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'How It Works': Stroke, Music, and Minimalism in Robert Ryman's Early Paintings

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Robert Ryman’s predominantly white paintings have been fervently admired by scholars, critics, and artists since his emergence in the mid-1960s. Although these works are a source of consternation to the general public, anything more than a cursory glance at Ryman’s exploration of substances, supports, and techniques should quell the idea that he makes “blank pictures.” Careful study of his oeuvre reveals considerable variety: he has used oil, enamel, latex, alcohol-based primer/sealer, and many other paints to cover canvas, paper, steel, fiberglass, and cardboard with marks that vary from sluggish comma shapes to light swaths or stuttering horizontal bricks. Recent shows, such as the mini-retrospectives at Thomas Ammann Fine Art in Zurich in 2002 and the Dallas Museum of Art in 2005–6 as well as a 2004 exhibition at the Peter Blum Gallery in New York of works on paper produced from 1957 to 1964, remind viewers of the diversity and insistent materiality of an artist who has sometimes been mistaken for the quintessential modernist ascetic.

Robert Ryman’s use of white is not an indicator of transcendent spirituality or postmodern exhaustion. Rather, it is a way to foreground the substantive and performative qualities of painting, in which each stroke is a record of its application. The painting-performance is not the emotionally laden gesture of the action painter but more a staid recitation. The relationship to time implicit in Ryman’s strokes is also present in the artwork itself, which should be considered as a fully three-dimensional development in modern art. This reputation is partially accurate, given the artist’s plainspoken reticence and gentle mockery of art criticism. The increasing abandonment of belief in a mainstream, however, allows us to see how Ryman’s contributions are inextricably linked with the broader critical issues of his era. This linkage is of a particular nature, one that is attached to the artist’s own approach to painting. He had been a serious student of jazz in the early 1950s when, inspired by what he saw on his day job as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, he abandoned music in favor of painting. Without formal training, Ryman came to the medium as an outsider, free to experiment. Musical performance as much as modern painting conditioned the methodology he developed. Ryman’s use of white is not an indicator of transcendent spirituality or postmodern exhaustion. Rather, it is a way to foreground the substantive and performative qualities of painting, in which each stroke is a record of its application. The painting-performance is not the emotionally laden gesture of the action painter but more a staid recitation. The relationship to time implicit in Ryman’s strokes is also present in the artwork itself, which should be considered as a fully three-dimensional...
object and not just the ground for an “abstract” image. This object is responsive to changes in lighting and vantage point, reminding the viewer of the continuously unfolding present of his or her perceptions.

In his earliest mature works of the late 1950s, Ryman often piled pigment onto small, ragged pieces of canvas, paper, or cardboard. These paintings were featured in the 2004 exhibition A Minimal Future? Art as Object, 1958–1968 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. While his white paintings would seem perfectly in keeping with a popular idea of minimalism, the insistently tactile nature of his work puts Ryman at odds with this usually uninflected movement, which was also largely sculptural. In his review of A Minimal Future, critic Mark Godfrey called the artist “anything but” a minimal painter, noting that his “endless material pursuits are close to [sculptor Carl] Andre’s in sensibility.” By denying that Ryman is a “minimal painter” and yet linking him with Andre, Godfrey left the painter’s connection to minimalism tantalizingly unresolved. Yet ascertaining Ryman’s precise relationship to what art historian James Meyer terms the “minimal field” is necessary to establish his position in the art world of the last fifty years.2 The comparison to Andre, who is known for arranging identical pieces of wood, brick, or metal, is apt, because Ryman’s affinities with minimalism lie not in reduction or emptiness but in his frank and nonallusive handling of his medium.

Ryman was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1930. As a teenager, he became interested in jazz, particularly bebop, which featured smaller ensembles and greater complexity than the commercially successful big bands. Because of racial segregation and the dominance of country music in his hometown, he had little opportunity to hear live jazz but would visit record stores and search the radio dial late at night. After attending college for two years, first at Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, then at George Peabody College for Teachers, Ryman joined the army in 1950 to avoid the draft and Korea. His proficiency with the saxophone allowed him to spend his tour of duty traveling with the army band throughout the South, playing marches and dances. After his tour, the young musician was greatly relieved, however, to leave behind this regimented and popular music, taking a bus to New York with only his $250 “mustering out” money in hand. There he sought out pianist and teacher Lennie Tristano (1919–1978) and occasionally joined jam sessions in Greenwich Village clubs. The last in a series of “flunkie” jobs he took to pay for his room and lessons was a position as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art, where he worked from 1953 to 1960.3
At MoMA, Ryman was unmoved by the relative austerity of Kasimir Malevich, Barnett Newman, and Ad Reinhardt, preferring more painterly artists such as Henri Matisse and Franz Kline. Matisse’s brushwork epitomized the verve and confidence that Ryman enjoyed, and he has enthusiastically called Kline “one of the best.” These preferences for the work of a colorist and an expressionist might be surprising to those who consider Ryman primarily as a painter of white squares, but they make sense if his practice is seen instead as grounded in the self-evident display of the act of painting. A full treatment of the painters Ryman studied at MoMA is outside the scope of this essay, but it should be noted that his favorite, Mark Rothko, was useful for more subtle and complex reasons than might be imagined. Rothko’s and Ryman’s mature works seem to share a compositional emptiness, but Ryman has recalled that he was not as interested in “the style” of Rothko’s art as in “the basic approach he was using.” He specifies this “approach” as the quality of Rothko’s paintings as assertive objects in a physical setting. This interpretation, somewhat at odds with Rothko’s own intentions, helped to initiate Ryman’s long-standing abhorrence of pictorial space—the illusion of depth that even abstraction can possess—in favor of the more literal space of paint and surface.

The “One-Time” Method

The sensuality of Ryman’s painting is not a contentious point. It has been celebrated by critics who otherwise disagree on the artist’s significance. However, the basic unit of Ryman’s production—the painted stroke—has yet to be fully discussed in terms of its origin and function. To again take up Godfrey’s assessment: “Endless” his “material pursuits” may be, but their salient quality is not material per se but material as revealed in space and time. From as early as 1957 Ryman has deployed the stroke in a nonpictorial space that incorporates the unidirectionality of time: the viewer can almost re-create the order and pace in which the strokes were applied. This is because Ryman scrupulously preserves this application, never smearing, scraping, or adjusting. The artist articulated his position in a 1971 interview, explaining, “The way I work the painting is either finished or it’s destroyed. It’s a one-time thing. It has to be very direct; it has to be immediate, to the point. There can’t be any overpainting. When I do a painting, it’s a one-time thing.”

With these parameters, Ryman attains a temporal transparency and avoids the lingering illusionism that so troubled critics and artists writing about abstract painting in the 1950s and 1960s. He arrived at a solution in which minimalistic rigor was applied to that which minimalism found intractable: painting, and painterly painting at that. Painterly facture had become problematic because of its associations with the pervasive and mediocre “Tenth Street touch,” as gestural abstraction was called in the late 1950s. The rhetoric of personal commitment and self-discovery, while compelling in relation to the work of Willem de Kooning (fig. 2) a decade earlier, no longer rang true for viewers who felt they were witnessing an increasingly academic style. Ryman’s strokes function differently from those of the preceding generation of gestural painters. Instead of acting as autobiographical ciphers in a shallow, turbulent space, his deliberate strokes secure his painting in the real space of time-bound looking, because each maintains a distinct identity.

In a lecture delivered in 1991, Ryman claimed the term “realism” for his enterprise. “With realism there is no picture. The aesthetic is an outward aesthetic instead of an inward aesthetic,” he declared. Its space “is real, the surface is real and there is an interaction between the
The surface of Ryman’s “realist” painting is not to be isolated as the container of fictional space but is instead continuous with experiential space. Standing in his studio in 2002 before a small painting on stretched canvas, Ryman held up two hands in a gesture indicating a head-on view and said, “This isn’t the image.” Rotating his hands forty-five degrees to approximate an oblique view, he explained, “This is.” By implication, the “image” is a continuum around the painting and is never fixed. This goal is hampered when the paintings are overly crowded, as they were in the home of a collector Ryman once visited. In this collector’s hallway he saw “two small paintings of mine . . . maybe a foot apart, along with . . . pictures in frames, and it was totally misunderstood as to what they were.” The artist reflected, “It’s odd that they seemingly like the painting but yet they don’t understand what it is. Or how it works.”

A painting by Ryman “works” by virtue of its spatial flexibility, as opposed to the still and instantaneous mode of customary pictorial viewing. The paintings claim space not only as whole objects but also as conglomerations of applied paint. Whatever the support, the most consistent way in which Ryman’s painting asserts its status as an object and not a picture is through the “one-time” criterion. He further described this criterion in 1992: “I didn’t want to work the paint too much. . . . So there could be no covering of mistakes—it goes on and that’s the way it is. I like that feeling, and I like that approach.” The eccentricity of this technique can be understood by comparing it with the procedures and results of other highly materialistic painters. For all their differences, many abstract expressionists relied on the gesture as a sign of liberation from previous notions of finish. But even the most gestural, high-impasto paintings allow for a point at which the material seems to disappear and an image is read. This occurs all the more readily in reproduction. Ryman avoids this moment by refusing to efface previously applied strokes. No ideated image takes precedence over the applied paint itself. Ryman’s stroke never describes forms or fills in areas but exists as one of many discrete units.

A small untitled painting from 1962–63 (frontispiece) demonstrates this quality. A rough square of linen canvas was stapled to a wall or drawing board and coated with glue sizing. The shrinking and tightening of the canvas under the sizing accounts for the scalloped edge, an effect Ryman enjoys. This detail is an example of his attention to the painting as an object in which the support itself is integral; the stiff patch of cloth is not a negligible ground for an image but a part of the experience of the painting. The penciled grid establishes actuality by contrast; its lines weave and buckle, rejecting the stable idealism of geometry. Onto this cloth, Ryman first brushed a
cloudy film of white. Not a true priming coat, this layer declares itself because it fails to cover the brown linen completely in the pristine blankness that precedes a picture. Next, the painter scattered strokes of turquoise and light ocher, followed by the final cluster of thick white marks. Each stroke is clearly the result of one action of the brush, but the “one-time” rule does not preclude obscuring previous strokes with new, equally decisive ones. Ryman’s frequent masking of color with white should not be confused with a de Kooning-esque drama of pentimenti in which the image is discovered through revisions and partially buried previous states. Ryman did not paint out but over. Everything that was once there is still there. He made this obvious by letting the colors dry before adding white, so that each stroke remained a decisively enunciated component and did not blend with the colors underneath.

Separation, Not Reduction

Ryman’s early development was not a gradual rejection of color and incident in favor of uniform white paint. Instead, white appeared alongside black and other colors in paintings with large portions of exposed ground. His discrete stroke distinguished itself from more indiscriminate coats of paint in the mid- to late 1950s. The work evolved as a clarification of these individual strokes, and not as a process of purification through the abandonment of color. Ryman’s first paintings, like those of any student, display little stylistic cohesion, ranging in color from muted brown to lurid violet and green, and in mark from rigid and thick to sweeping and curvilinear. By the end of 1955 and continuing into 1956, after a number of more or less gestural abstractions in which loosely painted squares and ovals are circumscribed and linked by an energetic black line, the paintings seem to develop a deliberate clumsiness. Untitled (fig. 3) is predominantly dull green and includes small patches of blue, red, and ocher, which together read as a nearly arbitrary collection of marks and shapes. This arbitrariness is in pointed contrast to the grand and confident works that had drawn Ryman’s attention at MoMA. It indicates a shift away from a traditional lateral composition, in which elements are arranged in a given space. Energy is redirected toward the canvas, and putting on paint supersedes any depicted drama of shapes.

As mentioned above, Ryman would sometimes emphasize and reemphasize a shape by circumscribing it with black lines. In an untitled painting of 1957 made with casein and pencil on a tiny piece of canvas (fig. 4), jagged lines describe a white quadrangle several times before chalky white paint fills in the zone, partially obscuring its outlines. A horizontally elongated C has been inscribed in the top central portion of the shape, its upper extremity running off the plane. The lines defining the square, the white paint filling it in, and finally the
C line tell the story of a painter physically savoring the central form through two different mark-making techniques—line and brushstroke—before departing from this form in a speedy flourish. The inclusion of this painting in Ryman’s 1993 retrospective at the Tate Gallery in London and MoMA must have been irresistible, but it is somewhat misleading. It seems to prefigure his mature work, but only if that work is conceived as consisting of white squares. The apparent whiteness of Ryman’s art came about through a different trajectory—deriving from the cumulative effect of isolated strokes, rather than the white square as an ideal shape to be conceived and executed. When he made this painting, Ryman was experimenting widely with marks, placement, and colors.

One of the earliest examples of the decisive stroke is *Untitled* (fig. 5). Shapes on the left (in black) and on the top (in orange—this may be two orange strokes rather than one orange shape)—are partially buried by multiple pieces of white. Again, this layering is quite clear, distinguishing Ryman’s approach from the wrecking-and-rebuilding technique of gestural abstraction. He has retraced in white the once-orange “58” on the right side. In other areas, such as the upper and lower right, he avoids the smothering buildup that appears elsewhere, placing only a few marks on the sized cotton. Such an aerated technique, such visual penetration to the canvas, allows for a greater overall range of texture and a feeling of lightness. In contrast, a vertical stroke about a foot to the left of the date is much thicker. This flattened smear, whose load has oozed out to the left, is a veritable event on the surface. Here factual incident is, simply put, enough, whereas for de Kooning and other abstract expressionists such ephemera were not enough. For them, incidental effects had to be justified by contributing color, directional motion, or structural elements. Ryman instead found interest in “mere” application. His painting must have appeared naïve because of its intoxication with the basic building blocks that other artists put to more elaborate use.

These details illuminate the vantage point from which Ryman practices his art. He avoids privileging a finished image to which individual acts are subservient by focusing on the acts themselves, imposing a condition of irrevocability. Irrevocability is already an inherent quality of music, especially the jazz improvisation that brought Ryman to New York in the first place. A musical phrase, once proposed, cannot be withdrawn. Ryman infuses painting with the same high stakes. His technique not only parallels music in general but shares the principles of kinesthetic and multisensory attention to detail that characterized the teaching of Lennie Tristano.

Musical Affinities

Music was, I think, important to my painting, the way I saw painting right from the beginning, because . . . jazz is where you improvise; . . . what you play is really only a one-time thing; you don't hear it again, unless it's recorded, . . . and it's very much like painting, in a sense. . . . You play or you paint, and something comes from it.

Comparisons between music and painting, especially abstract painting, have a long history. From Whistler’s symphonies and nocturnes to Piet Mondrian’s Broadway Boogie Woogie (1942–43) to recent reexplorations of synesthesia, music has served as a model both for a nonreferential, internally justified art and for an art of liberation from given structures, whether formal or social. A number of Ryman's seniors and contemporaries, including Larry Poons and Larry Rivers, have also been fans and even practitioners of jazz. The following observations on Ryman join the large body of literature on music and painting, but are distinguished by their articulation of the locus in which his paintings and music (particularly jazz) intersect.¹⁰ As has been discussed, Ryman's method maintains the time-bound clarity of music. It attempts neither to relate to a social climate nor to produce visual parallels for an aural experience. Even with his laborious and exacting revisions, Mondrian filled in forms and colors that, together, create an optical energy that mimics the jazz he admired.
The cause-and-effect performative nature of Ryman’s method is similar to that of Jackson Pollock, but Ryman carefully avoids the spatial ambiguity that, while enriching Pollock’s work, would weaken his own. Pollock was known to play jazz records obsessively at high volume, and the energy and spontaneity of this music have served as an interpretative guide for his work. Ryman’s “music,” if it may be called this, is more sedate and contemplative, perhaps in keeping with the tendencies of his onetime teacher.

Tristano (fig. 6) is less well known than such canonical figures as Charlie Parker or Miles Davis, a fact bemoaned with some indignation by admirers of his reserved, delicate, but highly innovative music. In 1949 he and his ensemble recorded two short, completely improvised pieces, “Intuition” and “Digression,” which lacked the melody, chords, or key signature that normally govern jazz, predating Ornette Coleman’s “Free Jazz” by ten years. Most of Tristano’s ensemble work did not consist of total improvisation, but because it could be reminiscent of modern atonal music, the popular press dubbed him the “Schoenberg of jazz.” Tristano and his students and collaborators, including saxophonists Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh, were criticized for their apparent lack of emotion. For example, bebop pioneer Dizzy Gillespie complained, “They never sweated on the stand, Lee Konitz, Lennie Tristano, and those guys. This music, jazz, is guts. . . . They sorta softened it up a bit.”

Konitz, whom Ryman admires immensely, defended this “softening” of jazz by arguing that “it’s possible to get the maximum intensity in your playing and still relax.” He demonstrated his position by invoking swing-era saxophonist Lester Young, who, according to Konitz, “never sounded frantic, nor did he sound as if it were an effort to play. He sounded as if he were sitting back and putting everything right into the groove where it’s supposed to be. It was very pretty and at the same time, it was very intense.”

Ryman has expressed this same belief in emotional content without histrionics—whether fast and loud playing or spattered and colorful action painting. His intention is to provide an experience of “enlightenment and delight.” The belief that such an experience is possible with such limited means is reminiscent of the economy of Tristano’s playing. Indeed, bassist Peter Ind has written that it is possible to invest just one note with feeling. Both Tristano and Ryman assert that meaningful content can be found within unadorned technical details. To this end, Tristano based his teaching on theoretical knowledge and physical control. He required his students to play all manner of scales and to identify an exhaustive variety of harmonic intervals by ear.

Like all of Tristano’s students, Ryman was exposed to this emphasis on rudiments, and he seems to have transposed this principle to his first attempt at painting. He began by acquainting himself with the tools and methods of the art: “I was just seeing how the paint worked, and how the brushes worked. I was just using the paint, putting it on a canvas board,
putting it on thinly with turpentine, and thicker to see what that was like, and trying to make something happen without any specific idea what I was painting.” Instead of controlling the paint and brushes for the sake of an image, Ryman experienced their properties. Thinning the paint and applying it thickly are two options in the vocabulary of paint, and Ryman started with a systematic introduction to this language. These self-guided exercises are much like a musician practicing scales or attending to such matters as posture, tone, and breathing.

One of Tristano’s important exercises was derived from playing scales. Instead of playing the entire scale, the student would break it into small groups of notes, from two to seven, played in quick succession. Former wind student Timmy Cappello described this exercise: “You would play one note, and then you’d play two notes tongued very fast, just straight up and down the scales. Dudop, dudodop, dudop, dudodop. He was very concerned that a saxophone player’s or wind player’s tongue and fingers be really well coordinated.” Although Cappello probably sang “dudop, dudodop” to his interviewer, in print these syllables become onomatopoetic equivalents of Ryman’s discrete strokes, particularly in his small linen flaps of the early 1960s (see frontispiece). Each stroke is a decisive articulation of several factors—the body of the paint, the texture of the ground, and the give or stiffness of the brush, all eminently clear—placed and then left, as if they were notes from an instrument.

The coordination between breath, tongue, and fingers that Cappello described is mirrored by Ryman’s simultaneous attention to a number of variables in Mayco (fig. 7). In this painting, a twelve-inch-wide brush was pulled across a large linen canvas. Ryman recalled the concerted physical control this project required: “I had a few failures at the beginning. Finally, I got the consistency right and I knew what I was doing and how hard to push the brush and pull it and what was going to happen when I did.” The painting was deemed successful only after he had coordinated the viscosity of the paint with the flexibility of the brush and the resistant weave of the canvas. This need for unerring execution, combined with the articulation of physical variables, also characterizes his Standard polyptych (fig. 8). Of the nearly fifty sheets of steel that Ryman prepared, he rejected all but twelve:

Well, I did them three at a time and I had them next to the wall, and I cleaned them and they were coated with lacquer. . . . When I began to paint them, I had to have the paint ready, and the brush, and the consistency of the paint. . . . And when I painted them, it had to be done quickly, and it was just a one-time stroke across, and again and again, and sometimes, . . . if there was a certain twitch or something, the stroke might miss a little bit as to how it went across, or maybe it’d be too much of a drip or something would happen where it just didn’t come out so well. . . . so it was really just a matter of how it looked to me and how I felt with the others.

The painter’s standards for judgment were as subjective as those of a traditional abstractionist, but while de Kooning or Kline judged configurations, Ryman assesses performances. Thus he replied circumspectly when interviewer Paul Cummings asked him in 1972 about the apparent preconceptualization of his work: “Yes, that’s to begin with, but then the painting. . . .” The ellipsis appears in the transcript, indicating that Ryman trailed off in thought. Cummings continued his inquiry, pressing the artist: “So there’s still actually a lot happening once you’ve started the picture. There’s a certain amount of chance involved in it.” Ryman replied:

Well, it’s not chance. I mean, I’m very aware of what the paint is going to do. I know how the paint is going to react on the surface.
because I know it. I’ve done it. It’s more the chance of . . . It’s difficult to explain. It has to be a very direct feeling and a very sure approach. There can’t be any doodling. I mean it has got to come out right away; and if it doesn’t, you can always tell when it’s been fussed with.18

Cummings asked if the painting is either a systematically produced image or the result of a procedure incorporating accident, but Ryman practices a third path, in which a given procedure is subjected to evaluation. In other words, he does not use either of the theoretical justifications (system or accident) that Cummings suggested, because both of those options are pictorial. The substance of Ryman’s work is instead an event that must leave a satisfactory result in order to survive.

Another important parallel between Ryman and Tristano can be seen in their shared use of the term “feeling.” Despite his reputed lack of “guts,” Tristano insisted, “The jazz musician’s function is to feel.” This “feeling” was of a particular nature, however. Tristano expressed his disapproval of more exuberant players such as saxophonist John Coltrane with the phrase “all emotion, no feeling,” adding, “For my purposes . . . emotion is a specific thing; happiness, sadness, etc. But when I listen to the old Count Basie band with Pres [Lester Young], it is impossible to extract the particular emotion. But on the feeling level it is deep and profoundly intense.”19
Based on Tristano’s explanation, “feeling” can be described as an attention to the internal relations in music instead of a reference to a state of mind. Ryman uses the term in a similar manner, with the further implication of a bodily apprehension of painting. In denying any representational or metaphorical aspect to his work, he has explained that each painting is based on “the way it’s done and the way it feels.”

Ryman’s equation of “the way it’s done” and “the way it feels” suggests that “feeling” denotes a mode of perception that is tied to vision but not exclusive to it. The choppy rhythm of oil paint in the Winsor Series (fig. 9) feels different from the swaths of matte enamel in the Standard polyptych (1967), which in turn feel different from the dull, watery sealer on corrugated cardboard in VII (fig. 10). Ryman proposes a mode of viewing distinct from the “opticality” theorized by modernist critics such as Clement Greenberg and his chief protégé, Michael Fried. Fried’s famous construction “eyesight alone” stands in opposition to the greater bodily engagement of minimalist works, a quality Fried derided as “theatrical.” It must be stressed that Ryman did not practice his anti-optical painting in direct engagement with these art-critical battles, which played out in the 1960s. He developed this work in the late 1950s when he sought to express, as succinctly as possible, the feeling of actuality he derived from the paintings that inspired him at MoMA.

This kind of feeling can be ascertained by attending to details, intuited by the object’s tactility, and conducting an imaginary rehearsal of the painting process. In a statement written for an exhibition of new paintings in 2004, Ryman continued to downplay pure vision in favor of feeling by explaining, “At the beginning I have to somewhat blindly find my way. . . . Then it becomes more clear how [the paintings] are working, how they feel. How the paintings look can be deceiving, but the way they feel is more important.” Viewers may be “deceived” if they do not look in a manner that integrates bodily and temporal implications. This unfolding of detail and possibility—as opposed to the singular vantage point of pictorial viewing—is how the painting “works,” and in the above statement Ryman equates how the paintings “work” with how they “feel.”

Just as Ryman refuses to isolate vision, Tristano incorporated bodily experience into the production of sounds. Physical internalization of knowledge and integration of the senses were key to his pedagogy. Musicologist Eunmi Shim has discussed this goal: “To his students he [Tristano] often stressed the connection between senses, such as hearing, feeling, and seeing, and made an effort to enable them to experience the musical process as a whole by doing so.” To instill this multisensorial approach, Tristano recommended practice away from the instrument, “visualizing” playing while rehearsing the tunes in one’s


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mind. In addition, he would require his students to sing along with records of accomplished players. Often he would slow the records to half speed to facilitate scrutiny of the melody. These exercises were intended to dismantle the barriers between conception and execution, and to allow for direct expression of musical ideas, without the intervening negotiation of an instrument. And again Ryman continued this enterprise by eliminating shapes as a second-tier effect of the painting activity, in favor of uniting mark and effect with his one-time stroke.
Shim speculates that Tristano’s visualization technique could be partially attributable to the fact that he was blind, having lost his sight at an early age. Ryman’s eyesight seems to be weak, and while his work is predicated on subtleties perceived visually, these subtleties result from bodily activity. Critic and historian Lucy R. Lippard, to whom Ryman was married in the 1960s, recalls that when he acquired eyeglasses he commented, “Oh, is that what I’ve been doing?” This almost offhand recognition of that which is thought to be central to painting—the visual—suggests that Ryman’s efforts had been directed not toward resolved images but toward the experience of applying paint.

Ryman was no “Tristanoite,” as the pianist’s adherents were called, and he left his studies after only a year. The future painter found his teacher to be “very cold and kind of rigid” and unable to “teach in that way of opening someone up to their own personality.” Tristano’s students were divided on this issue. Some found the musician very helpful and stayed with him for years, while others consider Tristano’s studio to have been cultish and attribute to him a “messianic” ambition toward “mind-control.” While Ryman is more diplomatic, he indicated his reluctance to submit to such a group dynamic in discussing his eventual choice of painting over music: “[P]ainting was something I could do alone, do myself, and music demanded other people involved. . . . It just suited my personality, I think.”

Despite Ryman’s eventual abandonment of music, the correspondences between his and Tristano’s aesthetic philosophies indicate that this early experience affected his conception of painting as a self-justifying activity rather than as a set of technical problems to be overcome on the way to an image. Having entered painting from without, Ryman was able to avoid the persistent illusionism of abstraction at the precise moment when other painters were working so hard to expunge it. Because he worked from different assumptions, he remained disconnected from the stylistic decadence
of abstract expressionism as well as from its critique by other painters of his generation. Jasper Johns and Frank Stella, for example, famously rebuked abstract expressionism’s excesses by presenting the stroke as drained of color, individuality, and/or communicative power. Instead of ostensibly “expressing themselves,” they were skeptical about the existence of an interior realm, not to mention its accessibility through the culturally conditioned act of painting. While Ryman rejected the metaphorical trappings of gestural painting, he celebrated its tactile immediacy. If his paint application is understood as engendered by a performative impulse, his repeated brushstrokes appear as propositions of materials and activities that possess their own positive qualities rather than as negations of painting’s accepted meaning.27

Minimal Overlap

Stella’s early work is no simple act of negation, but his Black Paintings of 1958–60 clearly succeed at his ambition to avoid making “a record of . . . sensitivity, a record of flux.”28 Ryman saw these paintings in the exhibition Sixteen Americans at MoMA when he worked at the museum as a guard, and appreciated their importance. “Many of the painters that I talked to didn’t even like them at all [and] thought they were ridiculous,” he commented. “I thought they were very interesting paintings.” The exaggerated thickness of their stretchers along with the insular pictorial scheme these stretchers projected were read in succeeding years as the final transformation from the painting as window—in which the thickness of the stretcher was merely an expedient support to be ignored—to the painting as self-sufficient object, relieved of illusion and seemingly exhausted of formal possibility. However, the Black Paintings were devastating only to tenets Ryman did not hold. His easy enjoyment of Stella’s early work is an example of his disinterest in—even innocence of—the expressivity Stella was overtly undermining.

Ryman’s Winsor Series of 1965–66 bears superficial similarity to Stella’s work, since the paintings appear to consist of rows of stripes, but stylistic emulation is unlikely given the relatively large span of time between them. Ryman did not paint the Winsors until several years after he had seen and admired the Black Paintings. Immediately after he saw them, he continued on his course, in which discrete curving strokes populate expanses both large and small. It was five years before he regimented these units into “stripes.” In fact, they cannot be considered stripes at all, because a stripe is an optical abstraction existing in the realm of pictorial design. This distinction is clarified by looking closely at both painters’ work. Differences in their manner of execution reveal profound differences in conception. Ryman’s method was as follows. At the top left-hand corner of a large linen canvas, a brush about one and a half inches wide, loaded with white oil paint, was pulled horizontally about twelve inches, just until the paint began to thin and the weave of the cloth poked through. The paint may have been mixed with a solvent to allow for easier brushing, but it was more thick than thin. There are no drips, and the ridges created by the bristles have been retained in the dried paint. After this first stroke, another was applied with a reloaded brush, continuing the horizontal row. This process was repeated down the surface of the canvas.

By contrast, Stella rendered his stripes in varying directions with multiple coats of paint. They are not, as onetime studio mate Carl Andre called them, “the paths of [the] brush on canvas”—a description more appropriate to Ryman’s Winsors.29 This difference is demonstrated in Hollis Frampton’s famous photographs of Stella working on the Black Paintings. One photo (fig. 11) shows Stella with his brush placed horizontally on a vertical stripe and
consistent with the width of that stripe, as if he were maintaining the same one-to-one relationship between tool and mark that Ryman was to practice. But in another photo, he has placed the brush vertically, well within the lateral borders of the same vertical stripe. This vertical placement of the brush inside the zone that is to become the stripe indicates that it was something to be filled in, essentially an elongated shape. In addition, all of the photographs show Stella commencing this filling-in at an arbitrary point in the interior, while Ryman always started on one side and continued to the other. A Black Painting was to be a flat optical image, while the horizontal bands of the Winsors reflected the width and capacity of the brush as well as the sequence of painterly activity. This distinction is not drawn here to establish Ryman as more “advanced,” but to point out the opposing realms in which the two painters worked. Stella sought an instantaneous image, while Ryman’s stroke establishes a constant link to the time in which his paintings were made.

As aesthetic positions hardened in the 1960s, Stella repudiated the literalist reading of his work as pointing inexorably toward an evacuation of the pictorial in favor of the arrangement of materials in real space. Andre’s fertile misreading of Stella—which gave him license to pursue his horizontal arrangements of wood, bricks, and metal—again perfectly, if unintentionally, encapsulates Ryman’s method: “Frank Stella is a Constructivist. He makes paintings by combining identical, discrete units. Those units are not stripes, but brushstrokes.” It has been shown that while Stella did indeed paint stripes, Ryman’s “identical, discrete units” are the brushstrokes themselves. The wriggling clump of strokes on a scrap of canvas in his 1962–63 Untitled (see frontispiece) is similar in concept to much of Andre’s work, particularly his early untitled “dog turd” sculptures of 1962. Although Frampton photographed them before they were destroyed, Andre has rarely allowed their reproduction. These sculptures began as disc-shaped extrusions of concrete that were cut into elongated wedges and displayed upright on pieces of burlap. The “units” of both Ryman and Andre—whether paint or concrete—are deployed so that their space-claiming identity is more important than any predetermined arrangement to which they are subjected. The pieces are not composed but simply, gruffly presented.

The canonically minimalist order of Ryman’s strokes is more apparent in the Winsors and other post-1965 works, but this order is a more succinct manifestation of the discreteness with which he had already been treating his strokes since 1958. Nevertheless, there is no need to establish precedent between Andre and Ryman; each worked independently, with distinct sources.

Ryman’s horizontal polyptychs such as Standard and the corrugated III, IV, V, and VII may also remind the viewer of Andre’s metal plates. By the time polyptychs had become a significant part of Ryman’s vocabulary in the late 1960s, seriality had been established in the work of many artists. This repetition of panels may have been an assimilation of period
style, but it was also an elaboration of Ryman's original approach. Multipanel works provided him with a means to expand the repetition inherent in his technique from 1958 onward as well as to claim more concretely the exhibition space as a real place in which the painting "works." If each of Ryman's paintings exists as a field of possibilities in terms of hanging and viewing, polyptychs complicate this field. One of his earliest polyptychs was exhibited in December 2002 at the Paula Cooper gallery in New York City in a group show entitled Paintings from the 1960s, which also included work by Donald Judd and Andy Warhol. Projection (fig. 12) from 1964 consists of sixty-eight stretcherless pieces of linen, each roughly five-and-a-half inches square, on which are scattered proportionally large, curving strokes of dark and saturated colors with a final layer of white. These ragged cloths are arranged haphazardly on the wall. Ryman recalls finding the work only recently, having consigned it to storage shortly after it was made because it was "too crazy." While this "craziness" is apparent in relation to the austere Winsors that followed, Projection is an important example of the impulse to place rhythmic activity in real space, first through the strokes, and then through multiple surfaces. The regimentation of the relative chaos of Ryman's multidirectional "crazy" paintings into the orderly rows of 1965–66 parallels the rejection of this short-lived idea of an amorphous polyptych in favor of sequenced panels placed on the same horizontal line.

A Sculptor's Critique

Ryman has been praised for his commitment to an art that has been embattled throughout his career. While this theoretical strife has been reassessed with nostalgia and mild embarrassment, the distinct perspective from which Ryman approaches his medium demonstrates that painting is too complex to be either "buried" or triumphantly "resurrected." Ryman would disagree with those critics who praise him even while they deny that he is a painter. But the very conceivability of such assertions demonstrates his distance from painting as it is usually understood—that is, as image making, even when that image is empty. Reductive painters such as Jo Baer, Brice Marden, and Robert Mangold have less in common with him than those minimalists who explicitly identified themselves as sculptors. It has been shown how Ryman and Andre share an artistic vocabulary of discrete elements. In addition, Ryman shares with Robert Morris a deemphasis on the a priori design of a work in favor of the vicissitudes of execution and the changing relationship of an object to the viewer and the space it occupies.

Ryman can be linked to Morris through his direct technique, which maintains a close connection between the manipulation of material and the finished work. No mentally existing image supersedes individual making-acts or necessitates their effacement, as in the glazed and scrubbed flesh of a Titian Venus or the measured, cut, and assembled facets of a Judd. Morris's minimalism, like that of Judd, grew partially from his interpretation of the limits of painting. He seems to have believed in the 1960s and '70s that painting was no longer capable of fulfilling the modernist imperative of self-clarification. According to Morris, the only way out of illusionism was acknowledgment of the "structure," the literal support. But the ingrained opticality Morris saw in painting would always contradict the emphasis on the object. This tension made painting intractable.

By eschewing color and hence diminishing opticality, Ryman seems to answer Morris's critique of painting by making inroads into the very procedural realm the sculptor saw as inaccessible to this
antiquated art. The unretouched stroke corresponds to Morris's demonstration of the object's coming-into-being in his late 1960s Anti Form sculptures, in which industrial felt interacted with walls, floor, and gravity, deriving its form from the activities of slicing and draping (fig. 13). Of course, Ryman's work cannot be claimed to be formless in Morris's sense. Yet it does assume a different position than most paintings in the chain of events that leads to its existence. Ryman makes a permanent and admittedly precious object, which is nevertheless charged with perceptual flux, as he indicated when complaining of some viewers' lack of understanding of "how it works." Interestingly, both Ryman and Morris had earlier participated in durational performances: Morris in theater and dance and Ryman in jazz.

Morris has made exceptions in his assessment of painting by praising those artists whose work demonstrates a visible relation with its mode of being made. He credited Jackson Pollock and Morris

12 Robert Ryman, Projection, ca. 1964. Oil on sized linen, sixty-eight panels, each ca. 5 ⅜ x 5 ⅜ in. Private collection. Photo, Robert Ryman Archive, New York, R64.020
Louis with a clear display of process, commenting: “The forms and the order of their work were not a priori to the means.” Pollock’s stick, according to Morris, is “unlike the brush”; it is “in far greater sympathy with the matter because it acknowledges the inherent tendencies and properties of that matter.” Louis, he claimed, achieved an even greater correspondence with the matter because he poured it from containers. Although Ryman’s use of the brush is an imposition of an inherited, culturally conditioned order onto paint, his visible results are also based on an engagement with his tools and materials and have not been conceptualized as a particular image, even if they are often carried out according to a predetermined system.

Ryman has been reluctant, however, to identify his work as process-oriented. In 2002 he acknowledged, “I keep [the paintings] kind of open, kind of naked in a sense, where you can really see how they’re done,” but he added that the process is “not a message I’m trying to promote necessarily.” The term “promote” is crucial here, with its connotation of products or ideas designed for easy dissemination. Few artists wish to be subordinated to an already known category, and process art quickly became such a category in the late 1960s. Moreover, Ryman’s denial is much more than a matter of strategy. He does not set up events to be perpetuated through documentation and anecdote like Rafael Ferrer, who allowed a large quantity of ice to melt during the 1969 exhibition Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Instead, Ryman takes care to produce objects whose process, while complete, is continuously available. This nuanced stance accounts for the ambiguity in his statements.

While he remains firmly within painting, Ryman opens up the shallow but previously unexplored space between paint, surface, and wall, thereby departing from the illusory space and static, idealized form that had been thought to be endemic to painting. He occupies a unique position in the “minimal field” because he built his work on the conspicuous brushstroke—the aspect of abstract expressionist painting that was suppressed by other artists connected with minimalism. This position explodes the notion of flatness and literalizes painting, not only as an object but as a process that, because of its clear discernability, seems to continue even as we look.

Postscript

In Ryman’s December 2004 exhibition at PaceWildenstein in New York, he relinquished the unretouched stroke that has been the cornerstone of this essay. The painter acknowledges this departure in his catalogue essay: “Usually, I never ‘work’ paint as I prefer to put paint
down and leave it as it is and in doing so, generally like to use heavy paint.”

In the recent paintings, four different whites are thinned with turpentine and scrubbed over a ground of black gesso that wraps around the sides of the stretchers. The varying levels of buildup result in a hazy blue-gray in some areas and a more solid white in others (fig. 14). These surfaces have suggested a nineteenth-century sublime to some viewers, reminiscent of J. M. W. Turner or Albert Pinkham Ryder. This association may seem surprising given the previous decades’ persistent literalism, but, strictly speaking, Ryman has

never been able to eliminate entirely the possibility that spectators will read his paintings pictorially. Rather, he sets up cues to discourage such a reading. The “one-time” stroke must be understood as such a cue, indeed the central one. It is a function of the desire to make a painting that avoids illusionistic depth and exists in a continuous realm with the viewer. In his 2004 show, this roadblock was lifted.

After fifty years of deploying the singular stroke and experimenting in a number of other ways (mostly with materials), Ryman has radically changed his vocabulary. These are not the grand and comfortable paintings of a complacent master but the searching experiments of a painter eager to “pull out all the stops,” as the artist described his ambitions a year before he embarked on this series. Throughout his career, Ryman denied himself the “working” of paint. The question he asks with the new paintings is, Must the repeated brushing of thinned paint necessarily introduce spatial depth, or can it, given the established language of five decades of painting, indicate the same temporal clarity?

Notes

1 Pepe Karmel has documented the emergence of the understanding of Jackson Pollock’s working method as a performance, in large part owing to the photographs of Hans Namuth, while providing a less mythologized, more detailed account of the artist’s decisions. Karmel, “Pollock at Work: The Films and Photographs of Hans Namuth,” in Kirk Varnedoe and Karmel, Jackson Pollock (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 87–137.


3 A key biographical source on the artist is Robert Storr, Robert Ryman (London: Tate Gallery; New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1993); some additional details may be found in Vittorio Colaizzi, “Robert Ryman, Painting as Actuality: 1953–1969,” (PhD diss., Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005). Amy Baker Sandbach, project director for the unpublished Robert Ryman Catalogue Raisonné and Archive, has generously made photographs and other information available to scholars. Catalogue raisonné numbers for Ryman’s early works, many of which are named Untitled, are from this project; see the exhibition catalogue Robert Ryman (Zurich: Thomas Ammann Fine Art AG, 2002).

4 Ryman, interview by the author, September 17 and 18, 2002. Unless otherwise noted, statements by the artist come from this interview.

5 The two separate statements from which the substance of this sentence is assembled follow: “[I]t wasn’t the color that I was concerned with but the basic approach he was using.” “Interview with Robert Storr on October 17, 1986,” in Rosemary Schwarzwälder et al., Abstract Painting of America and Europe (Vienna: Galerie nächst St. Stephan; Klagenfurt: Ritter Verlag, 1988), 215. “When I first saw Rothko, it changed my thinking about painting. . . . Not so much the color, or even the style of the painting . . . but the way it projected off of the wall. . . . Actually my painting was very different, my approach was different. But that didn’t matter. It was just the presence of his paintings, and the way they worked with the light.” Robert Ryman: Interview by Jeffrey Weiss, 8 May 1997,” in Weiss, John Gage, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, et al., Mark Rothko (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), 369.


9 Ryman, from interviews by Lynn Zelevansky, July 1 and 7, 1992; see the catalogue notes compiled by Catherine Kinley and Zelevansky in Storr, Robert Ryman, 120.


11 “[Pollock] would get into grooves of listening to his jazz records—not just for days—day and night, day and night for three days running until you thought you would climb the roof!” Lee Krasner, interview by Francine du Plessix and Cleve Gray, “Who Was Jackson Pollock?” Art in America 55, no. 3 (May–June 1967): 51. See also Andrew Kagan, “Improvisations: Notes on Jackson Pollock and the Black Contribution to American High Culture,” Arts Magazine 53, no. 7 (March 1979): 96–99; and Chad Mandelès, “Jackson Pollock and Jazz: Structural Parallels,”


17 Tuchman, “An Interview with Robert Ryman,” 49.


22 Ryman, untitled essay in Robert Ryman (New York: PaceWildenstein, 2004), 7.


25 Music critic Francis Davis described “Tristanoites” as former students who suffered from “Tristanoitis, a chronic ailment whose symptoms include burrowing introspection, a seeming preference for practice over performance, and a disinclination to mix with musicians outside the fold.” Davis, “Tristanoitis: The Legacy of Lennie Tristano,” Village Voice 36, no. 23 (June 4, 1991): 51.

26 Chamberlain attributes these terms to an “ informant [who] wished to remain anonymous” who was a jazz fan in the 1950s and later became a psychoanalyst. An Unseen Cat, 54 and 66 n. 31.

27 For an interpretation of his strokes as negations of painting’s accepted meaning, see Douglas Crimp, “The End of Painting,” October 16 (Spring 1981): 69–86.

28 Frank Stella, interview by Caroline Jones, in “Frank Stella, Executive Artist,” chap. 3 of Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 120.


31 Ryman, faxed letter to the author, April 24, 2003.


34 Morris, “Anti Form,” Artforum 6, no. 8 (April 1968): 34, 35.