

FOR ROBERT RYMAN, in his own words, 'there is never a question of what to paint, only how to paint'. And just how does Ryman paint? Suzanne Hudson's answer: pragmatically. In her new monograph, *Robert Ryman: Used Paint*, Hudson gets quickly to the point about how she intends to 'frame' Ryman anew: 'Against antiaesthetic historicism and anticonceptual hedonism, this book asserts Ryman's pragmatism', which is to say, painting as a true 'practice'.

Every artist today is engaged in some sort of 'practice', but Hudson asks us to consider exactly what this means within the scope of pragmatism as it was developed by the likes of C.S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey. For these turn-of-the-twentieth-century American thinkers, pragmatism offered a means of navigating between the Scylla of empiricism and the Charybdis of idealism; it entailed considering the potential effects of one or another solution to otherwise irresolvable metaphysical problems, and then going with whatever worked best. Hudson explains how '[Ryman's practice] is marked by a careful working over of painting's conventions in their most radically reduced (to white paint and a support structure) and paradoxically inverted and expanded possibilities'; and staying with the pragmatist vein, Hudson compares this method to a kind of 'laboratory-derived problem solving', through which the results of each painting or series of paintings are taken into account, mulled over and ultimately mined for new and promising directions.

Robert Ryman: Used Paint

Edited by Suzanne P. Hudson
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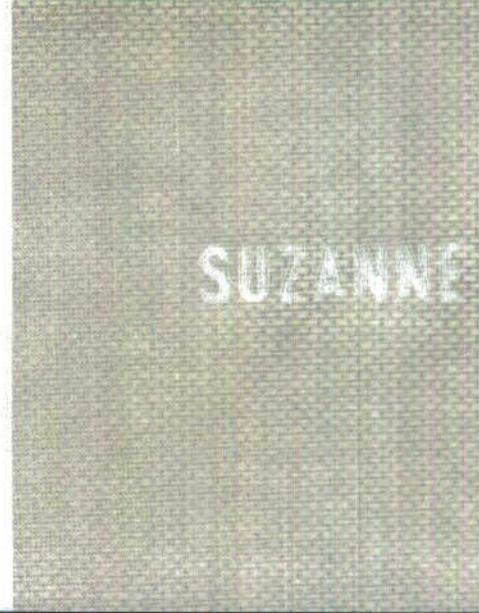
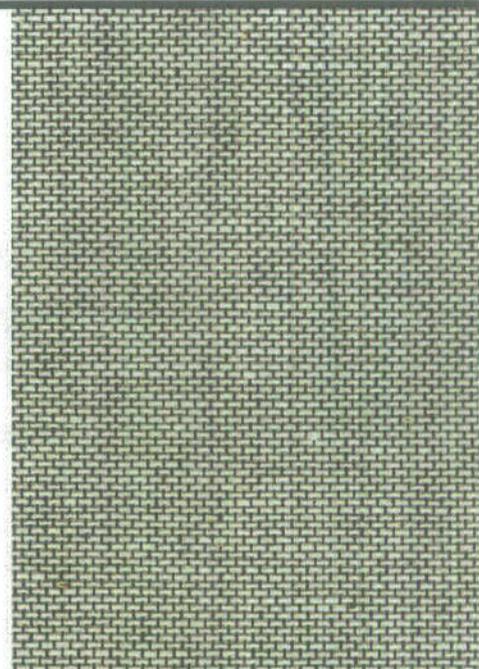
For anyone familiar with the art of the 1960s and 70s in New York, the period when Ryman's work first came to public attention, the gunshots of process art and postminimalism can be heard just down the street. But what Hudson shows us – and this is perhaps her study's one genuine contribution to the field – is that Ryman's pragmatism was formed in the crucible of the Museum of Modern Art, where he had been employed as a guard beginning in 1953. As Hudson states quite plainly: 'Ryman's acquisition of the skills of looking and painting were made possible by the museum. As a pragmatist institution during the period under consideration, MoMA nudged its installations and related programs, publications, and courses toward such educational purposes under the aegis of Victor D'Amico [director of the museum's education department and head of the early People's Art Center] and Alfred Barr [the museum's influential founding director]', both of whom were pragmatism devotees. In this narrative, postminimalism is simply a passing storm that picked up Ryman for its own purposes and then left him behind when new and more interesting alternatives outside the galleries beckoned.

Ryman never strayed, of course. And throughout *Robert Ryman: Used Paint*, Hudson invokes the pragmatist framework again and again to make sense of how Ryman worked. For example, 'Ryman's pragmatism comes dramatically to the fore in that his painting, while based on "painting", offers no guarantees for future success any more than it argues against such potentiality.' And 'Ryman opens the material and conventional dimensions of painting to a different kind of medium-specificity that involves a narrow-band infinitude of provisional answers to questions of what makes a painting, how it is made, with which materials, and why.'

But, one seems compelled to ask, so what? Is this really a newly won understanding of Ryman? Yes, all of this adds up to what Hudson calls Ryman's 'arhetorical' painting, a practice which eludes, even shuns, discourse in the face of doing. But why not call this 'narrow-band infinitude' a 'productive solipsism', the constant traversal of an admittedly complex state space with few degrees of freedom (which as Hudson's chapter titles reveal, reduce to 'primer', 'paint', 'edge', 'support' and 'wall')?

Without any kind of theoretical or historical expansion, *Robert Ryman: Used Paint* reads like an academic essay that has been stretched to fill a book-length study, its salient points easily condensed into a single chapter within a larger and more ambitious account, say, of pragmatism's resurgence in the US since the 1970s. And what of Ryman's 'realism' (the artist's own retrospective understanding of his work), which Hudson never argues much beyond a pragmatic belief in the 'literalism' that has set in place painting's conceptual trajectory since the 1960s? To my mind, 'realism' is the concept in greatest need of reassessment today. Just how Ryman and others of his generation came to understand their work as such is the question that still needs answering.

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