

The Museum of Modern Art

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ROBERT RYMAN

September 26, 1993 - January 4, 1994

A retrospective of the work of Robert Ryman, one of the foremost American abstract artists, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on September 26, 1993. 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.

The New York showing, which remains on view through January 4, 1994, 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.

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 a myriad of formal possibilities while realizing paintings of unusual elegance and luminosity.

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Arranged chronologically in the Museum's newly renovated third-floor Painting and Sculpture Galleries, **ROBERT RYMAN** is installed with the artist's participation. Ryman has stated, "My paintings don't really exist unless they're on the wall, as part of the wall, as part of the room." In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Mr. Storr writes, "Ryman treats the immaculate walls of the modern gallery as a given against which he plays with a wide range of substance and tonalities. These have been given the generic name white, but each is as distinct from the others as they are from the decorator's white of their intended surroundings."

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 -- some of the most beautiful he has created -- reveal Ryman's work to be rooted in the art of the 1950s and the aftermath of Abstract Expressionism. These paintings from 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."

Starting in 1965, Ryman's work begins to develop in groups or systematic series. Each is created with related techniques, as the artist investigates the behavior of the medium. After 1967 his work reveals an increasing experimentation with unconventional pigments and primers, as a means of exploring the nature of paint and its light-responsive properties. At the same time, Ryman varies his surfaces and supports to encompass a range of materials from cardboard and wax paper to fiberglass and cold-rolled steel.

Several small works on fiberglass, from the series *Surface Veils* (1970-72), are prompted by his desire to paint on something as close to "nothing" as possible.

Since 1976, Ryman's interest in the relationship between the wall and the painted plane leads him to incorporate visible fasteners into his work. These steel pressure plates, aluminum tubing, plastic straps, and other fixtures vary greatly from painting to painting in their physical prominence and hence in their compositional importance. In *Phoenix* (1979), for example, the long metal tabs that move the attaching screws well away from the central plane, in effect, alter the work's square composition. In *Access* (1983) and other works of the early 1980s, in which heavy bolts and bars combine with delicate layerings of paint, the fasteners become much more evident as structural parts of the paintings. This involvement with hardware and its structural dimension culminates in *Journal* (1988), in which Ryman uses large steel clamps to create a concave plane that catches and bends the light which plays over its curved surface.

The exhibition concludes with three paintings from the sixteen-work *Versions* series (1991-92). Unlike much of Ryman's work of the 1980s, these paintings, ranging in size from approximately one square-foot to slightly more than four square-feet, are suffused by an overall softness. The artist applies the paint in cottony tufts without any predetermined plan, until these marks coalesce into forms that seem to shift and meld. In *Versions VII* (1991), Ryman experiments with yet a new element: an undercoat of opalescent paint that changes color with the light.

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 traveled to the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 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).

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