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Robert Ryman

In 1972, the Guggenheim Museum presented a solo exhibition of Robert Ryman's work, a surprisingly early institutional recognition accorded to the painter. The curator Diane Waldman had made the decision to show paintings created from 1965 onwards only, as she regarded that year as a turning point in Ryman's work. In 1952, Ryman had moved from Nashville, Tennessee to New York, where he hoped to pursue a career as a jazz musician. He scraped a living in that city with a variety of jobs and finally found employment as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art. This gave him the opportunity to encounter art directly and awakened his desire to engage with painting himself and paint pictures. In fact, Ryman never departed from his idea of exploring painting in depth, of creating a painting from the ground up and experimenting with various means of doing so. Basically, each painting that he did during his ultimately successful career served solely to get to the bottom of these questions. By 1959 Ryman had already arrived at the decisions that he was never to relinquish – the square painting format and the predominance of the colour white.



What changed in the years after 1960, when Ryman gave up his job, took on a studio in the Bowery and started to work as a professional artist? When I was invited two years ago by David Zwirner in New York to curate the first posthumous exhibition of Ryman's work, I decided to show paintings from the years 1961–1964. This was a period of posing questions and experimentation, during which Ryman proceeded to extend his painting further and at the same time succeeded in demonstrating what unexpected results he could thus achieve. At that time, systematic and serial ways of working were in the air. It is striking to observe how Ryman addressed these options in his paintings, but never settled on a specific scheme. Some of his paintings from that period were included by Ryman in his first retrospective shows, while others were hardly ever exhibited during his lifetime – or not at all. Considering that Ryman worked in isolation and lacked any opportunity to show his work except for a very few group exhibitions – his first solo exhibition was not until 1967 at the Bianchini Gallery – the self-confidence with which he proceeded and his readiness to tackle large formats is amazing.



The layout of the three exhibition spaces at David Zwirner's gallery fell into place of its own accord: the large entry space is devoted to works from 1962, the year in which Ryman's productivity was at a maximum resulting in a number of large format paintings; the following two spaces are given to works from 1961 and to paintings from 1963–1964 respectively. This chronological arrangement has led to three rooms that differ from each other greatly, demonstrating how Ryman progressed from one painting to the next without repeating himself in the process. Considering other artists of the time and their inventions, it becomes apparent that there is no such thing in Ryman's oeuvre, and that the sheer practice of painting takes the place of pure invention. An invention is exhausted sooner or later, and either is followed by a new one or comes to an end. It was because Ryman devoted all his attention to the practice of painting that he never reached an impasse; his stock of possibilities was never depleted, as he was confronted with the infinity of painterly potential. This amounted to an obsession as well as freedom.



When speaking of the practice of painting, this means that Ryman paid attention to everything that is visible in a painting – the relationship between brushstroke and canvas, the proportion of the individual overlapping marks to the painting as a whole, the density and amount of paint applied, the connection between painted surface and unprimed ground, and the margins of the painted area, which might be clear-cut or irregular. On some canvases from 1962–1964 Ryman drew a number of squares which he treated in different ways – with a whitish or coloured primer, or by applying several different layers of coloured paint, building up to the final whiteness. His signature, drawn with the brush as a sign, is to be found in every painting, functioning as both a painterly element as well as affirmation of the completion of the work. It would be possible to list many other features of these paintings, only to realize anew that all of them are equally important and significant. When painting, Ryman never produced a narrative, nor any symbols or figures, but facts that he allowed to remain visible in their own right.



The exhibition at David Zwirner's in Chelsea runs until February 3, 2024.

Dieter Schwarz