

Robert Ryman

The act of looking

Robert Ryman
Untitled, 1965,
oil on linen canvas,
25,7 × 25,7 cm
Centre national des arts
plastiques, on loan to Collection
Lambert, Avignon

March 6 – July 1st, 2024
Musée de l'Orangerie

Robert Ryman (1930-2019), an American painter who began working in New York in the late 1950s, spent the bulk of his artistic career exploring the foundations of painting. This exhibition confirms the artist's historical significance, five years after his death. Ryman's approach was more singular than the parallels that are often drawn with the American minimalist movement suggest, and merits being viewed for and by itself. The Musée de l'Orangerie, which houses Claude Monet's ultimate masterpiece, the *Water Lilies*, is a venue well suited to this reinterpretation. Although Ryman rejected the notion of influence and the idea of exhibiting in juxtaposition with another artist, his contributions to the history of painting are still wholly relevant in his challenging of its aspects and fundamentals.

Like Monet before him, he focused, to the point of obsession, on the specificities of his medium, intrigued by the surface of the work, its limits, the space in which it is presented, and the interplays of light on it. Inspired by the medium's infinite possibilities and creating endless variations, Ryman always looked actively at painting. His paintings should thus be viewed as the artist encouraged us to: as an active painting, which rouses equally both the painter's gaze and that of the viewers.

Claire Bernardi
Director of the Musée de l'Orangerie

1

Robert Ryman in front of *Concert* (1987), in his West Village studio in New York, 1987, photograph
New York, Robert Ryman Archives

2

Robert Ryman
Arrow, 1976,
oil on sanded Plexiglas,
four sanded Plexiglas fasteners,
four hexagonal cadmium-plated
bolts, 34.9 × 30.5 cm
New York, The Greenwich
Collection



1

“No, it may seem that way superficially, but there are a lot of nuances and there’s color involved. [...]

It’s really not monochrome painting at all. [...]

I don’t think of myself as making white paintings. I make paintings; I’m a painter. White paint is my medium.” (Robert Ryman, 1971)

Robert Ryman experimented tirelessly as he probed the possibilities of painting, using not only traditional materials and media (oil paint, graphite pencil, silverpoint, charcoal, acrylic paint, primers, cotton or linen canvas, paper, and wood) but also more unconventional materials, such as enamel paint, chalk, synthetic polymer-based paint and supports made from industrial plastic or fiberglass.

Such perpetual testing throughout his oeuvre demonstrates his approach: to understand how painting works and what happens when the material parameters are changed.

Display

Display is the way in which the artworks are arranged in a space. A traditional display typically presents the pieces framed, on a wall. Robert Ryman experimented with different display methods, exploring the options, by creating works without frames, affixed directly to the wall or held up by metal fasteners whose finishes were chosen to complement the color and composition of each painting. The masking tape, fasteners, screws, nuts, bolts, straps, and metal fixtures used to secure the paintings to the wall form an integral part of the work, prompting the viewer to wonder about the limits: where does the work end and the wall begin?

Light

For Robert Ryman, light is an integral element of a painting, in the same way as the paint used, the support, or the surface on which it is displayed. It is the light that catches the material, throwing into focus its reliefs or demarcating the shadow of a support on the wall. This light is both that of the works themselves—which the use of white reflects with no illusion—and that of the lighting of the works. Ryman wanted this lighting to be as neutral, uniform, and natural as possible. For it is only once installed on a surface and lit that a painting becomes truly finished: the lighting completes the work and reveals its presence.



2

Materiality

Robert Ryman was more interested in knowing *how* to paint than *what* to paint. He was motivated by what painting is, what it comprises, how it works, and what happens when its variables are changed: the brush (fine, broad), the support (canvas, aluminum, Plexiglas, paper, fiberglass, etc.) and its size, as well as the type of paint (oil, resin, acrylic, or enamel) and color. He brought to light the physical materiality of the painting, and the way in which this influences the presence of the work.

Minimalism

Minimalism, or minimalist art, was an art movement that emerged in the mid-1960s in the United States in reaction to abstract expressionism and Pop art. The artists leading this movement (such as Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Robert Morris, and Sol LeWitt) focused their work on the object and its relationship with space. The environment in which these works are displayed is a decisive element. Robert Ryman was regarded as a minimalist painter for these reasons. Although he was friends with some of these artists, he rejected any theoretical ties to the movement.



3

“The first thing I did was find out how things worked. You find out what the paint does and how the brushes work and what’s going to happen when you put things together, and how colors react together, and composition.” (Robert Ryman, 1974)

Monochrome

A monochrome work does not comprise only one color. Robert Ryman's works are often described as white monochrome, in reference to Kazimir Malevich's painting *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918, New York, The Museum of Modern Art). And yet, whilst he does, indeed, largely use white to compose his paintings, his pieces are never just monochrome. White is used as a tool, to reveal different shades within the same work, brushstrokes, the light emanating from within or the various elements giving shape to its composition. See **White**.

Protocol

A protocol is a set of rules that painters follow to produce their paintings, i.e. a method. Robert Ryman generated and tested a large number of protocols, observed their results, and put these on show in each of his works. In some cases, these protocols have been left on the back of artworks. They may relate to the way it is installed on the wall. Through the protocols and their variables (the brush, paint, technique, or support used), it is possible to observe the endless variations permitted by the use of apparently simple tools like the square format or white paint. The act of painting becomes a study, over a long time frame and through repeated experimentation, of the links between "the small simple things" that make up the painting. Whilst the protocol might make Ryman's approach appear purely methodical, it does not preclude the perceptible dimension of his works.

Signature

This refers to the act of artists inscribing their name on their own works. Robert Ryman often signed and dated his paintings on the back. Over time, he used his signature less as an affirmation of the authorship of his paintings, and more as an independent graphic element integral to the composition. Sometimes, he even applied his signature on the edges of paintings, thus highlighting its significance as a component of them.

Square

The square can refer to the shape of a support on which the painter chooses to paint. The support can be in any shape: square, rectangular, round, oval, or triangular, for example. In his experimentation, Robert Ryman mostly opted for square formats for his paintings, favoring its neutrality as it is a basic, direct shape. Ryman thus dismissed the traditional formats in history of art, such as the rectangle, which is associated with portraits or landscapes, depending on its orientation.

White

Traditionally, white has been used in painting in combination with other colors (to lighten a shade for example). Robert Ryman uses it on its own, for its neutrality and endless scope for variation (consistency, transparency, tonality, light, etc.). He explained that, depending on the brand, manufacturer, or quality of the pigment, some whites are bluer or grayer, warmer or colder than others. For Ryman, white forms the basis from which it is possible to see the other aspects forming the painting, to reveal them, rather than distracting from them by using other colors.



3

Bill Jacobson
Wall of photographs of works
by Robert Ryman
in his West Village studio in
New York, circa 1998,
photograph
New York, Robert Ryman
Archives

4

Robert Ryman
Untitled, 1959,
oil on primed cotton canvas,
21 × 21 cm
Private collection

4

Materials Glossary

Acrylic (“Elvacite,” “Lascaux”)

Acrylic is a resin obtained through the chemical reaction of various acids forming denser molecules. When dry, it forms a flexible, water-resistant and non-yellowing film. Ryman also used acrylic in the form of sheets.

Aluminum

Aluminum is a lightweight yet strong silvery-white metal. It is used as a support by painters, Ryman among them, as well as to print photographs for its lightweight, flat properties. Ryman often used metal supports like aluminum—such as in *Spectrum II* and *IV* (1984, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum)—and steel. Their rigidity meant the work could stand alone, unlike canvas or paper.

Canvas (linen or cotton)

In painting, the canvas is used as the support. It can be prepared using a **primer**, and is traditionally stretched over a frame, a board panel or a wooden stretcher. Although Robert Ryman used an astonishing array of supports for his pieces, both traditional and less conventional, he frequently chose canvas to observe the way the different paints reacted with this support and interacted with the light.

Casein

Casein is the main protein component in milk. It can be used as an adhesive and as a binder for artists' paints. Ryman used casein paint for its matte surface which allowed to him to experiment with interplays and reflections of light.

Enamel or enamel paint

Enamel is a varnish which, once dry, hardens and can become shiny or matte depending on the intention. Enamel paint is commonly used in model-making and industrial bodywork. Ryman applied it to paper, cardboard, canvas and less traditional supports, as in *Large-Small*, *Thick-Thin*, *Light Reflecting*, *Light Absorbing 2* (2008, Maastricht, Bonnefanten Maastricht), for its adhesive properties but above all for its reflective surface and the way it catches the light.

Fiberglass (“Lumasite”)

Fiberglass-reinforced plastic (i.e. incorporating glass strands) is primarily used as a building material for its resistance and insulating properties. Robert Ryman used these materials, which are more rigid and self-supporting than canvas or paper, to create pieces with distinctive formats, reliefs and display methods, such as *Journal* (1988, Maastricht, Bonnefanten Maastricht).

Gesso

Gesso is a primer traditionally obtained by mixing white pigments with animal glue, which Robert Ryman found in a ready-prepared format.

Lacquer (“Enamelac”)

Lacquer is a natural or industrial resin which, when dry, forms a hard coating. Ryman used a pigmented form of it like paint.

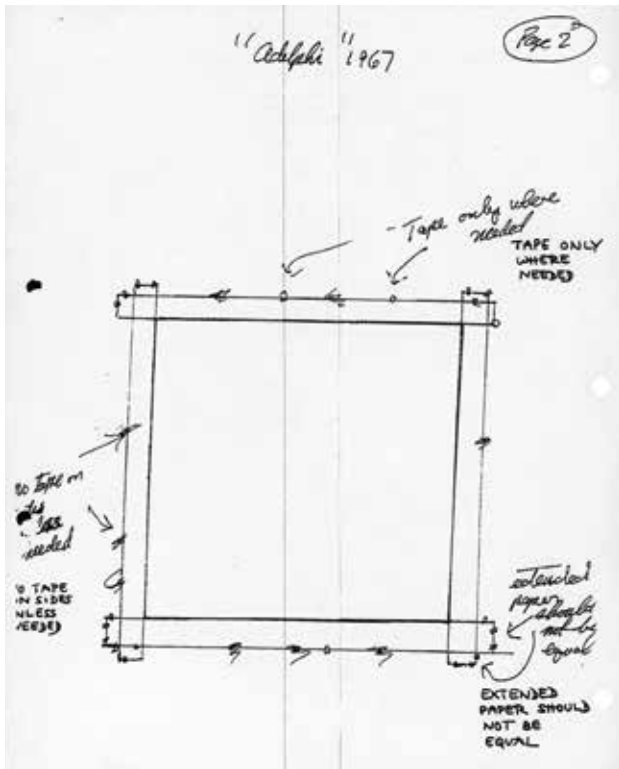
Oil paint

Oil paint is composed of pigments and a binding medium of vegetable drying oil (such as linseed, poppy or walnut). It is one of the traditional painting media. Ryman experimented extensively with oil paint, combining it with industrial supports to observe its reactions, giving it different degrees of consistency and studying the varying extent to which it revealed the brushstrokes and how the latter reflected the light.

Primer

A primer is a preparatory coating applied to a support before painting. This undercoat keeps the paint subsequently applied separate from the support, while improving its adhesion to the surface. A primer's composition can vary depending on the paint chosen.

Gesso is one of the primers used by Ryman.

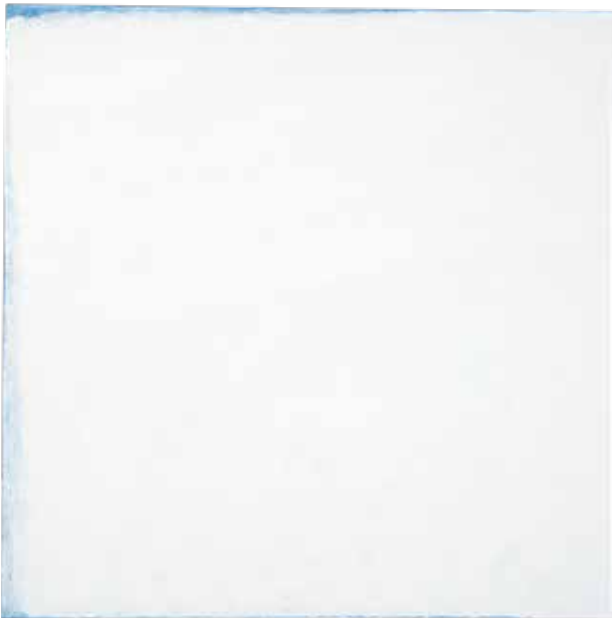


5

5
 Robert Ryman
 Instructions for the installation
 of *Adelphi* (1967), 1992,
 handwritten document
 New York, Robert Ryman
 Archives

6
 Robert Ryman
 Series #1 (*White*), 2004,
 oil and gesso on cotton canvas,
 wood fasteners,
 213.4 × 213.4 cm
 Paris, Pinault Collection

7
 Robert Ryman
Pair Navigation, 1984 and
 2002,
 oil on fiberglass panel, laid on a
 fiberglass panel with aluminum
 honeycomb core, polished
 aluminum front face, redwood
 edging strips, two aluminum
 rods, 22.8 × 120.7 × 120.7 cm
 Private collection



6



7

Alongside the exhibition

Visit

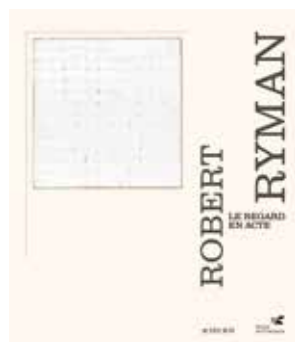
Audioguide (French or English)
Full rate €6 / reduced rate €4

Guided tours

(French or English, French Sign Language)
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Publication

Exhibition catalogue
Musée de l'Orangerie/Actes Sud
co-publication, 136 pages, €40



Discover the interview with the curator
Claire Bernardi and Guillaume Fabius on
video and podcast, articles, the program
of visits, and events alongside the
exhibition:



Program and booking
musee-orangerie.fr



For a more in-depth insight

Study day

Tuesday, March 12, 2024 from
10:00 a.m. to 4 p.m – Exhibition
rooms

In connection with Robert Ryman

This study day delves into the artistic
conditions in which the painter worked.
Guest speakers will talk about the
presentation of his work in France and
abroad and the public's reception and
understanding of Robert Ryman's
paintings.

Curated by

**Claire Bernardi, Director of
the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris**
With the participation of
**Guillaume Fabius, assistant
curator at the Musée de
l'Orangerie, Paris**

Exhibition organized by
the Établissement public
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