorative variations, and wondering to himself: whatever next? A sad business.

★

The Lisson Gallery's *Out of Sight: Out of Mind* is another salutary and entirely justifiable historical exercise, but again the fundamental issue is inescapeable. It is an ambitious group show which deals rather more comprehensively with the graphic, photographic and cerebral manifestations of 1960s and early 1970s conceptual art than *Gravity & Grace*, at the Hayward, has lately done for sculpture of the time.

From Carl André and Art & Language to Bob Law and Bill Woodrow, it offers a stimulating and enjoyable trawl through the fashionable and technical preoccupations of the time, a ferment of ideas and possibilities. But as Art? Bruce Maclean at his most ironical, with photographs of his evaporated puddle, and of himself as Henry Moore's "Fallen Warrior", says it all.

Robert Ryman: Tate Gallery, Millbank SW1, until April 25, then on to Madrid, New York, San Francisco and Mineapolis; sponsored by the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation and the Patrons of New Art. "Out of Sight: Out of Mind": Lisson Gallery, 67 Lisson Street NW1, until April 3

Jan '94
ATELIER
#803

アメリカ美術界でロバート・ライマンは内気な巨匠として知られている。彼は、50年代の終わりに登場して、ジャスパー・ジョーンズ、ロバート・ラウシェンバーグ、フランク・ステラと共に抽象表現主義の影響力に挑戦した画家たちの中でも最も重要な4人のうちの1人に数えられる。ライマンは、他の3人とは違い、派手に目立つ存在だったことはなく、また指導者として期待される人格的ないし知的素質を示したこともない。それよりも彼の役割は、寡黙なものである。彼の経歴は、物質性と信念のゆるぎない追求を示す好例である。その信念とは、解釈しようとする精神に駆り立てられたあらゆる雑念を取り払った眼識こそが、ほぼ40年に及ぶ気長な精進による彼の画業を支えるのに十二分な体験を表していると、ライマンが思っているものである。この信念は、彼の回顧展(ロンドン、テート・ギャラリーと共催)が開催されているニューヨーク近代美術館(MoMA)の9つの大きな展示室を通じて、十分に証明されている。

50年代後半にライマンは絵を描き始めたが、彼が一番影響を及ぼしたのは60年代のミニマリズムに対する関係である。そうなった理由は、ひとつは歴史的なものであり、もうひとつは、ライマンの仕事の方法と深くかかわるものである。50年代後半では、抽象表現主義は、だれもがやり過ぎて崩壊し始めていた。彼の世代の芸術家たちは、第3世代の抽象画家たちの手による"絵画"が訳の分からない、ぼやけた陳腐な決まり文句のようになることを知っていた。ライマン自身、ジャクソン・ポロックやウィレム・デ・クーニングのような第1級の芸術家を評価してはいたものの、彼らの業績に付け加えるべき新たなものを自分は何も持っていないと感じた、と述べている。ラウシェンバーグ、ジョーンズと同様に、彼も抽象表現主義の方法を放棄しなかったが、それを以前には見られなかったような方法—60年代の新しい代わるべき絵画を規定するのに決定的となる方法で、それを利用した。

ライマンの媒体は白の絵具である。MoMAには、この系列の作品が実にたくさん展示されているので、見る者は最後の部屋のはるか手前で、作品が種切れになるのではないかと思うほどだ。だが、もう白のバリエーションも尽きただろうと思えるとき、ライマンはまたしても次の手をやってのけるのである。この展覧会で白でない唯一の作品は、彼が職業画家として初めて描いたキャンバス作品、1955年から1958年にかけて描いたオレンジ色を主体とした絵である。その直後ライマンは下地の色を

PHOTO: BILL JACOBSON

「無題」
"Untitled" 1960
Oil, gouache, casein,graphite pencil, and red crayon on tracing paper on plain paper
33 x 33 cm

「無題」
"Untitled" 1959
Oil on pre-primed canvas
20.5 x 21 cm

ROBERT RYMAN

at MoMA PAINTINGS 1955 TO 1993

Kay Larson

白い巨匠— ロバート・ライマン

ケイ・ラーソン(ニューヨーク大学教授、在N.Y.)

50年代後半—ラウシェンバーグ、ステラ、ジョーンズ、そしてライマンらは、
当時抽象表現主義一色とも言える世界にチャレンジした。
白い絵の巨匠であり、絵画を壁に取り付ける方法でも創造的な発明家であったライマン。
50年代半ばから現在に至るまでの彼の作品がフルスケールに、
ニューヨーク近代美術館で展観されている。
多くの静かなる白い作品群からは、
ライマンの寡黙な強い信念が聞こえてくるようだ。

展覧会名：「ロバート・ライマン」展　会場名：ニューヨーク近代美術館(MoMA)　会期：9月23日～'94年1月4日

こんなことはどうでもいいと思われるかも知れないが、しかし、これは恐らくライマンがもたらしたものの中でも重要な部分を占めており、物理的発明の最も変化に富んだものである事は確実だ。

ほぼ40年間を通じ、彼の白い絵具を支えるのに、ライマンは驚くほどさまざまなものを使ってきた。これらの中にはバンドエイドくらいの大きさのマスキングテープで壁面に張り付けた紙も含まれる。ワックスペーパーのフレームを付けたキャンバスをホッチキスで壁にとめた。木くぎが堅いコンポジションボードを支えるのに壁に打ち込まれた。プラスティックの帯状のものが鉢巻のように作品の周りに引き伸ばされた。アルミニウムの帯状のものは、模造宝石の粉のように光るまでやすりにかけた。緑色と赤褐色両方の銅板。酸化されたアルミニウムの板はリベットでとめられた。ルマサイト（プラスティックに似た合成樹脂シート）は黒い酸化した鋼鉄ボルトで支えられた。あるいは、絵具を塗ったボルトや、カドミウムのボルトや穴をあけさせるために一度動かされたボルトさえもある、等々。

ここで再現された作品を考えてみよう。1959年に、彼は下塗りした小さなキャンバス（「無題」20.5 x 21cm）に、筆跡の際立つ白の絵具の厚い層を乗せ、白い画面の下から黒とオレンジ色が見えるよう、キャンバスの周りのギリギリの部分を塗らないで残した。この絵は明らかに、メタファーや空想を担う媒体ではない。それはその絵通りの厚みを強調するものであり、彫刻をも含めてこの世界に現実に存在する他の物体との親近性を強調するものである。

ちょうど1年後の1960年、ライマンは、1959年の諸作品に不満を抱くようになった。それらは、標準的な油絵にあまりに似ていたからである。そこで彼は、作品の物質的状態をラディカルに実験を開始した。1960年のこの絵は、ただのトレーシングペーパーの上にかすかな幾層もの油絵具、グワシュ、カゼイン、鉛筆、赤のクレヨンを使って塗られ、何の変哲もない白い紙を台紙に使った。絵具もその支えも対等のリアリティ、同一の物質性を共有しており、両者は、この物体によってすべて創造された単一の経験へと溶け合っている－その物体の頑強さによってのみならず、そのエレガンスによって。

1965年までに、ライマンは客観の表現的質に関する真剣な探究を開始した。この小品（「無題」19.7 x 20.6cm）は、ボール紙の一種であるブリトスルボードに白色エナメルを水平に塗ったも

PHOTO : BILL JACOBSON

「表面のベール」
"Surface Veil" 1970
Oil on fiberglass with waxed paper frame and masking tape
33 x 33 cm

白の層で覆い始めた。各々の白い絵は、その当時から今日まで、各々の絵に、ある種の特性を与えるために、繰り返された、ただ1種類の筆さばきを使った。この限りなく白の上に白を塗る技法は、絵具をどのように塗るかによる。速くか、あるいは遅くか、幅広くか、薄くか、分厚くか、透明にか、水平にか、垂直にか、また碁盤の目の上に塗るか、硬い平坦な表面にか、柔らかい平坦な表面にか、分厚い箱にか、薄い板にか、リネンにか、アルミニウムにか、ファイバーグラスにか、等々。

ライマンの作品は、特質主義者的楽観主義、すなわち、メタファーや文学的意味や形而上学などに頼らないで見るならば、見るだけで十分である、という信念に基づいている。抽象表現主義がこうした手段をすべて使ってしまったので、ライマンの"絵具をそれ自体のために置く"という決意は、芸術の役割についての信念を変革する一翼を担う。そして、このような直写主義は、次のようなライマンの経歴から育まれたものである。1930年生まれのライマンは、テネシーで育ち、大学でジャズサックス演奏を始めた。朝鮮戦争中に陸軍で兵役に服した後、学校を中退し、1952年にニューヨークに来て、ある有名なジャズピアニストのもとで学んだ。翌年、近代美術館(MoMA)の守衛となってから、数年間、偉大な近代絵画を、だれの教えも受けず間近で研究した。1週間をマチスで過ごし、1週間をセザンヌでというふうにして、彼らの絵具の扱い方を注意深くつぶさに検討することで、独学自習したのである。

50年代後半、ライマンは、絵を描くことを、ひとりきり、なんの支援もなく、独学で学んだ。この時期は、(抽象表現主義に辟易して) ステラの有名なコメント、「あなたが見るものは、あなたが見るものだ」に要約される。60年代に入って、ライマンはついに画家としてその名が知られるようになった。彼の最初の作品は、本当のミニマリズムより約10年早すぎたにもかかわらず、60年代半ば、ミニマリストたちはその作品のうちに自分たちの重要な先駆者を見出し、彼は英雄的存在となった。ミニマリズムは作品の物質的存在を強調し、画家の感情や個性を一切排除する。このスタイルを典型的に示しているのが、工場で制作されたドナルド・ジャッドのピカピカの箱である。60年代と70年代には、ライマンの注意深く構成された絵が、物質としての絵画、またその物質的支援に関する議論 (議論は果てしなかった)を生んだ。ライマンは、白い絵の巨匠であるばかりでなく、絵画を壁に取り付ける方法においても創造的な発明家である。

PHOTO: BILL JACOBSON

「無題」
"Untitled" 1965
Enamel on Bristol board
19.7 x 20.6 cm

のである。さらに1976年までにライマンは、砂吹きしたプレキシガラス (厚手透明の合成樹脂ガラス)に発展させ、黒い酸化スチールのボルトで壁に取り付けた (「無題」126.1 x 126.1 cm)。プレキシガラスは、白のパステル・クレヨンによってクロスハッチングされ表面が密度のある質感で覆われ、真っ白い海にさざ波が起こっているようでもあり、その上をヘリコプターで飛んでいるかのようだ。1991年の作品 (「ヴァージョン VII」112.4 x 104.2 cm)で、彼は、1枚のファイバーグラスのマット材料(フェルトのような素材にガラス繊維を織り込んだもの)を切って、それを薄い、透明なワックスペーパーで裏打ちした。ファイバーグラスのマット材には、表面に油絵具が塗られ、織物のあざやかな凹凸の上を静かに滑走する。

これほどあれこれ手を尽くして作品を描写しなければならなかったのも、ライマンの作品の力の証しである。彼の諸作品は複写が難しいので有名である。それらを見ることを経験することが、それらの本質を伝える上で実に決定的重要性を持つからなのだ。しかし、原則は単純である。どんなことでも、少なくとも一度は試してみること。ライマンの芸術は、クリスマスの前日に、店の前でうっとりと目を輝かせて、想像にふける子供のころの喜びを思い起こさせる。そこでは、どんな入れ物も、畏怖すべき未知の可能性を持っているのであり、胸をわくわくさせる新しい物質なのである。

外科医の正確さをもって、ライマンは各々の発見に彼自身を充てる。この探究から生まれた産物の繊細さと美しさは、感性の高さ、満足感、絶え間ない興奮といったものの、物質面における報いを指し示している。この簡素で静穏な場に入り込むには、人は心の精神的迷いをなくさなければならないし、判断停止の一種瞑想的な状態に入らなければならない。

ライマンの作品を記述すると、どうも冷やかな技術的なものになってしまうが、作品自体のもたらす経験はそんなものではない。白と支えの間には、無限に微妙で叙情的な対話がある。各作品が、自然界または工業的世界、ないし両方の物質的存在によってもたらされる、ある種の超越性との新しい出会いなのである。エスキモーは雪のさまざまなタイプに応じて異なった名で雪を呼ぶと言われるように、白にもたくさんの種類がある。凍った舗装道路の上に渦巻く氷の結晶のような、希薄な、輝く白もある。流れる、溶けたバニラアイスクリームのような白、各々の筆のタッチの端でこねられたようになっている白もある

PHOTO : BILL JACOBSON

「無題」
"Untitled" 1976
Pastel and graphite pencil on sandblasted Plexiglas with black oxide steel bolts and fasteners
126.1 x 126.1 cm

(ここで述べた1966年の作品のように)。密度のある、ぼおっとした、ホワイトアウト(雪の乱反射によって起こる距離感・方向感の混乱) のような、カリフォルニア海岸地帯で海上にたちこめる濃霧のような白もある。強靭、文句ない、工業的なエナメルホワイト、クリーム色に近い白もある。つやつやした歯磨粉のような白が、段々強く打たれていくコンマのように塗られた。ちょうど、嵐に弄ばれる白色の海の逆立つ波のように。

あまりに薄いので、染みのように、麻のキャンバスの裏にしみ通ってしまいそうな白もある。幅30センチほどの筆で豪快に延々と真横に引いた白の航跡もあり、時にはそれは中断なしで描かれた運動で、時には明らかに途中で描くのをやめた動きのものもある。カウンターの上に一晩置かれ乾いたアイスクリームのような、サテン風の硬いテクスチャーを持つ白もある。油っこい白で、それに繰り返しやすりがかけられ、羊皮紙に似た絹のような滑らかさを作り出しているものもある、等々。

このたくさんの白さが、雪嵐の寒気が衣服を通してついには骨の髄にしみ通るのと同じように、ついには脳をすっかり掃除する。実際、ライマンがちょっとでも色彩家への衝動に屈服したり、グレーのスチールやアルミなどで何かをすると、がっかりさせられる。

芸術家としてはライマンはいつも勉強している人である。画家として出発したときには絵に対して何の先入観も持っていなかったし、美術史についてもほとんど何も知らなかった。彼は純粋な状態で登場した。そしてそれは今までも変わりない。彼が提供してくれる経験は、このように、基本的に単純だ。芸術の素材、そしてそれらの素材が精神を除外し、解放し、機会、精神による所業をすっかり浄化する機会、それだけである。この過程が超越的であることなど、ライマンの関知するところではない。それは我々の側の関心事なのだ。というのも、それは、ライマンが「逆説的な絶対」と呼んだものへの航路を提示するからだ。ライマンはこの句を、1958年に、哲学について思いめぐらしていたとき、作品の一つにこの言葉を記したのだった。以来これを再び使ったことはないが、それは、彼に喜びを与えてくれるものは何であるかを示唆している。それは真実、そして、それが逆説的に与える至高の美と輝きにおいて、ただ真実だけである。

「ヴァージョンVII」
"Versions VII" 1991
Oil on fiberglass with wax paper
112.4 x 104.2 cm

OCS NEWS
New York
29 October 1993

アートランダム

Robert Ryman at Museum of Modern Art

白のアイロニー

林 道郎

ロバート・ライマンという作家は微妙な位置にいる。というのも、彼の作品が、50年代の抽象表現主義から60年代のミニマリズムへと移りゆくアメリカの美術の動向の中で、その丁度狭間に立つような性格を持っているからである。

画面を白一色で塗り潰すそのスタイルは、一方で、確かに「表現」を拒否するミニマルな物体としての絵画に接近しているのだが、他方、よく見れば、その白には無数の微妙な白が含まれ、その塗り潰しは微妙に変化をつけられた筆触から成り立っているので、我々観者は、彼の作品の表面から、いわく言いがたい白のざわめきのようなものを感じとってしまう。その「ざわめき」の故に、彼は、一世代前の抽象表現主義の作家達に見られる抒情性や官能性を引きずっているとも言われるのである。

事実、ライマンは、50年代の初期にニューヨークに出てきて以来（その時彼は、ジャズのサキソフォン奏者を目指していた）、多くの抽象表現主義の作家達の作品――ことにマーク・ロスコ――に感銘を受け、画家への道を歩むことになる。だが、「遅れてきた青年」は、先達からインスピレーションを得ながらも、それを乗り超えて、より遠くに行かなければならない。その葛藤が、ライマンの作品の中には、ある種のアイロニーとなって表面化（隠喩的にも文字通りの意味でも）してくる。私の興味を引くのは、ライマンのそのアイロニカルな側面である。

ただ彼の作品を、「官能」や「抒情」という言葉を用いて説明するだけでは、「肌合い」や「冷え」や「さび」を云々する茶碗の鑑賞とまったく変わらない（と言って、私は茶碗の鑑賞の在り方を否定するわけではないが）。ライマンに特徴的なのは、むしろ、そういったある種の心理的な深みのようなものを宙吊りにしてしまうような、乾いた感覚である。例えば、彼の多くの作品が意識的に、その「仮構性」を強調していること。微妙に塗り込められた表面が、実は、安物のテープで壁に張りつけられていたり、或いは、キャンバスの塗り残しを意識的に見せることによって、それこそロスコ的な暗示の世界が、キャンバスという工業製品の上に置かれた薄っぺらな作り物に過ぎないことを露呈させるやり方は、彼が、「抒情」や「官能」への素朴な信仰からある距離を持っていることを明らかにしている。

70年代以降目立つ金属素材の使用は、そのような距離を、そしてその距離がもたらす、私的な内面性と公共的な社会性の間の緊張関係をますます表面化している。一体、私的抒情性など可能なのだろうか？作品制作はどこまで行っても、工業生産物や商品経済から自由にはなりえないのではないか？いや、さらに言うならば、芸術の文法すら社会的産物に過ぎず、従って、白の微妙な階調そして筆触すら、既に抽象表現主義によって確立された公共の言語を反復しているだけではないのか？というような問題が、無視できない重みを持って現れてくる。そのような問題において、ライマンは、ステラやジャッドなどのミニマリストと一つの芸術圏をつくるというべきだが、そのことに立ち入るスペースはない。

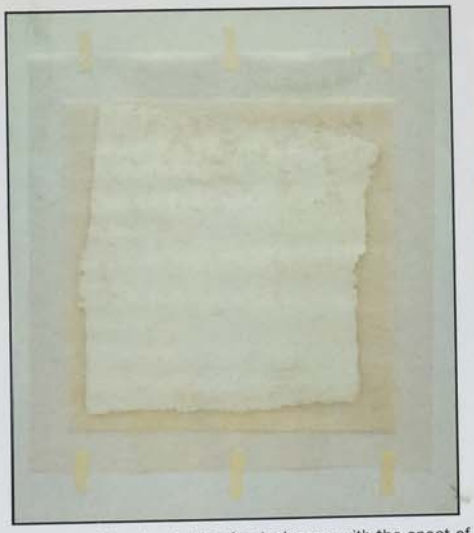
ライマン作「Surface Veil」(1970)

ライマン展の評を散見すると、しかし、私が今あげた彼のアイロニカルな特質について注意を払っているものは非常に少ない（ことに大新聞などの一般的なメディアにおいて）。たいていは、彼の画面の「官能性」や「抒情性」を無批判に賞揚し（それは近代美術館がみずから配ったプレス用資料の中でもそうなのだが）、その「美」をありがたがっている。そういった批評に見られるある種の「興奮」は、政治に偏向してしまったかに見える現代美術において忘れられている「美」の問題を復権させようという意識に支えられていると言っていいだろう。しかし、私が危惧するのは、そのような反作用的な「美」への回帰が、非常に陳腐な、芸術の神秘化へと連絡しはしないだろうかということである。

ライマンの作品について、確かに、「官能性」や「抒情性」を問うことは可能だろう。しかし、同時にそれは、作品自身が往々にして、それらのメタファーを不能にしてしまうようなアイロニカルな要素を持っていることを考慮にいれてのみ可能というべきである。（近代美術館。詳細は45ページ）

INTERNATIONAL TEXTILES
London
November 1993

insight



a paler shade of white

American artist, Robert Ryman, paints abstract paintings solely in white. An austere approach, but on closer inspection a thousand nuances of hue, texture and gestural marks can be discovered within these pale canvasses - a revelatory inspiration for designers, with the onset of winter whites and very pale tones for '94/95 and the faint, veiled tints of Summer '95 (see I.T.'s directions, October No.747). Showing at the **Museum of Modern Art** in New York until 4 January 1994. [Above: Surface Veil, 1970]

Ryman

Arte IN
Dec. 1993

ROBERT RYMAN
Surface veil, 1970

Sofia di Madrid, è approdata al Moma (fino al 4 gennaio) una mostra comprendente circa 80 opere dal 1955 ad oggi di Robert Ryman. Le sue superfici sono bianche eppure ogni volta prepotentemente diverse e rivelatorie. Pur nel minimalismo della forma, spesso rigorosamente quadrata, e del colore, in lui esiste ancora l'antico amore per la pittura, la pennellata, l'impasto. Benché a prima vista le opere degli anni Sessanta appaiano eteree e incorporee, ad una più attenta analisi rivelano una matericità ricca e pastosa. Una intensa vitalità si insinua lentamente e poeticamente in tele di piccolo formato, fogli di carta o cartoncino. Lentamente negli anni crescono in formato e si librano più sicuri di sé. A questo punto la ricerca di Ryman si sposta verso il supporto del dipinto che può essere cotone grezzo sfilacciato, carta da pacco, carta da lucido, lastre di metalli vari con brugole d'affrancamento a vista, plexiglass traslucido e così via. La rigorosità non viene a mancare, anzi a volte si accentua in una cerebralità più sottile, il bianco è sempre più puro, la pennellata meno visibile.

Micaela Martegani Luini

PADOVA

Si è da poco conclusa alla galleria Bluart la rassegna "I pittori di Chioggia" comprendente una trentina di vedute lagunari realizzate tra la fine del secolo scorso e il secondo dopoguerra. Cinque gli autori presentati: Leonardo Bazzaro (1853-1937), Attilio Bozzato (fine Ottocento-metà Novecento), Angelo Brombo (1893-1962), Dario Galimberti (1881-1966) e Luigi Pagan. "Nella maggioranza dei casi - scrive Carlo Facchinato in catalogo - questi artisti si esprimono con pennellate grosse, materia densa, pastosa, stesure larghe e vibranti. L'immagine che ci offrono è di un pacato Naturalismo".

PADOVA

Il piano nobile dello Stabilimento Pedrocchi ospita la mostra "Pettini. Cento artisti per cento pettini". L'esposizione già presentata in musei olandesi, svizzeri e tedeschi, documenta come l'estro e la creatività possano dare dignità artistica anche ad un semplice og-

MARION HERBST

getto di uso quotidiano. I modelli vanno dal minuscolo pettine con autoritratto al pettine collana, da preziosi lavori di oreficeria ad esempi di *readymade*. Fino al 9 gennaio.

M.V.

PADOVA

Si è da poco conclusa alla Galleria Dante una mostra personale di Pino Pascali dal titolo "Ludens o faber?".

PARIGI

Si è aperta al Beaubourg una piccola e pregevole mostra di disegni di Georg Baselitz, l'artista tedesco al centro delle vicende della Nuova figurazione dalla metà degli anni Sessanta a oggi.
Le sue ultime opere su carta, tuttavia, operazioni concettuali relative all'introduzione della terza dimensione sul foglio, esibiscono grandi *patterns* astratti e risultano meno coinvolte in problemi figurativi. Questi disegni sono piuttosto simili agli esempi di ritmi strutturali offerti da Paul Klee agli studenti del Bauhaus.
Le chine o i lavori su carta con tecniche miste degli anni Sessanta, invece, hanno un effetto potente. Baselitz lavora la carta con inchiostri neri, grafite, tempere ocra e gialle alla ricerca di immagini pantagrueliche e frananti, citazioni di Meidner e del più aggressivo Espressionismo sociale tedesco e insieme anticipazioni di neoselvaggi afro-mediterranei, come Miguel Barcelò, o meno propriamente dei *neomaudits* tedeschi e americani, da Eric Fischl a David Salle, impegnati a ridipingere su grandi fotografie con espliciti e stimolanti riferimenti sessuali per camere da letto post-modern (omo ed etero) in un crasso e appetitoso stile anni Trenta. Aquile sacrificali, misteriosi santuari, pastori grandi come i San Cristoforo della tradizione. Una mostra di grafica di qualità, da vedere anche per chi ritiene non troppo interessante l'artista divenuto celebre con enormi quadri a olio *upsidedown*.

Michele Dantini

PARMA

Prosegue fino al 5 gennaio negli spazi della Galleria Niccoli la mostra di Alberto Burri "La pittura come materia vivente. 1949-1966". Curata da Claudio Cerritelli e realizzata con il contributo della Banca Monte Parma, l'esposizione è dedicata alla prima fase dell'attività dell'artista: dalla tragica presenza dei *Sacchi* e dei *Gobbi* al trattamento delle *Plastiche*, dei *Legni* e dei *Ferri*. Per l'occasione è stato pubblicato un catalogo nella collana "Attraverso le Avanguardie" della Galleria Niccoli, con un saggio del curatore e apparati biobibliografici.

PERUGIA

Il fascino della carta, la sua intrinseca espressività che segna, essa stessa, il lavoro pittorico dell'artista, viene analizzato e materializzato in "La linea dell'immagine - carte di pittura italiana". La rassegna, nella quale compaiono una sessantina di opere dei migliori artisti italiani delle ultime generazioni, realizzate, appunto, su supporti cartacei, curata da Luca Beatrice e Cristiana Perrella, è stata allestita al Piano Nobile, diretto da Massimo Papa. Inaugurata il 4 dicembre, rimarrà aperta fino al 15 gennaio. Fra gli artisti presenti: Chia, Cucchi, Paladino, Clemente, Salvo, Ceccobelli, Gallo, Pizzi Cannella, Fermariello e Di Stasio.

M.D.

PESCARA

L'interesse crescente per il lavoro di Gerardo Dottori (1884-1977), oramai ricollocato a pieno titolo nella vicenda futurista a partire dai primi anni Dieci e non più soltanto da considerare come esponente di spicco del cosiddetto "Secondo Futurismo", ha portato la filiale Fiat di Pescara, che organizza ogni anno una retrospettiva di un grande maestro, a organizzare una cospicua mostra nella sua sede. Curata da Leo Strozzieri e Massimo Duranti, la rassegna, che andrà avanti fino alla prima decade di gennaio, presenta oltre una quarantina fra oli, tempere, idromatite e una trentina di disegni; opere eseguite nell'arco di quasi settanta anni. Dai primi disegni all'Accademia, ai dipinti futuristi, fino alle aeropitture degli anni dai Trenta ai Settanta. Pur non mancando alcuni dei più celebri capolavori, la mostra presenta molte opere inedite o poco esposte dell'intera vicenda artistica del futurista perugino.

M.D.

PITTSBURGH

Si è recentemente inaugurato lo Heinz architectural center che si propone come uno dei più qualificati sistemi per lo studio dell'architettura esistenti all'interno di un museo d'arte. Con la sua collezione di plastici, disegni e fotografie intende svolgere un programma