Robert Ryman

"Light is extremely important, how it's shown on the painting and whether it comes from the front or from the side and whether it's a soft light or a bright light. It all activates with real light!"1

In discussions of his paintings, Robert Ryman often references something that he calls "real light." Real light is the way in which paint reflects the natural or artificial light of its surroundings as well as how the paint absorbs and refracts light when applied to different surfaces, such as aluminum, board, canvas, paper, and Plexiglas. Ryman also defines real light a third way: it activates painting. Though he has long painted in the artificial light of his studio, he prefers to show his work in daylight so that the varying degrees of natural light—low to high, sunny and bright to dim and blue-gray—illuminate various aspects of the work. It is as if the change of light throughout the day allows his paintings to "take on a different life" with each new cast.2

Luminousness is a consideration from the beginning of his process, starting with the kind of paint used and methods of application to specific surfaces, through to the end, affecting how the paintings are displayed.

While always a part of the work, the importance of light for Ryman has not always been apparent. Since the 1950s, his paintings have been both readily identified and identifiable by their chromatic surfaces, ones that transmit light without separating it into visible colors. As viewers, we experience these painted frequencies of light as white. Ryman's early paintings include studies that examine how white, frequently perceived to be the absence of color, is in fact composed of tonal gradations of blacks, blues, and grays. Untitled #17 (1958) is such a painting. Despite the seeming whiteness of this work, a thin black line runs along its right side, marking a space between the densely layered paint to its left and the thinly applied paint to its right, visually prohibiting the spread of pigment across the canvas. When closely examining that line, other colors lurking beneath the surface become visible—small flecks of dark orange, red, and yellow with large streaks of gray and black that are broken by layers of off-white. The dense paint is both coating and covering, allowing the white underlayers to shine through.

Deeply aware of his materials and their abilities, Ryman has described his aesthetic practice as "a challenge to 'make something happen' with white." Similar to many of his early works, Untitled #17 was likely achieved by first "putting down a lot of color" and then "painting out the painting" with white. This method of overpainting with white is one that Ryman saw not as adding white paint so much as subtracting to let the underlying color inform the surface. The remaining traces of "a little red here or a blue shape slightly on the edge" may then pick up and transmit real light wherever the work is shown.3

Untitled (1958) is another early example of how Ryman approached color to create his compositions. In this work, two semiquadrate colors of color—one black painted over yellow, the other a rust brown painted over a sunny orange—emerge from the top and left sides within a field of white marked by sagittal scribbles, lines, and spurs. His color choices in this work pick up some of his earliest interests in art. While working as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, he carefully studied the palettes of noted colorists like Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Mark Rothko.4 Mary of Ryman's works showcase dramatic tonal contrasts set off by expressive brushwork. Alternating thick swaths of pigment with thin layers of primer, his marks reach the edge of the canvas in order to realize the shape of the square.5

Painted in the same year as both Untitled and Untitled #17, To Gertrud Mellon was the only painting that Ryman displayed in a 1958 MoMA staff exhibition. A member of the museum's paintings and sculpture committee, Gertrud A. Mellon purchased the work, which was untitled at the time and marked Ryman's first sale. In 1990 Mellon returned the painting to Ryman, who restored it in her honor. The painting features a vertical rectangle of black paint over areas of green and white. Most of the marks made with graphite, paint, and pencil appear on the left side of the sheet, while the unpainted right side displays the ochre-hued paper underneath. This painting also suggests the impact of those earlier painters that he had seen at MoMA.

In the 1960s as his career grew both nationally and internationally, Ryman began to experiment with support. After creating many works on board, canvas, and paper, he transitioned to aluminum in order to experiment with the direction of light before the application of paint. Lightweight and soft, aluminum is a surprisingly durable metal and its reflective quality made it ideal for enameling, painting with vinyl polymers, and working with oils. Using it as a ground, Ryman explored the metal's natural luminosity by burnishing it, relying on the shape of the square to balance the composition, and situating the work within an environment to better capture light.

Ryman's move into the metal was by way of aluminum signified his curiosity about industrial materials, which he continued to explore through acrylics, fiberglass, and various hanging devices. One of his first works with fasteners, Arrow (1967), features a square Plexiglas panel with four evenly placed fasteners (two above and two below) that attach the painting directly to the wall. Both serious and playful, Arrow was first shown in his 1976 solo exhibition at the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, PS 1 (now MoMA PS 1). The added structural element suggests a kind of inner life of the object and its relationship to the space around it. As the artist has remarked, his paintings "don't really exist unless they're on the wall as part of the wall, as part of the room."6

The fasteners also draw attention to the symmetry of the composition's shape and reflect other advances in his practice from the late 1960s onward, such as the introduction of paintings in low relief, use of corrugated paper, and choice to paint directly on the wall. Taken as a whole, these innovations explain why Ryman—a painter adamant about his devotion to the practice and at ease with manufacturing, including new materials and fabrication—was often aligned with both Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. His conception of real light is part of a greater anti-illusionistic concern, given his reliance on the veracity of his materials and their methods.

For this presentation at Dia:Chelsea, daylight illuminates the color, material, method, structure, and style of a group of twenty-two paintings. More than twenty years after his last solo museum exhibition in New York City, Robert Ryman aspires the second Dias presentation of his work in Chelsea. Many works in this group ranging in date from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s were on view in a long-term exhibition at the Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, and have not been exhibited in the United States in decades, if at all. This exhibition builds upon Dia's rich relationship with the artist, which began in 1988–89 with an exhibition of paintings on the top floor of the former Dia Center for the Arts (548 West 22nd Street, New York). Ryman installed another long-term installation of his works, which span over six decades of his practice, at Dia:Beacon in 2003. Acknowledging his first Dia exhibition where he positioned works to be lit by the building's exterior windows and skylights, the Beacon presentation utilizes the museum's natural light sources in its industrial-scale galleries. Concurrent with the ongoing presentation at Dia:Beacon, Robert Ryman also employs natural light to highlight the many ways in which light is visible in his paintings.

Courtney J. Martin

Notes
Robert Ryman was born in Nashville in 1930. Ryman attended the Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, Cookeville, and the George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville. After serving in the United States Army Reserve Corps from 1950 to 1952, he moved to New York City, intending to pursue a career in jazz. In 1953, however, Ryman began working as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art. That same year he was inspired to make his first painting. His first one-person exhibition was held at the Paul Bianchini Gallery, New York, in 1967. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Ryman’s works were presented in Documenta, Kassel, Germany; the Venice Biennale; the Whitney Biennial, New York; and the Carnegie International, Pittsburgh. His first retrospective was organized by the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1974, Dia mounted a show of his works in 1988–89. In 1993–94 a retrospective of his works traveled to the Tate Gallery, London; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. In 2000–01 another retrospective was held at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, and Kunstmuseum Bonn. Ryman lives and works in New York City.

selected bibliography

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Cover: Robert Ryman, Untitled [Background Music], c. 1962. The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

site map and checklist
1. Untitled #17 1958
   Oil on canvas
   The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

2. Classicus 6 1968
   Acrylic on handmade, watermarked paper
   Private collection

3. Counsel 1982
   Oil and Enamelac on linen with steel fasteners and bolts
   The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

4. To Gertrud Melton 1959
   Canvas, graphite, and colored pencil on paper
   The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

5. Untitled (Background Music), c. 1962
   Oil on linen
   The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

6. Untitled 1962
   Oil on linen
   Private collection

7. Factor 1983
   Oil on acrylic on red clay and acrylic with varnish on verso of fiberglass and aluminum with aluminum fasteners and rods
   Private collection

8.Ascend 1985
   Oil on aluminum with steel bolts
   The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

   Oil on fiberglass with aluminum, wood, and aluminum fasteners and rods
   Private collection

10. Anita 1968
    Oil on unstretched linen with staples and chalk lines
    Promised gift of the Virginia and Bagley Wright Collection, in honor of the 75th Anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum

11. Arrow 1970
    Oil on Plessisglas with Plessisglas fasteners and steel bolts
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

12. Catalytl III 1985
    Enamel on aluminum with steel bolts
    Private collection

13. Finder 1976
    Oil, graphite, and Enamelac on Plessisglas with steel bolts
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

    Oil on aluminum and polyethylene with aluminum bands, steel bolts, and steel screws
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

15. Untitled 1973
    Double-baked siliceous enamel on oxidized copper
    Private collection

16. Untitled, c. 1964
    Vinyl polymer on aluminum
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

17. Untitled, 1973
    Enamelac on aluminum
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

18. Untitled, 1958
    Canvas and graphite on paper
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

19. Untitled 1959
    Oil and gesso on paper
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

20. Untitled, c. 1960
    Oil on canvas
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

    Oil and gesso on unstretched linen
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

22. Untitled, c. 1960
    Oil and gesso on linen
    The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

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