

rather directly to the *Standard* paintings of 1967, in which enamel paint was washed in translucent brushstrokes over thin sheets of cold rolled steel. This was the first occasion in which Ryman aligned painting and wall plane so closely, an element fundamental to the current series. "The thinness of materials interested me because my painting has a lot to do with the wall plane. Thinness of materials allows clarity of working with the wall plane and the environment."³

Yet, despite the similarities linking the two series, they differ in subtle but significant ways. Whereas the *Standard* paintings are thinly washed and evidence a delicately veiled surface, the *Charter* paintings are evenly brushed, and their matte finish enhances the imposing formal presence of the group as a whole. This distinction attests to Ryman's determination to press beyond previous solutions, an inspiration aided by the extensive record of past paintings that the artist keeps visible in his studio at all times. Because he has generally worked in series, producing groups of works that share a related size, support, and paint surface, Ryman has found it useful to fill a large wall with a photographic log of black-and-white images that document the history of his work. Although many contemporary artists maintain such records, or ask assistants or dealers to do so, few artists care to be constantly reminded of their past efforts in such a fashion. The implications are telling, for even Ryman has reduced his creative options almost beyond reason, he is utterly unwilling to admit repetition into his work.

If creative discipline and a will to invent characterize Robert Ryman's endeavor, they also link the artist to the great tradition of modernist abstraction. Ranging from Malevich and Mondrian early in the century, to Newman, Rothko, and Reinhardt following World War II, these artists shared a commitment to the unity of mind and spirit. Accepting of the modern world, each in his own way attempted to rejuvenate the human spirit through painted forms.

Modest by nature, Robert Ryman has never made expansive claims for his work. Throughout his career, he has preferred to concentrate on formal problem-solving rather than on postulating meanings for his paintings. Yet, he has long since established working mechanisms for the creation of an extremely impressive and often magnificent body of work. Born of the ongoing confusion of contemporary culture, Ryman's endeavor to translate his forms into environments demonstrates both his confidence in the importance of his work and a faith in the power of art to shape experience in a productive manner. In his steady search for new visual expression, Robert Ryman has assumed this modernist commitment as his own.

Neal Benezra
Associate Curator in Charge,
Department of Twentieth-
Century Painting and Sculpture
The Art Institute of Chicago

ROBERT RYMAN

born in Nashville, Tennessee, 1930

Lives and works in New York City

EDUCATION

Tennessee Polytechnic Institute, Cookeville, 1948–49

George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, 1949–50

SELECTED INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

1972

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

1974

Westfälisches Kunstverein, Münster

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

1975

Kunsthalle, Basel

1977

Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

1981

Musée national d'art moderne,
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

1982

Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf

1986

Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1966

Systematic Painting, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
New York

1969

When Attitudes Become Form, Kunsthalle Bern

1976

American Exhibition, The Art Institute of Chicago

1977

Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York

1979

American Exhibition, The Art Institute of Chicago

1980

La Biennale di Venezia, Venice

1981

Westkunst-Heute: Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939,
Museen der Stadt Köln, West Germany

A New Spirit in Painting, Royal Academy of Arts, London

1982

Documenta VII, Kassel, West Germany

1984

La Grande Parade, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

1985

Carnegie International, Museum of Art,
Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh

1986

Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art,
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

1987

Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York

CHECKLIST

The Elliott Room: Charter, 1985

Oil on aluminum

82 x 31 x 2½" (208.3 x 78.7 x 6.4 cm.)

The Elliott Room: Charter II, 1987

Acrylic on fiberglass with aluminum

93¾ x 93¾" (238.1 x 237.8 cm.)

The Elliott Room: Charter III, 1987

Acrylic on fiberglass with aluminum

84¼ x 84" (214 x 213.4 cm.)

The Elliott Room: Charter IV, 1987

Acrylic on fiberglass with aluminum

72¾ x 72" (183.8 x 182.9 cm.)

The Elliott Room: Charter V, 1987

Acrylic on fiberglass with aluminum

95½ x 95½" (242.6 x 242.6 cm.)

All works lent by Gerald S. Elliott, Chicago.

The Charter Series is the second exhibition in the "New Work" series, a program featuring recent work by younger and established artists.

"New Work" is generously supported by Collectors Forum.

ROBERT RYMAN: THE CHARTER SERIES

NEW WORK

14 JANUARY 1988

THROUGH 13 MARCH 1988

SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM

OF MODERN ART

A SERIES OF

RECENT WORK BY YOUNGER

AND ESTABLISHED ARTISTS

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Photograph by Robert E. Mates, courtesy of Galerie Maeght Lelong, New York

¹ Quoted in "The '60s in Abstract: 13 Statements and an Essay," *Art In America* (Oct. 1983), p. 123.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 123–24.

³ Quoted in Nancy Grimes, "White Magic," *Artnews* (Summer 1986), p. 91.

A Meditative Room for the Collection of Gerald S. Elliott

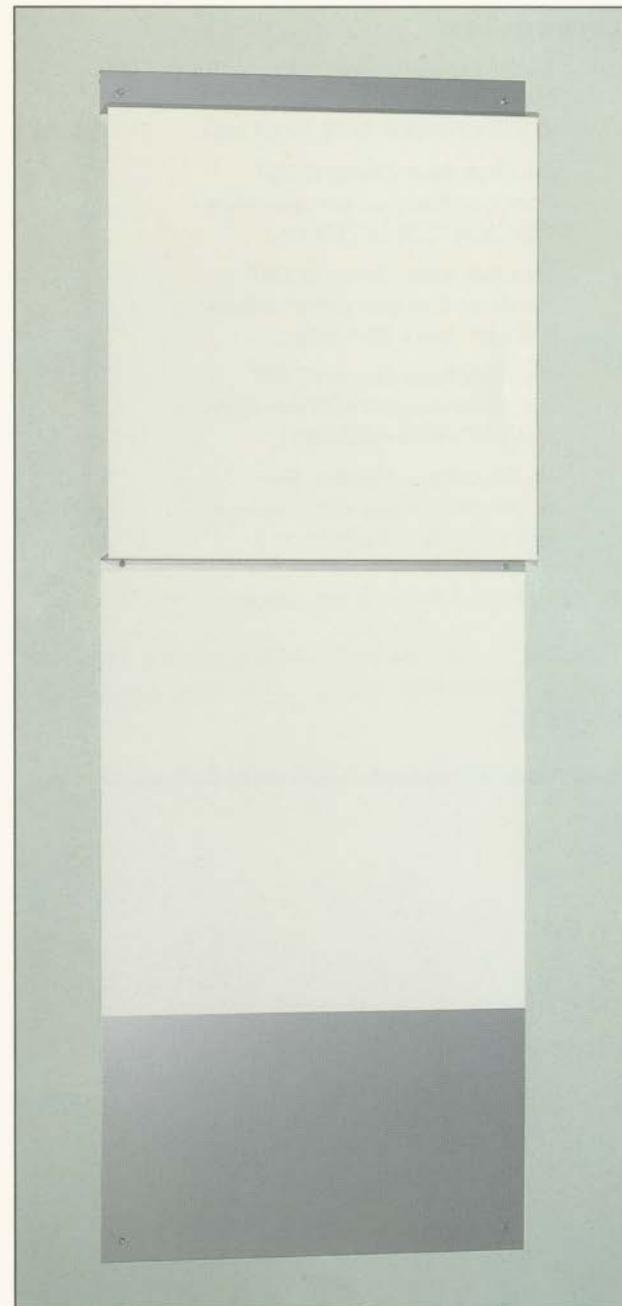
During the past twenty-five years, Robert Ryman has taken great care to eliminate information and incident from his painting. He has intentionally restricted himself to the color white, and to abstract and measured fields of carefully considered brushstrokes. Eloquent and assured, these paintings consistently convey Ryman's ability to archive compelling visual effects through radically reduced means. Ryman's discretion holds particular meaning for a culture accustomed to the constant assault of superficial audio and visual insult. His clear, silent, and authentic surfaces induce a contemplative moment for weary urban eyes.

Ryman's paintings bear certain unmistakable characteristics. As noted, he not only eliminates all incident from his paintings, he also works exclusively in white, a color devoid of drama but rich in its reticence. Although white is usually considered a "non-color," it is actually the most subtle of hues, capable of resuscitating the senses for those whose visual awareness and concentration is acute. Beyond its sensual aspect, the color white enables Ryman to bring other painterly elements—particularly brushstroke and supporting surface—to the fore as equal partners in his paintings. "The use of white in my paintings came about when I realized that it doesn't interfere. It is a neutral color that allows for clarification of nuance in painting."¹

Among the nuances with which Ryman is concerned is the delicate but crucially important relationship between the painted surface, the underlying structure of the paintings, and the wall plane itself. Most of his recent works have been painted on thin sheets of metal—generally aluminum or fiberglass—and these are affixed to the wall by a variety of small, carefully placed but always visible fasteners. In so doing, Ryman incorporates the means of installing his paintings into the composition of the work itself. Beyond this, the artist also maximizes the interaction between wall and painting, successfully creating a visual dialogue between these elements as well as between individual paintings. Ryman's best paintings tend to fill their surrounding space both perceptually and psychologically, evoking a profound sense of calm or even euphoria.

It is this interest in creating expansive works of art, paintings that communicate impressions and emotions exceeding the limitations of the means employed, that links Ryman with several of the great geometric painters of the century. Integral to the work of Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian and, more recently, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Ad Reinhardt is a will to translate the orderly poetry of their painting to the daily lives of viewers. In the work of each, painted forms implicitly extend beyond the existing boundaries of the painted plane, and we know that each artist intended this expansion of form to be emblematic of a world in greater spiritual and formal harmony than our own.

The work of all these artists, Ryman included, is most successful when the artist's aesthetic is allowed to dominate an entire space. Painters of restrained forms have often traveled great lengths to control environmental conditions, occasionally making exacting demands on exhibitors of their work in order to ensure the purity of the viewing experience. To this end, many modern artists have dictated the color of gallery walls or lighting



△ *Charter*, 1985

levels, and some have refused to participate in group exhibitions or have required that their works be shown in separate galleries. Superior expressions in this vein have occurred when artists have created series of paintings for specific circumstances, as in Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* (1958–66), and the fourteen paintings Mark Rothko was commissioned to complete for a chapel designed by Philip Johnson in Houston (1971).

It was the example of Rothko and Newman that provided the inspiration for Ryman's *Charter Series*. The series was conceived during the course of conversations held in May 1985 between Ryman and noted Chicago collector Gerald S. Elliott. Long an admirer and collector of Ryman's paintings, Elliott asked Ryman to consider painting a series of works that might eventually be exhibited together in a single room, apart from other works of art, in order to evoke a meditative mood and spirit similar in effect to Newman's *Station* or the Rothko Chapel. Although Ryman has consistently rejected the notion of any spiritual intent in his work and has never made excessive demands in terms of installation, he was fascinated by this challenge and agreed.

The point of departure for the series was a painting that Elliott already possessed, *Charter* (1985). Although Ryman has generally worked in a square format, *Charter* is emphatically vertical, composed of two evenly painted white panels, with the upper projecting inches beyond the plane of the lower. The two fields are divided by the shadow that the upper casts on the lower and by a thin aluminum strip. Wider aluminum bands bracket the painted fields, top and bottom, with the lower large enough to balance the projecting upper panel. *Charter* is among Ryman's most successful paintings, both because of the formal tension produced by the contrasting surfaces, and because of the allusive, perhaps totemic, quality of the stacked fields of white color. Ryman was so pleased with the finished work that he decided it should serve as the basis for the four additional paintings that would compose the series.

A large measure of the creativity in Robert Ryman's work resides in the inventiveness with which the artist attends to practical matters. Despite the success of *Charter*, for the four additional works Ryman decided to return to his accustomed square format. This created a problem, because the fiberglass/aluminum laminate that he employed in *Charter* was not available in the square, six-to-eight-foot lengths he projected for the new paintings. Unwilling to simply abut two metal sheets to create these larger surfaces, after much investigation Ryman employed an "H" channel, an element that would perform the necessary structural function, while adding a horizontal design element. In the process, each painting was divided into upper and lower registers, corresponding to the similar composition of *Charter*, while retaining the overall square configuration.

Yet, on superficial inspection, the four subsequent paintings seem unrelated to *Charter* and remarkably similar to one another. Besides being square, they all share the horizontal band, a matte painted surface, and a few discretely placed fasteners. Only after sustained, even repeated, examination do subtle formal distinctions and shifts in impact and mood become apparent.

Charter V is eight feet square, the largest of the later paintings. It is also the most rigorously composed, for although it was not required for structural reasons, Ryman divided the upper

panel vertically, the only work in the series so handled. The emphatic partitioning of the whole and the exclamatory feel of the painting are further enhanced by Ryman's handling of the aluminum, which is only partially painted. While the public, emblematic character of *Charter V* links it to *Charter*, its square format and compositional disposition connect it with the other three paintings.

Charter II, III and *IV* are all slightly smaller than *Charter V* and, to a varying degree, they share an intimacy that enhances their allusiveness. This effect also results from Ryman's decision to reduce the formal weight of the strips by painting several segments white. While the aluminum disciplines the white field of *Charter* and *Charter V*, the other three paintings read as quiet white planes, their compositions only gently punctuated by additive forms.

Charter II is only inches smaller than *Charter V*, yet by painting over much of the horizontal band Ryman reduced the compositional weight of the aluminum significantly. *Charter IV* is handled similarly, as the aluminum remains visible only at the lateral edges of the painting and at the foot. This latter element links it to the original painting, which has a large aluminum band at its base. *Charter III* is perhaps the most poetic painting in the series. Here the aluminum has been painted away almost entirely and the composition is structured largely by four black fasteners, which implicitly divide the whole into quadrants. In comparison to *Charter* and *Charter V*, the other three paintings are less conspicuous in their subdivisions, and this encourages their reading as unspoiled, meditative fields of color.

Robert Ryman's achievement in the *Charter* paintings lies in the range of impressions they express within a rigorously circumscribed set of possibilities. In establishing a compositional framework and then exploring it in all its permutations, Ryman demonstrates the potential for freedom that self-imposed discipline holds, a lesson not commonly understood in our time. More specifically, the series reveals that rigor can yield poetic calm, an impressive accomplishment given such frugal means.

Viewed in the context of Ryman's previous work, the series is an inspired, if logical, step in the artist's continued exploration of the outer boundaries of painting. Although without formal training as an artist, Ryman worked as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in the mid-1950s, where he became enthralled with the modern masters, Paul Cezanne and Henri Matisse. "What interests me in Matisse was not so much what he was painting but how he was doing it. . . . He was sure, it was immediate. With Cezanne it was more the way he could work with paint . . . the building up, the structure, the complicated composition."² Ryman's fascination with these artists' techniques led to his eventual mastery of the means of painting. Methodical and probing by nature, he acquired these skills and then developed alternatives to traditional craft. By the early 1960s he was employing a wide variety of paints, brushes, and surfaces, developing unusual means for adhering his work to the wall, and working only in white.

It is in the nature of Robert Ryman's work that each painting is both a new discovery and a summary of past experience. The *Charter* paintings, for example, were prefigured as early as 1965, when Ryman began systematically to devote groups of works to the exploration of a particular paint surface. This series owes