

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

December 2008

IN CONVERSATION Cordy Ryman WITH PHONG BUI

In the midst of preparation for his one-person exhibit at DCKT Gallery, (January 10-February 14, 2009) and a group show *Organic Geometry* at Nicole Klagsbrun (December 12-January 10, 2009) painter Cordy Ryman took a break from his Sunset Park studio to pay a visit to the *Rail's* headquarters to talk with Publisher Phong Bui about his life and work.

Phong Bui (Rail): You've grown up in a family of artists. Your mother, Merrill Wagner, and your father, Robert Ryman, are both painters, your two brothers, Ethan and Will one of whom was a musician turned artist, the other a playwright turned sculptor—not to mention the whole community of artists that you grew up with. Can you recall any specific event, whether it was seeing a particular work of art, having a conversation with some artists, or simply accepting the strong urge, which drove you to come to terms with the prospect of being an artist?

Ryman: There was no particular episode that I can pinpoint that made me think, "OK. This is what I want to do." I didn't plan on doing what I'm doing exactly. Although before high school, I wanted to make comics so that was the first indication of some sort.

Rail: Which most children from nine or ten to 13 would be interested in.

Ryman: Right. But I wasn't too sure about what was going on besides that. I mean, being dragged to art openings all the time, not to mention once being in the Louvre for one whole day with my mom, which at the time I felt was real torture.

Rail: That's a full dose of looking at art. I don't think I can do it now, so it's a miracle that it didn't prevent you in becoming a painter. *[Laughs.]*

Ryman: Anyway, in high school, I became interested in sculpture and was making a lot of very expressive figures, mostly faces with great anxieties. At that point I really felt that art was about emotion and should be expressed emotionally. I remember talking to my dad about art while trying to figure out what he was doing, and it was frustrating because I never got a clear answer. As a teenager there was something inaccessible about his work; I never understood what the big deal was. The fact that they were critically praised made it more difficult for me to access. I really wanted to understand it and figure it out, but since I was trying so hard I couldn't. That process left me feeling as though I was missing something that everyone else seemed to get. Because if there was one thing that I knew it was the fact that his work was totally genuine.... it wasn't a gimmick. At some point I decided to leave it alone and stop trying to figure things out which in effect enabled the real breakthrough which came a little later. But now, when people don't get my work, I can really understand. And I can really sympathize with them. *[Laughs.]*

Rail: That's not a bad breakthrough. *[Laughs.]*

Ryman: What happened was that I was working from a very emotional place as a teenager. The work was very angst-ridden and you know, I got very good at making stone and woodcarving and many people liked it. It was strange to get that form of approval at a young age. Thinking back now, I was reducing to get to something inside as opposed to putting things together. Anyway, I applied to SVA on the basis of this body of work. I was able to skip the foundation course and began as a second-year student where I had an open studio and I could do what I wanted.

Rail: You were admitted at an advanced level?

Ryman: Yeah, but again, up until that year I had been working from a purely emotional base. I found that as my emotions changed the work wasn't changing along with it. In fact the reverse had started to happen! Since I was very good at making angry and angst-ridden work, I was forcing myself to stay in this increasingly artificial, angry and angst-ridden place. It became very clear to me that what was once valid for the work no longer rang true. Whatever I was as a person, I had changed, but the work wasn't changing. It was very strange and hard that first year. And while all of these things were going on, I was beginning to go along with my father from time to time when he installed

his shows. I must admit, being there for the installations, and having already decided that I didn't care, I gradually started feeling like I was getting it, yet I still couldn't put my finger on it. By not trying to "figure it out" I had let myself be more open. Slowly I started having more of an appreciation for art and why my parents do what they do, which I couldn't get before because I wanted to do too much, and I was frustrated by it. Does that make sense?

Rail: It makes great sense.

Ryman: So I had that in my pocket going into SVA. I had Hannah Wilke as a sculpture teacher. Even though she was battling cancer at the time, she was really supportive of my work. But that relationship was a bit difficult for me. Hannah seemed angry at the art world. She embraced the work I was doing at that time because of the emotional aspects, but at the same time I was finding it harder to connect to it myself, and didn't really want to be angry anymore. It actually did shut me down for a while in terms of pure reductive sculpture. At the same time I was in a painting class with Moira Sheehan. That class became an oasis for me. It was in her class and that year, 1990-91, that really started a shift in the way I worked and thought about art.

Rail: So it was then that you shifted from sculpture to painting?

Ryman: Yeah, kind of. The problem with the sculpture for me at that time was that I was working reductively. By its nature I had to have a plan and a clear idea beforehand. I couldn't just figure it out as I went along because then the block of wood would just get smaller and smaller and what I would end up with was a size of the golf ball. I just didn't have an idea as to where I wanted the work to go, and since the process wasn't conducive to experimentation and exploration, I found it harder to work. But in the painting class I was more able to get some paints and begin messing around. I knew I could paint a still life and I could definitely paint different versions of miserable faces, I found that if I was given a primed and stretched the canvas, I felt like I had to have some sort of plan, but if I just stapled a piece of canvas to the wall without prepping it, somehow that freed me and I didn't have to plan anything. I could just let myself go, I could have a great time. I always liked the act of working. It was that first few months of Moira's class where I realized that I knew this whole other language without knowing I knew it—it was amazing! I would do this sort of square stain painting and it would look like a Rothko. Then I would do another rectangular one with some black shape in it, and it would be a Motherwell. And this went on and on. The whole process was so wonderful. I didn't know Rothko had an affect on me until I made a Rothko.

Rail: I used to do the same thing. The thing is, if you were not Bob Ryman, what would you do? So, it's better to figure things out this way. *[Laughs.]*

Ryman: I tell you, after that first semester I was really happy. I felt like I understood what the big deal was, even though now, I probably couldn't explain it now to my son now any better that it was explained to me.

Rail: What happened next?

Ryman: Well, in the following semester I noticed that I liked working on hard surfaces because when I worked on raw canvas, which is soft, I didn't get that feeling of making an object or "thing". I would work at school and I also had a studio in my parents' basement, so it was like I had two separate bodies of work that never intersected because they were too big to carry. It was then that I started working on smaller things, so I could carry them back and forth. I also liked to work on smaller paintings because I could hold it and manipulate it like an object. For a while, I seemed limited in scale by my own wingspan. If I couldn't hold it and flip it as an object it was somehow harder for me. I discovered that I liked collage elements partly because I didn't know how to begin with a blank surface, so by putting found objects that already have their

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personal histories, and in some ways that also have some connection to my past experience as a sculptor, it just made more sense. Also it would automatically give me a relationship to react to. 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 or dance or game.

Rail: No one would deny that physical aspect in your work. And this would continue for the remaining years before graduation?

Ryman: Actually I dropped out of school halfway through my second year. I started in '90. Dropped out in '92 and went back and forth for a few years, but because I wanted to teach, I went back to finish my undergraduate degree in 1997.

Rail: Yeah, you were teaching at Packer Collegiate Institute when I first met you.

Ryman: Right, it was where I had gone to high school also.

Rail: You described the drastic change from sculpture to painting, but how about the shift from figuration to abstraction that was entailed in the same transformation?

Ryman: I don't know exactly how it happened but that was also in Moira's class. I was sort of playing around with imagined landscapes using flat shapes. I guess the initial spark was Cézanne in some way. I was first doing these Cézannesque / Matissean landscapes that were just packed with paint. Of course, mine were really crude because I would squeeze the paint out of the tube to make the lines for the horizon and so on.

I pretty quickly abandoned the landscape though, as I realized that the relationships in painting outside of figuration interested me more. The landscape was only used as a way to start, but once I got comfortable I was able to drop it altogether and use other things to start. I found that I was much more connected to the language of abstraction than I realized. I would make certain moves and they would just seem right, like home, and maybe that is because they were. I would see things come up in my paintings that I had seen my whole life without knowing I had seen it. Without knowing it, it was part of me. Intuitively, I felt like I really understood the process, which in itself wasn't contingent upon anything else. I could be miserable, I could be happy, I could be somewhere in between different states of mind or ideas. Whatever it was I knew I could go in and work and ultimately, this was what fed me. It was the act of creating something; that's what matters to me most of all. I think the desire to create or make things is universal, and when you're able to let yourself go, it feeds you in a way that other things can't.

At this point, in 1993, I dropped out of school, and worked in my parents' basement. Everything I did was abstract. They were relatively small wood panels, no more than 18 x 15 inches, which had collage elements sort of like Kurt Schwitters.

Rail: What sort of materials did you use?

Ryman: Things that I found in the dumpsters like plastics, metals, crushed air conditioner ducts, cloths, paper, etc.... And I would also paint all the sides of the panels as well as the back.

Rail: So they invited viewers to touch and hold them. Otherwise no one could see all the sides and the back of the work. It just occurred to me that the desire for physicality seemed to persist after your previous experience as a sculptor, and is now becoming even more amplified in your site-specific pieces. I often feel that while your paintings are considerably small and portable, therefore somewhat intimate, your *Wave* pieces and *Corner* stack works have a strong relationship to the body, or perhaps adapt to the given spatial environment. Do you agree?

Ryman: I never thought much about their differences, but if people read them differently, that'd be fine.

Rail: Anyway, what happened with those works?



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Ryman: Christian Haub, a very good artist who had an artist-run gallery in Long Island City called Tennisport Arts, came by and liked what I was doing. So he offered me my first one-person show.

Rail: What year was it?

Ryman: 1993. And a few years later I got married for the first time and had my first son.

Rail: Since then your use of materials from found objects has changed and expanded to include 1 x 2s, 2 x 4s, saw dust, sheetrock, house paint, polyurethane, shellac, you name it. Everything that one can find from a hardware store or lumber yard, as well as debris laying on your studio floor will eventually find its way into your work. How did that evolve?

Ryman: That's something that evolved over time and still continues to evolve. You find an affinity for certain materials and colors to go along with them, and then that goes somewhere else unforeseen. That's what I like about that process. It is very appealing to me. Working in this mode started in 1991 and it's now 2008 and that's amazing, you know, I'm not that old. To be in that creative process for that long and have it feed itself and off itself, and evolves organically is sort of amazing. The only time when I run into trouble is when I stop working. Otherwise, it's a living organism.

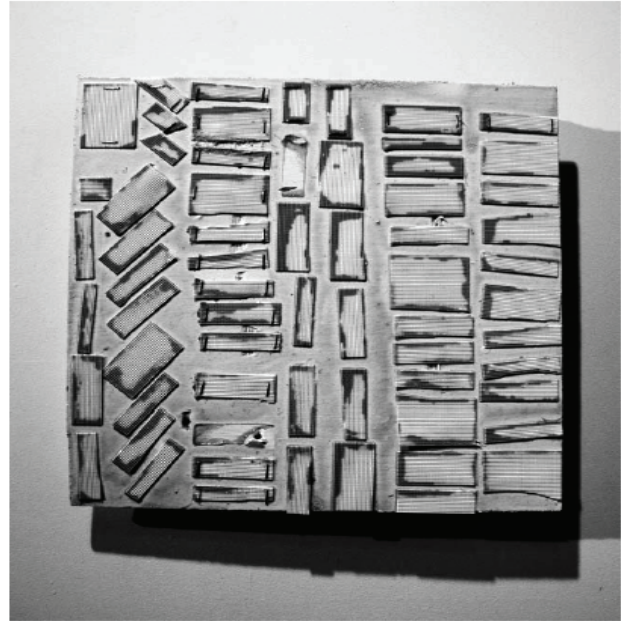
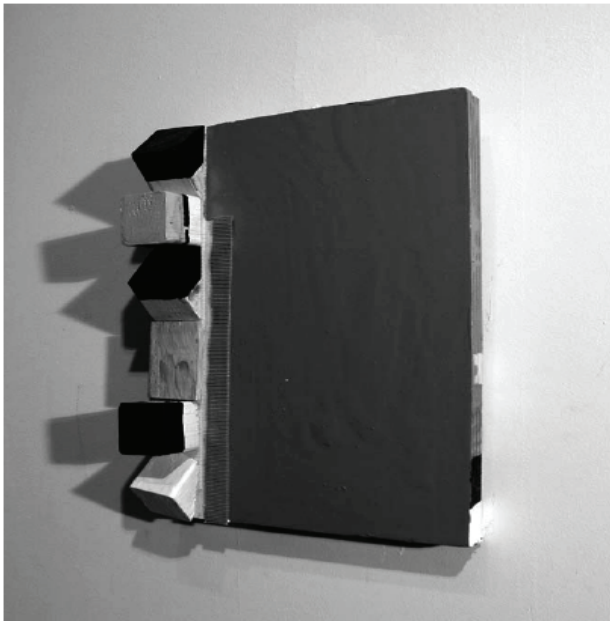
Rail: Could you talk about this relationship between randomness and repetition, which are two pronounced aspects in your work? For instance, in "Untitled 19," what appear are spots of paint drips, which you outlined with pencil lines, in contrast to the bold, painted gestures. Similar to "White (Untitled)," though in this piece the three irregular cut and painted 2 x 4 constitute the gestures. Whereas in most of your corner/stack pieces, the incremental adding up, down, sideways through repeated forms is what enables each to function site-specifically.

Ryman: Well, I think of them simply as two different modes. One is a planned mode and the other is a more spontaneous, unplanned mode, although one feeds the other, and sometimes, they happen to coincide in the same piece. I often start with an idea and once I start it leads to another idea, so that the one piece will become two pieces and then maybe three. I tend to work on multiple things at once. Sometimes the second piece will be like a continuation or another riff of the first, and then maybe the third piece will be totally different, an antidote to the two. I might start with an idea to repeat a form over

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and over and maybe plan on using certain colors, then decide that I want the repeated forms to be a bit different and maybe work with shadows better in the second. Then the third piece might be some sort of internal reaction or panic about the feeling that the repeated forms are too rigid and I'm working myself into a pigeon hole. So I'll random-seeming explosion of colors and sweepings and cutoffs, some of which might have come from the first two works. Then, somehow, it's all ok. They might not seem related, but they all are.

Rail: Like "Gray Variables," where you constructed six irregularly cut pieces of 2 x 4 on the vertical row on the left and painted five different colors while the same exact five colors are painted on the bottom of the right edge of the painting as if they harmonize with each other. It's quite musical actually.

Ryman: I'm pleased that you thought of that piece in such way. At any rate, while I'm working in the studio, ideas tend to emerge through whatever materials that happen to be available. I might be using a board as a palette, which somehow ends up being a painting. Or whatever gets cut off or "cast off" from the Wave pieces, which require some planning in their measurements, will find its way into the corner stack pieces; or in some cases, the corner pieces start as cast offs.

Rail: Recycling is good for the environment. *[Laughs.]*

Ryman: Yeah, I never throw anything away. Even the leftover bits and pieces from the Velcro, which I use in each of the unit for the corner stack pieces so they can be moved around easily, get used in some of the recent paintings. I think when you give an object a new function, it becomes alive.

Rail: That's cool, and I couldn't agree with you more.

Ryman: For something to be alive, it can't be made by a machine. The hand has its own charm because of its irregular movement, which is what makes everything so unpredictable. Even in the corner pieces, which have strong ties to the repeated form generated by artists of my parent's generation that I knew as a kid in the '70s, I don't want that perfection.

Rail: That's because there's a surprising shift in perception, which we call humor, in your work. "Wall Press #3" (2008), is a good example. It may recall Richard Serra's landmark "Prop Piece," of 1968, but the way you prop your 4 x 4 against two unequal squares on the wall and floor, and painted them pink while the brush marks are randomly distributed on the 4 x 4, is really quirky and present.

Ryman: Humor, for me, is like a way of embracing that monumental quality without being too serious.

Rail: Right. A sense of playfulness; I also notice that the function of the edges seems to be very important to your work. In some occasions, you would paint one of the edges with fluorescent colors, which...

Ryman: I guess the main thing about the edges and the sides is that I *think* about them. In one way or another they are considered. When the sides are painted or accounted for in some way, it makes the piece as a whole seem more like a thing or an independent entity as opposed to a picture of something. Each move you make within a piece, if it has a satisfying effect, becomes like another word in a language or letter in an alphabet. It becomes part of a greater vocabulary.

Rail: Could you talk a bit about the way you apply your colors? There is quite a wide range, from tonal to bright local colors?

Ryman: I don't know how to answer that. Except that they're applied based on the different needs of a particular work. But then there is also an aspect where I start to feel a certain strong affinity for certain colors or combinations for a time, and then it fades and morphs and I fall in love with the next color.

Rail: Even though your work is generally made of unconventional, industrial materials, there is a sense of intimacy that I feel is very generous.

Ryman: Ahhh, well, I'm still trying to sort out what all of that means.