

Robert Ryman Introduction

by Amy Baker Sandback

as published in Robert Ryman Prints 1969-1993, published by Parasol Press

Have you ever walked into a darkened room only to find that, once adjusted to the range of light, very definite characteristics are clearly visible? In such circumstances our focus sharpens to match the narrowed frame of reference, and our attention is forced to be more acute. Such concentration and direction are at the heart of the printed images created by Robert Ryman who, since 1969, has honed his skill in the use of serigraphy, lithography, and intaglio to reveal the nuances of each medium. These prints, like the artist's paintings, identify physical characteristics unique to the process at hand - and deal with them on their own terms. It is a sensitivity that allows an intensification and expansion of graphic language, an aesthetic as respectful of the process as it is precise in its tuning; the ends and the means so interconnected that they are one and the same thing.

To attain this quiet meld of means and ends, Ryman intricately blends craftsmanship and invention - including surprising emphases - ignoring in his approach the historical uses of plate, stone and screen. Frequently, unheralded details become the center of his attention, such as the "incidental" mark of the printing matrix (as well as its surface), or the character of the paper boundaries and tooth. For the artist, the function of the plate, stone screen, and sheet of paper, have no set conventions or pre-conditions, and each and every decision is of central rather than of marginal concern in the printmaking process. In fact there is nothing in a Ryman print that is thought of as secondary.

For these reasons, "truth to materials," an axiom of modern architectural criticism, would be as apt a reference in a commentary about Ryman's graphics as would a discussion of his use of light and shadow, a consideration common for an architect designing in airy volumes, but unusual for a printmaker working on the dimensional confines of a sheet of paper. Smooth fields of ink and paper cause light to bounce back while others, made velvety or dense by various aquatints, trap and absorb the glow. Edges and indentations add shadows and highlights, while pencilled inscriptions and embossed printer's chops not only identify the makers, but give definition and balance. As in architecture, it is the immaterial play of light that seamlessly joins all the elements, and in this instance, the visual interlock of separate elements and details of printed, unprinted, and inscribed areas of artworks.

What are the elements of these visual structures?

FORMAT

Except for one rectangular and two round images, Ryman's prints are presented in a square format. They are not, however, simple, uniform, equal-sided figures. Most of the prints have been torn or cut with small but important differences in each of the four sides of the square and these differences challenge the stability of the supposed neutrality of the shape. Likewise outer margins beyond printed areas are not always equal. These deliberate, yet almost imperceptible shifts in dimension are pivotal to the balance of all elements on the page, each of which is important, and none of which is thought of as casual or peripheral to the definition of the image.

PAPER

The character of the paper support becomes an integral part of the print since unprinted areas of the image function as strongly in the composition as printed ones. The paper's texture and tone are therefore understood as active rather than passive visual factors. This is especially true in "Untitled [5]", an aquatint in the portfolio "Six Aquatints" of 1975. In this print the center of the copper plate in which the image was etched has been removed with a bandsaw before printing, making the tone of the paper square within the broad printed borders of the editioned image the prime focus of the composition.

In many of Ryman's prints, a viewer's attention is often drawn to the line created by the paper's edge. Some sheets have sharply cut edges, others natural or torn deckles, still another has both cut and deckle edges. The character of the edge is understood to be a linear element of the composition.

PRINTING MATRIX

Understanding and using the potential of properties unique to a silkscreen frame, a lithograph stone, and a zinc or copper intaglio plate is basic to the creation of these printed images. The 1969 serigraph from the "Bowery Portfolio," for example, has a triple pass of white ink that builds a dense, screened surface that no other print medium would allow. This gives a special presence to the white square in the composition that reads as hard and cool as enameled steel.

On the other hand, when the artist worked at the lithography workshop at the Nova Scotia School of Art, his focus was centered on the physicality of the printing stones, rather than on the qualities of the printing ink. In "Two Stones" the physical outline of similarly sized lithograph stones, flaws and all, are used as the basis of his image. Under the pressure of printing, the uneven perimeters of the limestones indented the paper, and this mark, usually not seen in an editioned lithographic image, became the graphic key.

It is therefore not surprising that when the artist later had the opportunity to work in the intaglio process, he did so with an equally unorthodox interest in the printing matrix, using the edges of the metal plate as well as its surface, in several images. Over the years Ryman has hand-cut plates, blind embossed them, inked unetched grounds, and employed etched plates without ink to leave embossed detail. In some compositions he has used the mark of the plate edge, and in others he has negated this mark completely from his work. He has also extensively explored the tactile qualities of intaglio printing by hand applying a wide range of grounds: from very delicate sugarlifts to very heavy aquatints.

INK

"White" ink is used predominately and almost exclusively in all but one of Ryman's editions. This decision is best understood as opting for a selection of color that within its range of transparency and luminosity offers the most possibilities, is the least intrusive or distracting, and that by not calling exclusive attention to itself or its outline, allows other aspects of the artist's compositions to be co-equals. Far from being an absence of color, it is a wide tonal palette that has occupied the artist for the past twenty-five years, and which, for Ryman, offers a chromatic vocabulary as vast and as subtle as an Inuit's for "snow".

Whether it's titanium white's density or lead's semi-matte finish, all ink shades and tactile qualities become part of Ryman's working equation, along with

related decisions as to the degree of coverage affected by additives and plate treatments.

While a blue or grey line appears in a few images, there is only one project in which several different colors are used, and the color itself is dominant. In "Etching in Four Parts" of 1972 the artist's interest in the process of commercial 4-color printing led him to create a linear multi-color image. The first three sections of this image present one color each: blue, red, and dark-red. These serve as "separations" such as those used for checking and adjusting color during the production process of commercial printing. The fourth and final section of Ryman's print combines all three "separations" into one image, in much the same way as "full color" offset presswork does in trade publication.

In Ryman's prints it is rare for inked areas to solely confirm to the size or shape of the plate. The placement of the ink is a reasoned compliment to all other decisions.

MARKING AND INSCRIPTIONS

Lastly, there is special attention given to the placement of the signature, date, edition number, and printer's marks - all those elements usually added to a printed image after it leaves the press. These marks are understood to be necessary parts of the image in the same way that color, surface, and format reinforce the visual presentation. In Ryman's prints these elements complete the compositions and are integral to them. Their placement is decided as part of the process, not after the fact.

By these basic means, and a touch of alchemy, the artist sets up remarkably rich conditions on the printed page. It is a discipline of shapes and textures that is revealed by degree rather than in a rush, and that calls up a range of visual response that is as open ended as the sensibilities of the beholder. It is an art in and of revelation that like a composer's notation provides the suggested structure for countless unique performances and interpretations which due to the scale and nature of an unframed, printed sheet, can be experienced in the most immediate of ways. After a time, the deceptive simplicity of Ryman's images prove to be as much an illusion as the deep space of a trompe l'oeil painting or that apparent emptiness of a darkened room.