

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 Luminescence 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 achromatic 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 exacting and commanding.

Deeply aware of his materials and their abilities, Ryman has described his aesthetic practice as a "challenge" to "make something happen" with white paint.³ 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.⁴ This method of overpainting color 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 natural light wherever the work is shown.⁵

Untitled (1958) is another early example of how Ryman approached color to create his compositions. In this work, two semisquare wedges 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 *sgraffito* scribbles, lines, and spurts. His color choices in this work on paper reflect 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.⁶ Many 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.⁷

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 painting 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 then re-titled 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 enhanced 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 metals by way of aluminum signaled 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* (1976), 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, P.S.1 (now MoMA PS1). 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."⁸

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—is 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* is the second Dia 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

1. Robert Ryman and Urs Raussmüller, "A Painting Is Basically a Miracle: A Public Conversation in the Garden of Inverleith House," in Christel Sauer, ed., *Robert Ryman at Inverleith House Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh* (Frauenfeld, Switzerland: Raussmüller Collection, 2006), p. 26.
2. Robert Ryman, interview by Gary Garrels, *Robert Ryman* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 1988), p. 12.
3. "An Interview with Robert Ryman," by Phyllis Tuchman, *Artforum* 9, no. 9 (May 1971), p. 46.
4. Robert Ryman, interview by Paul Cummings, October 13–November 7, 1972, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. For a longer discussion of Ryman's use of the square, see Robert Storr, "Simple Gifts," in *Robert Ryman* (London: Tate Gallery; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993), p. 17.
8. Barbaralee Diamonstein, *Inside New York's Art World* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), p. 334.

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 Sofia, 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.

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

site map and checklist

1. **Untitled #17**, 1958
Oil on canvas
The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.
2. **Classico 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 Mellon**, 1958
Casein, 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 recto and acrylic with varnish on verso of fiberglass and aluminum with aluminum fasteners and rods
Private collection
8. **Accord**, 1985
Oil on aluminum with steel bolts
The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.
9. **Pair Navigation**, 1984/2002
Oil on fiberglass with aluminum, wood, and aluminum fasteners and rods
Private collection
10. **Arista**, 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**, 1976
Oil on Plexiglas with Plexiglas fasteners and steel bolts
The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.
12. **Catalyst III**, 1985
Enamel on aluminum with steel bolts
Private collection
13. **Finder**, 1976
Oil, graphite, and Elvacite on Plexiglas with steel bolts
The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.

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14. **Post**, 1981
Oil on aluminum and polyethylene with aluminum bands, steel bolts, and steel screws
The Greenwich Collection, Ltd.
15. **Untitled**, 1973
Double-baked vitreous 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
Casein 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.
21. **Untitled #1003**, 1960–61
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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