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John Haber in New York City
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5.1.13 — SCRAPPING ABSTRACTION

Topics: Cordy Ryman, Jordan Eagles, Visual Art Center of New Jersey

I had been wondering where Cordy Ryman went. Well, not really, since he has pursued his gallery's meanderings through smaller spaces and art fairs. Still, that could have entailed certain compromises, especially for an artist who leaves one so unsure when to call a work site specific. At the very least, he had to dismantle a ten-foot triangle over the desk when his last dealer departed the Bowery.

I should not have worried. He may well have taken some of it with him, to the Visual Art Center of New Jersey through March 24, to help piece together some of his largest work yet. He is also back on the Lower East Side, through May 12, for a fuller picture yet. Lumber never had it so good.

Windowboxing expands on a triangle, with a bit of a plateau on top, to cover much of a museum wall. It must have burst apart here and there in the process. The wood tiling has become open squares of varying sizes, like stretchers or picture frames in search of canvas—or like his earlier *Door*. Many nestle within others, upright or diagonally, as if in storage, while two by fours tilted up and out to hold up the rest. I should hate to call it a system of support. The brightly colored inside edges, in yellow and red, and ample surrounding space add to the work's lightness and resemblance to plain old painting. Others with him at the Center, in Summit, New Jersey, obsess way too much over painting without actually doing it. In Katie Armstrong's hand-drawn animation, the male narrator fantasizes about meeting Frida Kahlo on a train, before she morphs into a force of nature—running deer, to be precise. Less charmingly, Jordan Eagles pours real blood from a slaughterhouse into Plexiglas and resin. Just in case any of his *Red Giants* does not glow suitably enough or reek enough of death, he backs some with copper. At least Andres Serrano and Chris Ofili came by their precious bodily fluids the old-fashioned way, with a Catholic upbringing. Here the only "Sensation" is kitsch.



Cordy Ryman, *Windowboxing*, 2010, acrylic and enamel on wood, 153 x 328 x 6 inches

As *Windowboxing* suggests, Ryman is sparring with the architecture, just as in his corner pieces that never quite mount a stairwell or a room. He is also playing with the old metaphor of a painting as a window onto the world—here with multiple windows looking every which way and none. One might think, too, of Allan McCollum's "surrogate paintings," those frames and matte surrounding only black, but without the hectoring, dismissive irony. Ryman always leaves open the possibility for painting, geometry, the handmade, and art as object, very much like his father, Robert Ryman. He just has to start again from their scraps. And that includes the scraps of his past. In the next largest piece, scraps of art and other debris compete on an equal footing. One of four rectangular fields recycles wood from an older work, while the other three settle for whatever he can find. Each imperfect tiling has its own color scheme, in close shades of fluorescent paint or in nothing but wood. The differences suggest the logic of theme and variations in older hard-edged abstraction, another kind of recycling, but without a fixed vocabulary of primary colors. The pattern could even serve Ryman as his flag painting, after you know who. Then again, the changes could simply point out how much room is left to play around.

If smaller panels do less to engage the architecture and sometimes elude me as well, still they insist that, all along, the scraps are of painting. In fact, back in New York at Dodge, for what the gallery calls "Adaptive Radiation," Ryman puts painting and two-by-fours through even more paces. They can disrupt the image or the picture plane, collide again with their frames and the corners of a room, or cluster with so little paint that one might not even notice how their varying lengths reshape the rectangle. One variation on his early corner pieces looks like little more than a branch blown in from the street, except for its bands of color.

Again the two largest paintings play off the gallery most effectively. One set of slim beams angles off the floor, slides up, and arcs past the stairs, only to return across from where they began. His *Rafterweb Scrapwall* comes almost to the top of the two-tiered space beyond, as well as out onto the floor, like a majestic Islamic carpet. If all that starts from squares, each square distinguished by the disarray of smaller blocks within it, they are building and scrapping abstraction.

Note: I have wrapped this into a longer article, containing earlier reviews of Cordy Ryman and others. I have also revised it for continuity and, I hope, a fuller appreciation of the artist. I have written elsewhere about other recent shows that work with the scraps of abstraction.