

Robert Ryman

Fergus McCaffrey, Tokyo

March 24 – May 19, 2018

Opening Reception: March 24, 2018

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to inaugurate the gallery's new space in Tokyo, Japan with an exhibition of eleven career-spanning paintings by the celebrated American painter Robert Ryman. The exhibition, featuring works made between 1961 and 2003, will be on view from March 24 – May 19, 2018.

Ryman's work has been described as simultaneously subtle and sublime, painstakingly crafted and transcendent.

Fergus McCaffrey's Tokyo exhibition explores the resonances between Ryman's



(fig. 1) *Untitled* (1961). Oil on sized bristol board, 9 x 9 inches (22.7 x 22.9 cm)

philosophical, process-based approach to artmaking and approaches adopted by Japanese artists of the same era, such as Natsuyuki Nakanishi, Lee Ufan, and On Kawara. Like Nakanishi, Ryman seeks to discover the essential qualities of his medium, testing various forms and techniques to extract the meditative, incandescent characteristics of paint. Although his approach is rooted in experiment, it is not chance-based: Ryman enacts a rigorous and methodical exploration of the subtle interactions of form, environment, material, and surface.

Surface and Light: Ryman's Monochrome Approach

Originally trained as a jazz saxophonist, Ryman began painting while he worked as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from 1953 to 1960. The artist received little formal training save for classes in MoMA's department of education, devoting himself to the study of works on view at the museum by Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and

Barnett Newman. In 1955, Ryman created his first abstract compositions in a process of hands-on experimentation with materials. The artist's earliest works from the 1960s, of which an intimate *Untitled* (1961) painting on Bristol board is an example (fig. 1), demonstrate his interest in materiality and texture. Ryman has primarily worked in white paint throughout his career, famously declaring his works to be "realist," because they do not attempt any form of illusion. "There is never any question of *what* to paint," the artist famously remarked, "only *how* to paint."



Ryman's paint-application style varies tremendously, from the gestural and expressive to constrained, repetitive marks; from immaculate, smooth surfaces to vigorously applied impastos. Despite the seeming achromicity of his work, Ryman's canvases are composed of tonal gradations of ochres, blues, and grays, and are often densely layered with bright colors just beneath the surface of white paint. This technique is manifest in *Stamp* (2002), in which mustard yellows and dusty golds form a palimpsest against white paint, casting a warm, internal glow (fig. 2), as well as in standout 1963 painting #20, an early oil-on-canvas with loose, gestural teal brushstrokes grounding a small white square on an otherwise unadorned brown canvas.



TOP (fig. 2) *Stamp* (2002). Oil on canvas, 14 x 14 inches (35.6 x 35.6 cm)

BOTTOM (fig. 3) *Untitled* (1980/2003). Oil on canvas, 19 x 19 inches (48.3 x 48.3 cm)



(fig. 4) *Section* (1985). Oil on aluminum, 16 x 16 inches (40.6 x 40.6 cm)

In addition to subtle experiments with gradations of color, Ryman has made use of an astonishingly wide array of materials and structural supports over the course of his career. In the 1980s, the artist began to work off the canvas, extending his works into three-dimensional space to challenge traditional installation modes. This approach is evident in an *Untitled* painting (1980/2003) (fig. 3), in which a steel panel is worked with energetic, impasto white oils and affixed to the wall using four industrial fasteners. Ryman's repertoire of materials is vast, including industrial-grade

paints and rare pigments, supports, adhesives, and fixtures such as fiberglass, metals, and wood. In addition to creating many works on board, canvas, and paper, Ryman frequently works on aluminum, enhancing the metal's natural luminosity by burnishing its surface. He then applies paint to complement, rather than obscure, the metal's brightness—a technique that is on view in *Section* (1985) (fig. 4)—and fixes the work directly to the wall using white screws, foregrounding the work's installation method- and object-hood.

Fergus McCaffrey in Tokyo

Japan has had a spell-like attraction for generations of Westerners, and as a university student I, too, was drawn to the country's aesthetic refinement, depth of culture, and mystique. It has been a long-cherished goal of mine to have an art gallery here, and my intent is to share the often-unseen richness of postwar Japanese art in its place of creation, while providing foreign artists the opportunity to create and explore their own affinities with this remarkable country.

Since opening in 2006, the gallery has exhibited artists from around the world in New York; however, the roots of our success are found in our renowned exhibitions of the postwar

Japanese artists of Gutai, Hi Red Center, and Mono-Ha. In this regard, it was natural for the gallery to establish our Asian headquarters in the cultural hub of Tokyo's Aoyama district, surrounded by architectural masterpieces by Kenzo Tange, Toyo Ito, Herzog & De Meuron, Tadao Ando, and Kengo Kuma.

—Fergus McCaffrey

The design of the gallery space is a collaboration between renowned American designer Bill Katz, MTKA Architects, Tokyo, and Nakamura Sotoji, Kyoto. Katz is celebrated for his sensitivity in designing studio and exhibition spaces for artists such as Jasper Johns, Anselm Kiefer, Francesco Clemente, and Ellsworth Kelly; MTKA have a strong track record for designing gallery and museum spaces in Japan; and Nakamura Sotoji are renowned as the finest proponent of traditional Sukiya (Tea House) architecture in Japan, having worked on the maintenance and reconstruction of temples in Kyoto and the Ise Jingu Shrine in Mie Prefecture for several generations.

In designing this relatively modest gallery space, I asked the team to find a balance between tradition and modernity. The Tokyo gallery has its own character, reflecting the culture in which it is located. The space is not an industrial white box in New York, and besides, all modern Western architecture owes a profound debt to traditional Japanese architecture. Finding such a balance was not easy, but Bill has achieved it in the most remarkable way.

—Fergus McCaffrey

It was important in designing this gallery that the architecture didn't speak too loudly, because viewers come to have an experience with the art. This is the first space I've designed in Japan, and it has been a joy to work with craftsmen as skilled as Nakamura Sotoji and D Brain. The precision is astonishing; I've never before worked in millimeters! Walking through the finished space, I realize that it could have only been made here in Japan—it's right for the art.

—Bill Katz

About Fergus McCaffrey

Founded in 2006, Fergus McCaffrey is internationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in promoting the work of postwar Japanese artists such as Sadamasa Motonaga, Natsuyuki Nakanishi, Kazuo Shiraga, and Jiro Takamatsu. The gallery also exhibits the work of emerging and seminal Western artists such as Marcia Hafif, Birgit Jürgenssen, Richard Nonas, Sigmar Polke, and Carol Rama.

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Gallery Map

