

# DAVID NOLAN **NEW YORK**

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001

Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139

info@davidnolangallery.com

www.davidnolangallery.com

## CFile

### Exhibition | White Magic: Robert Ryman, Rudolf Staffel at David Nolan Gallery New York

By Garth Clark

Sept. 16, 2014

Long ago I predicted that the studio potters of the first post-WW2 generation would begin to make it in the art world. It was a period of remarkable authenticity and invention. A few are living with that acclaim such as John Mason, Michael and Magdalena Frimkess and Ron Nagle, but for others like Rudolf Staffel it arrives posthumously.

Above image: Rudolf Staffel, Light Gatherer, no date, porcelain with copper oxide patina, 5 x 10 inches

Every other month now a vessel maker from this era is arriving at another art gallery. It's no longer an anomaly but a trend. It may be churlish for me to say "I told you so" but why take the risk of making predictions if one cannot gloat over the (rare) times one is correct? Who, one wonders, will be next? Voulkos is long overdue for this treatment.

Credit must go to Helen Drutt Gallery in Philadelphia for nurturing Staffel for most of his career and the current gallery, David Nolan, deserves kudos too for the best photographs I have ever seen, electrifying his art which from day one should have come with a light box. A second show with Hans Hoffman, his teacher and greatest muse, would make a good followup.

Robert Ryman, Untitled, 1962, oil and graphite on unstretched linen canvas 9 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches

Robert Ryman, Untitled, 1962, oil and graphite on unstretched linen canvas 9 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches

And lastly, on a personal note, Rudi was one of the finest and perhaps purest artists I have ever known; gentle, generous, a great conversationalist, free of ego and agendas and unendingly kind despite the inner demons that tormented him for much of his life.



Image: Rudolf Staffel, Light Gatherer, 1980, translucent glazed porcelain, handbuilt, with copper oxide wash, 4 1/2 x 8 in 11.4 x 20.3 cm

The curator's description of the exhibition follows.

Garth Clark is Chief Editor of CFile.



David Nolan Gallery's *White Magic*: Robert Ryman, Rudolf Staffel, (New York, September 10 – October 25, 2014) brings together two masters – painter, Robert Ryman (b. Nashville, Tennessee, 1930) and ceramicist, Rudolf Staffel (b. San Antonio, Texas, 1911-2002) – who, within their respective media (each strictly reduced to a palette almost exclusively of white), achieve highly complex bodies of work that celebrate form and gesture.

Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, 1967, translucent porcelain, hand-built with cobalt blue, 4 1/2 x 8 inches, signed on bottom  
Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, 1967, translucent porcelain, hand-built with cobalt blue, 4 1/2 x 8 inches, signed on bottom

There is little in these artists' lives that directly link them to one another, yet over the course of parallel careers – Staffel working principally in Philadelphia, Ryman in New York City – they became intent on similar ideals and goals, each achieving a supreme

degree of innovation and mastery in their respective practices to remarkably correlative ends. Alongside a group of paintings by Ryman, we will exhibit over 40 ceramic vessels created by Staffel from the 1950s through the early 1990s, making this the first major presentation of Staffel's work in 16 years. This exhibition will provide an opportunity to look at the work of both artists in dialogue, imparting a deeper understanding of each. Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, 1985, unglazed porcelain, hand-built, 8 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches  
Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, 1985, unglazed porcelain, hand-built, 8 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches

One cannot reference porcelain in the history of American ceramic art without taking into account Staffel's contribution as the master of the white medium in its purest artistic form. Unlike the grand machismo gestures of Peter Voulkos, the Pop irreverence of Robert Arneson, or the colorful fantasies of Ken Price, Staffel explored the light-absorbing properties of the medium over six decades of his life and career, manipulating and searching for the nuances in its purity. By the mid-1950s, he had begun the journey that would occupy him for the rest of his life – how to manipulate the essential characteristics of porcelain: plasticity, whiteness, strength and translucency. His *Light Gatherers*, as he called these elegant and often deceptively casual looking vessels, became the culmination: vessels that appear utterly solid when lit from the outside but expose a translucent push/pull dance when lit from above. His sculptures exist on an intimate scale that demands the viewer to approach and contemplate closely. The forms remain organic without directly referencing the natural world, luminescent while denying any sense of preciousness.

Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, ca. 1980, unglazed porcelain, 7 x 5 1/2 inches  
Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, ca. 1980, unglazed porcelain, 7 x 5 1/2 inches

Like Staffel, Ryman's first forays in the mid-1950s employed fields of color and it would take several years before he reduced his vocabulary to an economy of primarily white paint and a square format, punctuated by

further instances of visual information. As in Staffel's ceramics, it was paradoxically and precisely this reduction that enabled Ryman's vast permutations of pictorial complexity. Each brushstroke takes on a heightened importance, as do the formal qualities of a signature or inscription, areas of the support which are chosen to remain bare, the thoughtful and occasional punctuation of color, and the method by which a work is fastened to the wall. Light is also accorded a place of importance: the way in which it glances off the impasto of a brushstroke, is absorbed by a contrasting support, or casts a shadow of the work against the wall. "I am not a picture painter," he has said. "I work with real light and space, and since real light is an important aspect of the paintings it always presents some problems."

Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, no date, translucent porcelain, hand-built over a balloon form, 5 1/2 x 8 inches. All photographs courtesy of the gallery.  
Rudolf Staffel, *Light Gatherer*, no date, translucent porcelain, hand-built over a balloon form, 5 1/2 x 8 inches. All photographs courtesy of the gallery. All photographs by Adam Reich.

Rudolf Staffel's ceramics are included in such international museum collections as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., The Victoria & Albert Museum, London, and the Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, The Hague. He was the subject of two major retrospective exhibitions: in 1990 at the Museum voor Het Kruihuis/Museum for Contemporary Art (now the Stedelijk Museum), 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands, and in 1997 at the Museum of Applied Arts, Helsinki and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Critics and scholars including Arthur Danto, John Perrault, and Janet Koplos have written about his work.

Robert Ryman's work can be found in numerous international museum collections, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Dia Art Foundation, New York, Hallen für Neue Kunst, Schaffhausen, and the Tate Gallery, London. He was recently the subject of the major critical monograph *Robert Ryman: Critical Text Since 1967*, edited by Vittorio Colaizzi and Karsten Schubert and with texts by Yve-Alain Bois, Donald Kuspit, Lucy Lippard and others.

Meredith Harper is the curator of this exhibition.

