

# cordy ryman

shuffle / scrap / echo

January 11 - March 24, 2013

## *Visible Echoes*

By Mary Birmingham

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For the past two decades Cordy Ryman has used materials found at hand to make abstract works that retain and reveal a connection to the human hand. Gathering 2x4s, metal, plywood, paint, cardboard, Velcro, glue, staples, sawdust and scraps from the studio floor, along with his own discarded artworks, he constructs hybridized works that hover between painting and sculpture. In an ongoing process of exploration and experimentation, repetition and reuse, the artist addresses the relationship between materiality and abstraction and demonstrates his intuitive grasp of both. This exhibition recaps Ryman's recent career and features representative examples of three types of work: site-specific installations, smaller painted constructions and large composite "scrap walls." While



*Windowboxing*, 2006-7, enamel on wood, dimensions variable

echoes of his past works are visible in the reshuffled scraps and repeated forms, Ryman's variations on similar themes always appear fresh. Unpretentious and playful, his work respects the unfinished and elevates the imperfect. True hybrids, his works are first objects in their own right, constructed from found and recycled materials, but they also function as underlying supports for paintings. While Ryman is ultimately a maker of objects, those objects always incorporate painting. A skilled colorist, he not only explores different hues of paint, he also experiments with a variety of types, including fluorescent, pearlescent, enamel, acrylic, spray, sign and other industrial paints.

Ryman's adeptness with diverse materials should not overshadow his fluency in the language of abstraction. Although he is an art world insider by birth and upbringing, (his parents are the artists Robert Ryman and Merrill Wagner, and his brothers Ethan and Will are also artists), he is uncomfortable with placing abstract art on a pedestal. Ryman recognizes that its aura can be a barrier to understanding, with a coded language decipherable exclusively by those "in the know." It may have been a desire to counteract this perceived elitism and to make abstraction more accessible and "real" that led him to employ materials drawn from real life. Ryman is not subverting abstraction so much as demonstrating a profound faith that abstract forms can hold up to non-traditional media and might even gain additional meaning from them. The dynamic push and pull between his work's physicality and its formal abstract content is one of its most consistent and fascinating qualities. While Ryman's works are architectural in the way they relate to their spatial environments, they are also architectural in their construction; the artist builds his abstractions as much as he paints them. *Windowboxing* is a site-specific installation of fifty four painted wood frame-shaped elements wedged together and stacked up the wall in a roughly triangular formation. Like many of the artist's installations, this work reconfigures elements from earlier works. Ryman first created *Windowboxing* for a 2010 solo exhibition, salvaging much of the raw material from *Windows*, a site-specific installation shown at Lesley Heller Gallery in 2007.

In the 2010 version Ryman angled the forms above a static bottom row, making them appear to bounce off it, animating the work with an upward sense of movement. In the 2013 reinvention the same forms are piled atop the same row of boxes, but in the new setting they must also react to a narrow engaged column that bisects the work. This sets up an internal tension that differs subtly from the first version. What may look like haphazard and spontaneous pile-ups, were in fact carefully choreographed by the artist in response to specific environments. Like all of Ryman's work, *Windowboxing* draws our attention to its physical reality as a series of objects on the wall, while simultaneously challenging us to see it as a formal arrangement of line, shape, color and composition. Unlike a conventional drawing

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or painting, this work asserts itself into real (as opposed to illusionistic) space. This is especially true when viewed obliquely, as the work appears more planar than linear, and the bright colors become more prominent. But no matter how three-dimensional Ryman's forms are, they always remain anchored to the wall. The importance of the wall as a support is further underscored by the reflected light that casts colored shadows and paints ghost images on the wall. The artist often chooses light-hearted and even humorous titles for his works. The term "windowboxing" refers to the solid black border wrapped around a television image when a widescreen picture must fit into a different format. This seems particularly appropriate for a work that is itself reformatted from old parts to fit a new space. And given the title, it is also tempting to think of these painted wood forms as actual window boxes—in this case filled with painted and reflected color in place of flowers. Ryman explores many of the same ideas in his smaller individual works. Like *Windowboxing*, *Blue Trap* considers the relationship of geometric forms to the wall. Despite its diminutive scale, this work incorporates squares and rectangles of various sizes that are constructed, painted or cut out. By utilizing negative spaces as shapes and layering the illusion of painted rectangles over an actual rectangular painted wood object, Ryman plays with the fluid boundaries between materiality and form.



*Green Wave*, 2007, acrylic and enamel on wood, dimensions variable

In *Trim Core* a concentric maze of white wood strips frames a small pink recessed rectangle, which acts like a bright punctuation point of color. Tiny details, easy to overlook, add unexpectedly sophisticated elements, like the small line of pink fluorescent paint that seeps through a joint in the wood. It appears accidental, but it accents the work like a syncopated note in a jazz composition. The scuffed and abraded surfaces of the wood strips carry traces of a past life, with little scraps of glue and plywood acting as ghostly echoes of older works. This residue also indicates the passage of time. Ryman's appropriation of these scrappy planks is both serendipitous and purposeful and his response to them is intuitive—an auspicious combination of chance and choice. *Chop and Spin* effectively illustrates Ryman's practice of revisiting and reworking older pieces. In this case he took what he considered an unsuccessful painting, cut it into four pieces and rotated them into a new configuration. This segmentation reasserts the "objectness" of the work while injecting it with a new dynamism. As he often does, Ryman pays special attention to the edges of this work, painting them fluorescent red. Situating the work just in front of the wall casts a chromatic shadow that further emphasizes its edge. One might view Ryman's frequent integration of shadows as another kind of echo, repeating the object's outline. *Red Mini* is a small sculptural painting that reiterates Ryman's fascination with edges. Painting the front of a single chunk of wood with shiny red enamel, and its right edge with a flat dark pink paint, Ryman adds a thin white line to separate the two colors. In contrast, he leaves the left edge unpainted, but traces the grain of the wood, exploring multiple meanings of "the edge." Comfortable with their human scale and portability, Ryman has been making small works for twenty years. Although he has gradually increased their scale, the artist maintains a preference for works that do not exceed his "wing span," and can be manipulated easily, like objects. Several years ago he began attaching wood scraps directly to the wall, effectively creating large three-dimensional collages. Since this resulted in an ephemeral artwork that was disassembled at the end of an exhibition, he devised a method for making these "scrap walls" more permanent. By working in sections no larger than forty-eight inches square, Ryman can shuffle and rearrange the components like large puzzle pieces. These moveable segments allow him to cover larger areas, experiment with different arrangements, and establish rhythmic patterns and repetitions across the surfaces. With these large works he strikes an intuitive balance between random order and deliberate design. The four panels comprising *Wave Echo Scrap Ghost* are filled with painted and raw wood chunks, blocks, wedges and scraps salvaged from earlier installations. This work is a happy mix of spontaneity and deliberation, with Ryman freely quoting from his own previous work.



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Three of the four sections were repurposed from “Wave” installations—arrangements of painted boards that resemble dune fences. The upper left quadrant derives from *Green Wave* (2007), and the lower right is salvaged from *Blue Wave* (2009). The yellow, ochre, light blue and red painted scraps in the lower left section are recycled from a 2009 installation titled *Third Wave*,<sup>1</sup> while the upper right quadrant is fashioned from raw wood scraps. The individual sections may be ghostly reflections of their former lives, but their shared scale, material, and repetitive format lend them a new monumental unity. Ryman selectively leaves remnants of labels, product information and hand-written notations on some of the scraps, referencing their original functions, and providing additional echoes from the past.

Ryman’s works are always responsive, reacting to their environments, their own layered histories and to one another. In his studio practice the artist often hangs an array of works on a large wall, observing the visual and conceptual relationships they create among themselves. It’s almost as if they become animated objects that belong to the same tribe, speak the same language, and echo each other’s ideas. By definition an echo is a repetition of sound produced by the reflection of sound waves from a wall, mountain, or other obstructing surface. In other words, an echo always needs to bounce off something in order to exist. It is a repeated response to an obstruction, making it an apt metaphor for the artist’s work. Cordy Ryman has been hollering at the same mountain for years. He has an enduring ability to hear something meaningful in the echoes, and to make them into something solid and substantial— something visible. While an echo is technically a sonic repetition, it has come to mean any lingering trace or effect, or even something that evokes memories. It is an effect that continues to resonate after the original cause has disappeared. Ryman likes to use objects that carry their own embedded histories as starting points for his work because they act as catalysts and create relationships to which he can react—like the mountain that ricochets a sound. This call and response between object and artist, between material and abstraction, is an echo that resonates throughout his work. While sonic echoes diminish and gradually fade, the echoes in Ryman’s art seem to grow stronger as they reverberate. In a 2008 interview in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Ryman noted, “A lot of my work, even still today, is all about reactions of one kind or another—reactions to elements within the materials, between different combined elements within a work, between the materials and the space around it, and so on...It’s sort of like a never-ending play, dance or game.”<sup>2</sup> Maybe it’s like a never-ending echo.

Mary Birmingham  
Curator

<sup>1</sup> Another work in the exhibition, *Dudley!*, was also made with scraps from this installation.

<sup>2</sup> Phong Bui, “In Conversation: Cordy Ryman with Phong Bui” *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 2008.