

# BROOKLYN RAIL

May, 2013

## CORDY RYMAN *Adaptive Radiation*

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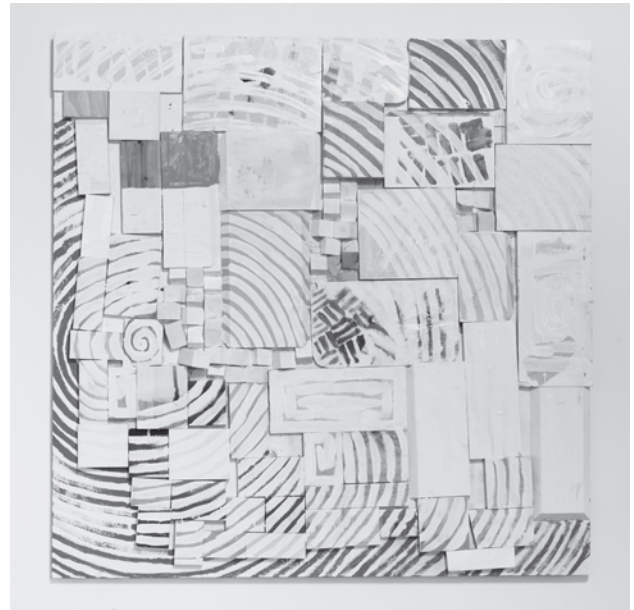
BY ALEX BACON

Intentionally or not, Cordy Ryman's use of the biological term "adaptive radiation" suggests the rhythmic relationship between his radiating patterns of paint and materials and their underlying, obdurate physicality. In "ES Spiral Trim Maze" (2013) a coil of white paint elicits a gentle optical pulse as it directs the eye back and forth across a loose arrangement of differently sized and colored pieces of wood. Optical "radiation" is "adapted" to a given work's physical components, such that it does not overpower, but rather compliments, and even improves upon what artist-critic Thomas Micchelli has recently characterized as a "slacker" or "dumpster" aesthetic of artfully disheveled arrangements of materials and colors.

In "Pantastic," (2013) the most beautiful work in the show, a progression of pastel tones lend a melodic cadence to a stepped series of segmented two-by-fours, the appeal of which is heightened by the ravishingly seductive glow cast by the work's crown of lime paint. Yet Ryman does not simply revel in the sensorial pleasures of his often-quirky materials, but instead harnesses their undeniable attractiveness to subtle optical effects so as to motivate that materiality to make a comment on the nature of focus and attention in our time.

Ryman has thus updated for the digital age certain of the perceptual strategies one finds in Suprematism, Op Art, and even Frank Stella. A new class of technology has profoundly changed the nature of focus and attention insofar as it mediates perception, affecting how we make sense of the world around us. In step with this, Ryman's work suggests how, in an age where our focus is constantly shifting, as opposed to simply "distracted," perception might be made purposeful, rather than rote and automatic. He implicitly questions whether staring at a screen for hours, glassy eyed and immobile, or restively moving in and out of different activities are the only possible responses to the endlessly unfolding sea of digital information. Further, might it be possible to transform or redirect such acts in the service of new modes of attention?

How exactly this transformation might occur can best be seen in the strongest work on view. One discovers "Case



Cordy Ryman, "ES Spiral Trim Maze," 2013. Acrylic and enamel on wood, 48 x 48 x 2.5".



Cordy Ryman, "Case Study," 2013. Acrylic, shellac and pencil on wood, 116 x 178 x 26.5". Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy Cordy Ryman and DODGEgallery.

Study" (2013) lying in wait at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Operating as a corner piece, the propped arrangement of beams subtly articulate the space they frame, but the key to the work's success lies equally in Ryman's decision to paint select parts of the white beams in brash, fluorescent colors. This complex interplay of color, both actual and reflected, results in a push and pull that is not simply a coloristic effect given to vision alone, but one that is felt even more emphatically at a physical level, inciting the viewer to move. In this way, Ryman has discovered means to rouse his viewer beyond established pictorial and phenomenological tactics.



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The moment at which I found myself convinced by “Case Study” was when, moving away from it, a flash of pink in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Turning around to investigate, I realized that Ryman had also painted the underside of the beams, such that there was an entire coloristic experience, replete with reflections cast on the wall, that I had initially missed. At his strongest Ryman solicits a fresh kind of phenomenological engagement: implying that it is not that we have irrevocably lost our ability to focus, but rather that we necessarily pay attention differently. Ryman’s particular layering of complex and interrelated experiences of color and movement provide just enough seduction to get us looking, and enough variation to keep us interested.

The unrelenting focus demanded by modernist art’s continuous, atemporal presence is no longer available, even to the connoisseur, if he or she has been raised on computer screens. As a result, the best art of our moment, such as Ryman’s, must play into the inescapably in-and-out nature of our attention, but should ultimately elevate its characteristic plodding banality to a musical syncopation. Like the nagging parade of “suggested” links on blogs, social media, and video sites, Ryman captivates his viewer with an always regenerating promise of the rewards that await if he or she gives just one more minute of his or her time. In “Case Study” we find them literally around the corner, suggesting that, if the conditions are right perhaps distraction can transform into attention. Ryman signals his considerable aesthetic intelligence by accomplishing all this in formal, rather than spectacular terms, as Internet culture typically does. He has translated the kind of seduction that might lead one to become inattentive and lost, mindlessly watching hours of YouTube videos, into a format for a self-conscious aesthetic experience, and in doing so has shed critical light on an important contemporary phenomenon.

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