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Nexus, Veil: Robert Ryman and the Equivocal
Spaces of Abstraction**

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Abstract

It is now understood that the two great defining points in the history of western painting: the emergence of illusory space in the Quattrocento and its disavowal in the mid-twentieth century, represent significant shifts in a perpetual tide in which pictorial space is re-invented. Outside of modernist teleology, the 'abstract' in painting is a malleable term, denoting a tendency, or a move away from, rather than a polemic against depiction. How productively, then, can notions of pictorial space be mapped between 'abstraction' and 'figuration'? In this essay, I focus on the work of the American painter Robert Ryman (1930-2019). Ryman defined his work as 'realist' and deployed a materialism that foregrounded the processes of painting. His paintings are both disarmingly simple and spatially complex, and, despite his disavowal of illusion, this complexity is, paradoxically, concerned with the production of pictorial space. I bring together two texts, Hubert Damisch's *A Theory of /Cloud/*, and Hanneke Grootenboer's *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, to address the complex and contradictory spaces in Ryman's paintings, and to suggest that they enter into a negotiation with perspective that is something very different to a rebuttal. To look at Ryman again in this way is to offer a rethinking of the paradoxical spaces of abstract painting, its past and its present.

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Veil

In a short story by Primo Levi called *Through the Walls*, Memnone, an alchemist, is incarcerated in a stone cell for heretically claiming that the world is composed of atoms. Over time he reflects on his knowledge of the insubstantial nature of matter, and becomes convinced that there might be a kind of air so lacking in density that it is even able to penetrate stone, and that, if his own body could become similarly reduced in density, he would be able to travel through the walls and escape. This, he believes, can be achieved by filtering out the solidity from his food, which he proceeds to do. Little by little he becomes fainter, transparent even, to the point where his body is able to pass through the wall. After merging with the stone, and with some difficulty, emerging on the other side, he escapes to find the woman who has been waiting for him, only to dissolve into her in the ultimate union of bodies.

Levi was fascinated by the tenuous substance of things; transitional states between solidity, permeability, translucency and opacity and the unstable nature of boundaries, real and metaphysical. Painters, of course, think about these too; glazes of oil paint that offer shifting and elusive layers and conjure a space for seeing-through; thicker, visceral paint that sits on the surface, or above the surface; the warp and weft of canvas that remains visible even when veil after veil of liquid paint has soaked into its chalky coating. In painting, material, support, primer, ground, and brushstroke are woven into the fictional screen of the picture plane. What painters know is that, even in small moves, spaces in painting can advance and retreat, shift and change, open and close, and that pictorial space is inextricably intertwined with the material, technical and physical structures of painting.

Robert Ryman's paintings are an extended soliloquy on the properties of white paint: thick, thin, wet, dry, opaque, translucent, smeared, brushed, scraped; zinc, titanium, flake, enamel, and surfaces too: polythene, linen, aluminium, and fibreglass. Following this line of thinking, his work for over 50 years forms a catalogue or inventory of materials and methods. Ryman even used this approach in naming some of his works, for instance, *Large-small, Thick-thin, Light reflecting, Light Absorbing 3* (2009). He frequently deployed this method of describing the paintings and used it as a blunt rebuttal of interpretive readings, frustrating critics with a seemingly monotonous materialism. Ryman's no-nonsense abstraction has subsequently proved difficult to place within a clearly defined trajectory: 'Why is it so hard to write about Robert Ryman's work?' asks Yve Alain Bois (1993:215). Defined in simple and literal terms by Ryman himself, his paintings appear to axiomatically answer the question of what they are, but, despite their resolute materiality, they never quite fit this definition.

Ryman is hard to pin down, Suzanne Hudson suggests, because, by concerning himself with the relationship of painting to painting, he distances himself from theoretical discourse (2007:127). Why would painting concerned with painting be difficult to write about? James Elkins (1997) advises art historians to learn painting: art history, he suggests, is constrained by an inability to grasp the 'painterly' – a form of knowledge that is only learned in the studio. Attending to the painterly means considering those aspects of painting that are intrinsically difficult to define, and resist pinning down.

In *Ryman's Tact*, Yve-Alain Bois rails against the limitations of a literalist reading, taking issue, in particular, with Naomi Spector's 1974 Stedelijk Museum essay. For Bois, defining Ryman's paintings as an allegory of their own making falls short of an adequate account: 'Does this mean that Ryman's world is a world without qualities? That the white of *Empire* is not, to our senses, brilliant, hovering, vibrating, and materially dense, *before* it is seen as a *product*?' (1993:216).

One of the problems with writing about Ryman is in weighing the phenomenal nature of the work against its functionalism. At its most literal, the work exhausts itself reflexively through an *it-is-what-it-is* strategy of deflection. But the materials are more than the sum of their parts and are brought together to make something else visible. This is most apparent when, towards the end of the 1960s, Ryman's work takes a more sensuous turn, and he begins romancing the wall with increasingly light and translucent surfaces.

Twin (1966) and *Adelphi* (1967) mark a shift from the visceral brushwork and weighty surfaces that characterise many of Ryman's earlier paintings. They are both comprised of thin expanses of white paint that almost reach the limits of their supports; in the case of *Twin* the support is stretched canvas, but *Adelphi* is painted on unstretched linen over waxed paper, stapled directly to the wall. From the early 1960s Ryman experiments with unstretched canvas, but the introduction of a translucent 'frame' of wax paper and tape signals a more complex relationship between paint, support and wall. In 1970 he begins the *Surface Veil* series, eighteen paintings that differ in scale and surface, with the larger paintings more conventionally painted in oil and blue chalk on linen. The smaller works are painted onto fibreglass, a material that is so thin that at times it feels no more substantial, or perhaps less so, than the vaporous lamina of paint on its surface. These small paintings follow a similar format: an irregular rectangle of white paint is loosely brushed onto fibreglass, which is backed onto a lightweight foamboard, or, in *Surface Veil* (1970) and *Surface Veil* (1970-71), onto a larger sheet of wax paper that acts as both support and frame. In both of these paintings, the paper is attached to the wall with masking tape—three short pieces placed opposite each other at the top and bottom - something used previously with paintings on paper (for instance *Medway*, 1968). The edge of the wax paper appears as the edge of the painting, although it functions as a frame as well, and the masking tape complicates the definition of the edge further. Looking directly at the centre of these paintings, it is difficult to confidently state either where the painting or the wall exactly are. As we move outwards, the layers separate and are presented, in turn, as being present. But it is at the centre where the atmospheric haze of white paint makes this phenomenally perplexing; the paint sits slightly in front of the surface of the support, which sits slightly in front of the wall. Thin layers of opaque and translucent material both assert and collapse the space in between. At the centre of these paintings, they materially intermingle, compressed into a space of indeterminacy.

My paintings are so involved with the wall, it's almost as if they are painted in the wall at times.

(Ryman [1990] cited in Swenson, 2017: 273).

This wall is assumed to be the 'neutral' white wall of the modern art gallery, although for Ryman this offers visual neutrality rather than an ideological one. His friend, Daniel Buren,

on visiting the Stedelijk retrospective with him, expressed concern that some of the *Surface Veil* paintings had been framed by collectors, and in so doing, their delicate interaction with the wall had been lost ([1999] 2001). Ryman was angry too, and from then on he invented systems and fixings that facilitated their removal and installation, without resorting to the 'mediocrity' of the frame. This inter-dependence between painting and wall reaches its apogee in the paintings executed directly onto walls a few years later, at John Weber Gallery in 1973, and P.S.1 in 1976. These, however, forego the tenderness of touch in the *Surface Veil* paintings.

Ryman's project is not concerned with undoing the boundaries of painting altogether, and these slight and barely visible edges still mark the outer reaches of a pictorial event. There is, however, a lateral expansion that takes place when the paintings are seen together: an accumulation that builds across the work. Arthur Danto describes visiting the Ryman retrospective in Paris: 'the paintings were arranged in such a brilliant way that they communicated with one another: the air was alive with painting-to-painting dialogue' (1993: 292).

Retrospectives tend to work like this, through the intensity of being in the moment with a painting, and carrying that moment to the next one. But there is a specific aesthetic experience that arises from looking at the cloudy softness of one white after another, as well as attending to the nuanced handling of the paint, that builds through repetition. Ryman's studio offers an insight into the non-linear expansiveness of the project too; on one wall, for some time, he assembled a grid of eight by ten-inch photographs of every painting he made. More of a constellation than a catalogue.

The work is expansive in another way as well, one that is to do with in-front, and behind. This is most clearly revealed in the *Surface Veil* series, in physically separate layers that atomise and coalesce, but is discernible in other works too, often within the more compressed space of a canvas. In the *Surface Veil* paintings, the layers are deployed to make surfaces cloudy and hazy, and to complicate the location of the picture plane; each painting activating a spatial zone of indeterminacy. Equivocating in this way, the locus of the picture plane - the nexus of exchange between seeing and the space for picturing- can begin to appear unstable and shifting. *This-is-here* and *that-is-there* are moveable points on a sliding scale.

/cloud/

Hubert Damisch's *A Theory of /Cloud/* is, at its most literal, a study of clouds in paintings. The early part of the text focuses on Correggio's painted cupolas in Parma, in which dense, swirling clouds carry figures aloft, and together appear to escape the architectural confines of their emplacement. Architecture gives way to a vision of the infinite; radiant light dissolves all that is solid and measurable.

Damisch also introduces the *nuvola*, a fifteenth-century mechanical stage prop covered in swathes of cloudlike wadding to allow movement and levitation, whilst at the same time concealing machinery and thus collaborating in the illusion of theatre ([1972] 2002: 71-81). There is an exchange, according to Damisch, between theatre and painting that can be traced from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and beyond. He finds evidence of

this in Correggio's clouds; these are rather solid and unnatural in depiction and for Damisch they have, therefore, another function beyond illusion. Correggio's clouds perform, instead, as interstitial spaces in which figures can move from earth to heaven, and as cloaks or veils, to hide what is (or isn't) there. They also act as psychological placeholders onto which the fantastical and supernatural can be projected. As such, they operate in dialectical pairs that oppose clarity and order, earth and heaven, the real and the imaginary. In Correggio's ceilings, /cloud/ works in opposition to the very foundations on which pictorial space is constructed:

It is a theme that, thanks to the textural effects to which it lends itself, contradicts the very idea of outline and delineation and through its relative insubstantiality constitutes a negation of the solidity, permanence, and identity that define *shape*, in the classic sense of the term.

(Damisch, [1972] 2002:15, original emphasis).

In setting out his use of the term cloud, Damisch separates its three semiotic functions. He is concerned primarily with its role as a signifier, and he places /cloud/ within the convention of forward slashes, to indicate a sign (in the form of a painted cloud), operating within a system of signs at work in painting. He differentiates it from that which is signified, indicated by 'cloud' (ascension, divine space, sky). The italicised *cloud* is used only to denote cloud as a pictorial element within painting. In shifting its primary function from signified to signifier, Damisch imbues /cloud/ with agency in the systematic construction of pictorial space. As the intention here is to examine the further potential of this reading, /cloud/ will be used from this point to remain consistent with Damisch's definition.

Central to Damisch's theory of /cloud/ is Filippo Brunelleschi's famous demonstration of the illusion of perspective. This consists of a painting that depicts, in perspectival construction, all that Brunelleschi could see through the doorway of the Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence looking towards the Baptistery of San Giovanni. Having drilled a small hole into the painting at the vanishing point, Brunelleschi positions himself so that he can look through the hole from the back of the painting towards a mirror, which reflects the image of the painting. To the viewer, it is almost impossible to tell whether the reflection is of a painted image or the real scene that extends beyond the mirror. Because the illusion would be spoiled by a painted (and therefore static) sky, Brunelleschi inserts a polished metal surface to reflect the actual clouds, which therefore appear to move in the reflected image. Clouds have no geometry and no implied viewpoint, and as such they operate rather like mirrors in paintings, spatially un-locating the viewer as a fixed point in front of the painting (think of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, In Brunelleschi's demonstration of perspective, the reflection of real and changing clouds exposes the foundations of perspective as unstable and shifting.

For Lacan, who is so important to Damisch's later writings on perspective, perception is unable to convey the entire visual realm; something is always missing, absent.ⁱ Painting is where this absence becomes visible. Lacan refers directly to linear perspective: in mapping perceptual experience between two geometric points — the imaginary position of the viewing subject and the vanishing point — this central field of painting becomes the site of

an invisible marker, an absence. The vanishing point is always disappearing from the picture plane, and although Lacan does not mention Brunelleschi, he tells us that 'in every picture, the central field cannot but be absent, and replaced by a hole' ([1973]1998: 108). In Brunelleschi's experiment the eye of the subject is positioned behind the hole, and, in a complete reversal, sees its own reflection in the cloudy mirrored surface of the sky, instead of the infinite recession of perspectival space.

For Damisch, /cloud/ is thus an oppositional and catalytic element, exposing perspective as a structure built on absence ([1972]2002:124). But these mutually exclusive terms are unthinkable without each other: if linear perspective enacts measure, delimitation, solidity and permanence then /cloud/ is the immeasurable, infinite, unbordered and unknowable. Perspective and /cloud/ are, then, on equal terms: '/cloud/ is not just an instrument, it is the very material of a *construction*' (Damisch, [1972]2002: 16, original emphasis). In Correggio's paintings /cloud/ undermines perspective, exposing and revealing it by concealing its location. As such, /cloud/ is the juncture of a spatial unhooking, neither here nor there. Perhaps equally, in the transitional zones, where it presses against other things, /cloud/ is both here, there and nowhere at the same time. We could say that clouds *in-between*.

There is an immediate comparison that can be made between Ryman's paintings and Damisch's /cloud/, as many of Ryman's paintings are, of course, distinctly cloudlike. Lucy Lippard, who was married to Ryman in the 1960s, recounts a story about *Wedding Picture* (1961), painted on their honeymoon: 'Oil paint dried slowly next to the sea, and my grandmother saw the mostly white painting with a touch of green as a depiction of pine trees in a foggy landscape' (2017:122). In the early 2000s, Ryman's paintings take a more distinctly illusionistic turn. In *Series #11(WHITE)* 2003, a concern with figure and ground emerges decisively in evanescent cloudlike forms brushed over dark backgrounds, softening and blurring at the edges in a very cloud-like way.

In the general absence of images, however, a definition of /cloud/ must be different. In Ryman's paintings it can be found, firstly, in the concealment of layers, through painterly veils and glimpses of the substratum. Secondly, in vaporous surfaces that are as susceptible to light and as mutable as clouds, resulting in *clouding* between and across the works when they are displayed together. And thirdly, and more significantly concerning Damisch's definition, Ryman's painterly layers unsettle the location of the picture plane, the projective space of perspective and the position of the viewer.

Damisch's purpose, in drawing attention to the operations of /cloud/ in painting, is to challenge an art-historical dichotomy between formalism and iconology, in which the latter has the upper hand, and to propose the *painterly* in painting as the correct focus of any analysis of painting, superseding these hierarchical categories. For Damisch, the definition of the painterly includes material and style; all that occurs in the treatment of an image.

This has been largely disregarded, or oppressed by art history, Damisch tells us, with the painterly having been put to work, so to speak, in service of the image, but without its own signifying potential. Style, he argues, has never been addressed properly by art theory, and

the reduction of painting's materiality only to the indexical (gesture, material) or linguistic (paint, frame, bolt) is an impoverishment. Damisch groups material, gesture and style, as pictorial (or 'painterly') elements, together under *effect*, and argues for a new analysis, one that gives access to the 'deep structures' of the image:

"Such an analysis ... needs to circumvent the flat surface upon which the image is depicted in order to target the image's texture and its depth as a *painting*, striving to recover the levels where superimposition (or intermeshing) and regulated interplay – if not entanglement- define the pictorial process in its signifying materiality" ([1972]2002:14, original emphasis).

The painterly in painting, Damisch suggests, can be likened to the poetic in poetry: the indeterminate elements responsible for poetic effect are imbricated into its formal linguistic and semiotic structures, whilst also marking a deviance from these. When we read poetry, it is the texture of the words and the rhythm of the text that we attend to, as well as their individual signifying potential. Indeed, the poetic, intertwined in its linguistic and signifying structures, can at times almost seem to unmoor itself and hover at a slight distance, in thin and barely touching layers. Like Brunelleschi's clouds, the poetic exposes the limits of knowledge. The painterly in painting exceeds the iconographic and the indexical trace. Its origins lie in the handling of surface, gesture, application, and colour and it manifests in many guises: sensation, feeling, glow, atmosphere, and so on, to include all aspects of painting that might be termed loosely under 'effect'. These make themselves known when painterliness exceeds the demands of depiction.

We can find instances of the poetic/painterly in the barely discernible dark space behind Manet's balcony, the specular highlights that detach themselves from everyday objects in Vermeer's paintings, and Rembrandt's hazy edges. /Cloud/ epitomises the painterly. We can find it where narrativity is disturbed by painterly effect, where clarity gives way to obscurity, and where linearity is disrupted by the material stuff of paint. /Cloud/ manifests as uncertainty and in-betweenness.

In Ryman, /cloud/ is at work in the concealment and unsettling of pictorial space; it designates the space of painting as operating within, through, above and against the surface beneath (and the empty space in front). The clarity of separation between interior and exterior, as well as under, between and above, is clouded and remains in a process of unresolving. /Cloud/ in Ryman is intertwined in the material and procedural elements and, at the same time, exceeds these. It extends to include the wall behind, and the space in front as equal and inseparable layers, or laminae, operating, along with the support and the painted surface, as different thicknesses or densities of space, what Merleau-Ponty termed the 'flesh' of looking (1960:159). In Ryman's work, in the absence of drawing as such, /cloud/ opens up an interstitial space that presses against object and paint. Ryman's layers both invite and negate a penetrative gaze, and the alternating translucent and opaque strata both make visible, and also obscure, their individual identities.

In *Painting in Shreds*, Jean Clay contrasts the 'projective' support of painting, to the 'inductive' surface of drawing. Drawing, according to Clay, differs from painting in making the support a visible, tangible presence, colluding with image and material on varying

terms. Surfaces for drawing are usually considered very carefully in terms of their visibility *in* the work, and he contrasts this to the generic nature of most supports for painting. He traces the long history of the 'neutralisation' of the support in Western painting and points to the nineteenth century; Degas, Matisse, and Cézanne, as the point of a decisive shift, in which the surface beneath is not just visible but becomes a constituent of the image or the articulation of space in the painting. Not so much underneath, or in-between, but *in-and-of*.

Clay suggests that modernist painting since Cezanne has been involved with a similar attention to the support, or 'subjectile' (1981:51). In Ryman's paintings, the support is invested with an involvement beyond that of the mute bearer of goods: 'The subjectile is made the instance of the full subject's open-ended coming apart in the scenography of its incompleteness' (1981: 50). This 'coming apart' is enacted in an exchange between the illusory and the real. Thin layers of white paint eliminate or hide the support in a concealment, and this is played against the more materially present: tape, bolt and stretcher, for instance. The limits of the physical surface do not always correspond with the illusory surface, or its inner spaces; the wall, support and the material stuff of paint and its intermingling veils, layers, peaks and troughs. It is impossible to perceive this illusory surface, however, without also perceiving it as a painterly layer of paint. Richard Wollheim's 'twofold thesis' is useful here; in *Art and its Objects* he opposes Gombrich's assertion that it is impossible to attend to the material surface of a painting *and* see it as an image simultaneously (1980:205). Wollheim tells us that if this were so, we would mistake an image for a real thing; we only know it is not real because we see it as a painting at the same time. Jasper John's flags complicate this further, according to Wollheim, because we can also perceive them *as* flags; flags made of paint. With Ryman, resemblances are largely missing, so it should follow that we perceive only the material object, although it is evident that there is an illusion of a surface, as well as a real one. Ryman's 'realism', which is most assertive in the self-referencing structural elements, is used to stage the illusion of painting. In Ryman's paintings, fixings are put to work as props for unveiling painting as elusive and problematic, illusory and transcendental, rather than shutting down all flights of fancy.

Let's begin with a brief comparison. In *Pitcher and Violin*, by Georges Braque (1910), a trompe l'oeil depiction of a nail appears near the top of the painting. It is an impossible nail, both as a representation, and as something that cannot be: it appears to give the illusion that the painting is nailed to the wall, but we know this is not the case (paintings are never nailed through the front!). The illusionistic rendering of the shadow is key: if illusion functions through a presupposed and specific viewpoint in relation to the fixed illumination of the object(s), the light that falls on the nail, in this instance, has nowhere else to go in the painting, and its obsolescence reveals the artificiality of representation as well as the physical actuality of the painting as a flat surface modulated with colour. It signals a brutal rupture in representation, as clearly as the cubist painting that it purports to be holding to the wall.

In Ryman's *Expander* (1985), four bolts are arranged in a square, almost in the centre. Of course, these operate differently to Braque's nail — the fixings, and the light that falls on them, are real. But they foreground the pictoriality of the surface in much the same way, if

we use Damisch's definition of the term 'pictorial' to mean that which is painterly, exceeding representation. In doing so, they reveal the aporia of painting as both illusion and object. Ryman's fixings re-present the painted surface as equivocal and contingent. They reveal the painterly; in this case, a softly painted and near-flat layer of oil paint on aluminium which appears to be in the process of disappearing. Equally, the *painterly* reveals the bolts as being real and present. Both *Expander* and *Pitcher and Violin* are tasked with exposing the limits of the illusion of painting, but *Expander* goes further — there is no reference at all to a fixed viewpoint. However ironic this might be in the Braque painting, it is played against more illusion; the shadows do not correspond to the modelling of light and shade anywhere else in the painting, and illusion here revolves around in a circular game of its spatial undoing. In *Expander*, Ryman releases the shadows and mobilises the viewer. The fixings anchor a thin layer of paint and its aluminium support, whilst revealing its capacity to hover, dissolve, become air or wall, to appear to transcend physical space and lead us somewhere else (other than back into the space of the painting).

Christian Bonnefoi makes a comparison between Braque's nails and Picasso's paper collages, in which dressmaker's pins or thumbtacks hold the paper shapes in place. These pins do not unify the surface, as glue would, but instead, they reinforce the separateness of the layers and the division or 'multiplication', of the surface. [1978: 91]. According to Bonnefoi, in piercing the underlying surface with pins, Picasso renders it symbolically open; pictorial space is no longer the application of one layer onto another, but an indeterminate sliding between, and of, surfaces. With Ryman too, he sees an interrogation of the 'perpendicular' surface of painting.

Picasso's pins, however, differ from Ryman's; they assemble, bring together. Whilst Picasso's pins undermine the illusion of unity, and Braque's nail ironises illusion, Ryman's bolts employ literalism to illusionistic ends. In *Expander* the painted surface remains open, separating and revealing its thickness (and thinness), but the illusion of space is not undone. The bolts in *Expander* are slightly off-centre to maintain an illusion of centredness (Ryman found that they looked 'wrong', less central, if placed in the middle), and they both literally and perceptually fix the painting to the wall:

The paint surface was very soft and extremely thin next to the wall plane. So it just melted into the wall. Then you saw that it was attached by these four black spots. I would never paint four black spots but it's okay if they're bolts.

(Ryman [1991] in Storr, 1993:186).

It is not too far-fetched, perhaps, to suggest that the nebulous surfaces of Ryman's paintings have a similar imaginative potential to Correggio's cupolas. In these, clouds operate in relation to their architectural moorings, which stage the mise-en-scene of their transcendence. They appear lighter and thinner, they evanesce, and they do this dialogically within the architecture of the dome. With Ryman, it is the bolts, fixings, masking tape and support that conspire to activate the theatre of the immaterial.

Nexus

For Jean Clay too, Ryman sets up pictorial space in order to establish that it is unstable, and out of reach (1981:71). In exposing the processes and means of the work's own making, what is revealed is an inconclusiveness as to what is being constructed.

How can we think of constructed space in Ryman's paintings? What is there, when the structures for structuring space are absent?

It might seem strange to talk of Ryman and perspective, but spatial illusion of course, as Greenberg famously acknowledges, begins with the first mark on the surface. For Hanneke Grootenboer, perspective is a model of thought that, even when not visible, is still at work in painting. In *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, she re-examines its claim to embody reality, and therefore truth in painting. Her text considers perspective both as a window, screen or frame for seeing-through, and a device for structuring encounter in painting.

The Rhetoric of Perspective draws together Merleau-Ponty's perceptual phenomenology, Damisch's writings on perspective (but not /cloud/), Heidegger's 'presencing', and Lacan's 'gaze'. Grootenboer examines both the representation and the *absence* of depth in the small, quiet 'breakfast' still lifes of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, particularly those of Claesz. and Heda; characterised by a restrained perspective that is antithetical to the drama of the Baroque. Grootenboer's interest is in shifting emphasis from representation to the painterly (un)structuring of pictorial space, and so she follows Damisch in challenging the primacy of the icon. What is of particular interest here, concerning Ryman, is her discussion of 'structured emptiness'.

Perspective, for Grootenboer, is the means for structuring effect within painting, and she likens this to rhetoric in language. Rhetoric is *outside* of linguistic signification, it has no meaning, but stages its effect. Perspective, according to Grootenboer, is rhetorical because it too has no meaning of its own: meaning can be present in individual objects in a still life painting, but the setting up, or the staging of these objects, through the use (or negation) of perspective, exceeds the symbolic conventions of the genre. Perspective organises what is there, or can be there, it conditions how we see what is there, but does not, in itself, add anything (2005:123-4).

The 'breakfast' still lifes of Claesz. and Heda are characterised by a shallow, indeterminate space and the apparent nearness of objects; as viewers, we only ever seem to be positioned a foot or so away. Rather than feeling that we are looking in, objects seem to be pushing out, towards the viewer. This lack of depth underscores a denial of narrative. These small still lifes present only the proximity of objects; they present, or re-present looking.

Grootenboer plays off the opacity of space in the paintings against the translucency of perspective: perspective as *seeing-through*, from the Latin: *per* – through, *specere* – look. The effect of perspective in painting is that we can imagine that we *see through*, and in doing so the picture plane becomes invisible, relinquishing its presentness for the illusion of depth (although with Alberti we arrived at perspective through both a window and a veil which obstructs, or partially obscures).

For Grootenboer the vanishing point represents *zero* – it is nonspatial, lacks all the qualities of space that, paradoxically, evolve from that point. It is, therefore, both inside and outside of pictorial space. In the breakfast still lifes, the vanishing point is negated through what

she terms the 'structured emptiness' of the monochrome backgrounds. In the near-absence of perspective the vanishing point is returned, sent back to where it came from. The flatness of the background denies the emergence of deep space and exposes the structures of perspective *as* structure, device, and in this case, the structure is rendered homeless. The horizon, or vanishing point, always belongs to the viewer, indicating eye level and corresponding viewpoint. When this is absent, the viewer no longer appears to be present: 'Paradoxically, we *are* looking at this picture, but in such a way that it appears as if *we are looking from an empty point of view*' (2005:79, original emphasis).

Ryman's paintings do not operate as fields to enter, or windows for looking through; in fact, he always avoided rectangles because they are like doors, windows, and traditional easel paintings. (Storr, 1993:17) His paintings are bounded, at least to some extent, by a rectangular border, even if this is sometimes interrupted by fixings, or it becomes blurry and indistinct when the support is translucent, as in the *Surface Veil* series. They do not, however, invite an inward gaze, rather they move outwards, towards. Even the fidgety surface of a painting like *Paramount* (1981) does not lead us in, except into the shallow depth of the surface. Their emptiness is structured through painterly effect. Not only is there nothing that could be designated as a centre or focal point, but often this centre is deflected, our gaze is diverted. It is unsettled, for instance, by the four off-centre bolts in *Expander*, and the nebulous shifting layers of paint/support/wall in the *Surface Veil* paintings. If we follow Grootenboer's line of thinking, then, like the empty backgrounds of the breakfast still lifes, Ryman's surfaces, in their apparent emptiness, reveal the absence of the viewpoint which is conversely *present* through its absence. We know it isn't there because we know it *should* be there. Additionally, Ryman unsettles any notion of the back of the painting, the space where this ends. Whilst we can conceptually locate this, in the *Surface Veil* series and the other thinner works, it remains obfuscated. Paint, surface, bolt, wall; these things are not in the service of an image or a meaning, but in staging pictorial effect.

In fact, there is rarely the fixing of a point, or a location, apart from in opposition (with nails, bolts, tape, for example). Wall, paper, fibreglass, paint and air collude in the *Surface Veil* paintings to un-locate the surface-nexus of the painting. This un-locating is mobile; it refutes the picture plane as an absolute point of entry, a place between here and there; the real here and the imagined there. Ryman's hazy surfaces are part of a collaborative process of blurring the boundaries. Equivocating in this way, the locus of the picture plane, the nexus of exchange between seeing and the space for picturing, becomes unstable and shifting. What happens when an image is absent? In its absence, the entry point or screen is exposed.

Flight

After Giotto, depictions of heaven and earth, almost without exception, employ clouds as a mechanism for the ascension of Jesus and other saints, as an interstitial space between the sacred and profane, the here and there. For Damisch /cloud/ opens up a space in which another space, heaven, can be reached, 'Cloud is [...] associated with an irruption of *otherness*' ([1972]2002:43). The illusion of weightlessness in Correggio's painted cupola is

antithetical to the fixed spatial relations of perspectival projection. This marks another oppositional force in painting: a nebulosity that is revealed, somewhat conversely, in the architectural grounding of the work.

With Ryman, it is the fixings, supports, boundaries and edges as well as the physical presentness of paint that are employed in unsettling pictorial space. Robert Storr warns, however, against metaphysical interpretations of Ryman's work, or of misreading its generous openness as inviting a space for imaginative projection. Ryman is adamant about this too. Thomas McEvilly for instance, suggests that 'to a degree, the white of Ryman's paintings is a blank check to be filled in as this or that by the viewer' (1992:260). He offers the blank gaze of Ryman's work as an empty space waiting for imaginative projection. On the contrary, Ryman fills his paintings up, fills them with painterly effect, to the point where they perform space rather than offer it up. They are filled to the point where they exceed their limits, which accounts for some of the effects that McEvilly attributes to sculpture (the interaction with space outside of the painting, for instance). This excess is, rather, one of painterly effect, and as such, it cannot be contained entirely in the material of paint or the physical reality of the painting-object. In unsettling the picture plane — the tactile nexus between the gaze and the gazed upon — Ryman's contradictory surfaces both intertwine and take flight from each other. The paintings operate through a complicated interiority and exteriority, and as Urs Rausmüller notes:

Some of the works are extremely quiet, and in fact, absorb everything. Others can be virulent and work outwards a lot.

([1992] Rausmüller cited in Storr 1993:223).

And mostly, they do both. Like *Mnemone* merging with the wall, inside, outside, here and there become fluid and transitory spaces. The cumulative power of each painting, individually and collectively, is in conjuring a dreaming space somewhere between here and there, being and not being, and of finding the space of painting and losing it again.

However slight the transition might be from wall to object, and however tenuous the boundaries might be, they are still paintings on a wall; as soon as paint touches a surface, it activates the space of painting. Ryman's white is a veil; it clouds, obscures, negates, makes our eyes feel fuzzy, uncertain. The painting-object stares back at us, but it does so in a way that reminds us of the limits of human perception. Ryman appears to reveal so much, but, at the same time, this revelation always reminds us that there is something that we do not know. The work deflects or scrambles meaning under its veils, and layers of marks. By foregrounding the material, it draws into the sphere of the work all the things that attach themselves to it, and are part of its material production. In an apparent act of complete disclosure everything external, or additional to the work itself, becomes intrinsic to the subject of the work. In doing so, Ryman's paintings pose a much more deeply rooted ontological question about the paradoxical space of painting, and where it enters the world.

The success of Ryman's paintings, if we are to talk about them on those terms, is in pointing to the space of painting as somewhere between here and not here, present and absent. This is why they have nothing to do with sculpture, because sculptures, with few exceptions, is intrinsically present. The surface of painting is a different space, a space for picturing, even when pictures are absent.

Ryman's emptiness is there to stage oppositions rather than existing entirely for its own sake. It is productive, rather than reductive, because it produces painterly effects as a surplus of activity. These effects can be considered auratic; they include luminosity, the dazzling effects of looking at one white after another, the vaporous expansiveness of thinly brushed paint, and the visceral presentness of thickly applied daubs. They also include the pervading stillness and silence that is carried beyond the individual boundaries of each painting. These effects escape from the hermetic circle of the work's production, like static electricity. Such effects unsettle the stability of the matter-of-fact construction and the certainty of the viewer in locating the surface, and point of entry into the work.

Ryman's stony essentialism, on one hand, sets a course to answer painting with itself, and on the other cannot help but produce an excess of effect. This absolute materiality, the objectness of the work, exhales a painterliness whereby the pictorial and spatial properties of the paintings exceed their corporeality.

The tensions between containment and flight, interior and exterior, opacity and translucency are always contingent on the limits of painting's material and physical boundaries. The painterly elements of colour, gesture and surface are enmeshed in the spatial structures through which picturing takes place, although these structures can find their undoing in the painterly. Painting can cloud: we never quite know what is under the surface but the not-knowing conditions everything that we do know. To cloud is to purposefully unresolve or incomplete, processes that in painting are productive. /Cloud/ is something that obscures and quiets: here lie painting's enigmatic silences.

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^{i i} Lacan's writings on perspective appear in 'Of the Gaze As' or "Objet Petit a' in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. The Damisch text referred to is *The Origin of Perspective*, originally published in 1987 as *L'Origine de la Perspective*, Paris: Flammarion.