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." 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." 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

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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 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.
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 Titoreto 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—ever so subtly—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 the flames 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.
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 pushed up through the paint surface and participate in the picture. I focused on 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. 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 stammers of Ryman’s brush, his ingenious autism, revealed to Bois the flaw in the modernist argument. Pain 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 intelligently. 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 into 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-sleeve 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 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 Alexandrines 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.
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-embryo 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. 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.” 8 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
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." 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's work 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 extravagance: 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." 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
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."5

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.6


The Robert Ryman retrospective was coorganized by the Tate Gallery, London, and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibition 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.

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