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White Magic: Robert Ryman, Rudolf Staffel

Curated by Meredith Harper

September 10 - October 25, 2014

David Nolan Gallery is pleased to present *White Magic: Robert Ryman, Rudolf Staffel*, on view from September 11 through October 25. The exhibition 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. 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.

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 irreverences 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.

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."¹

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 Kruithuis/Museum for Contemporary Art (now the Stedelijk Museum), 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands, and in 1997 at the

¹ (exh. cat., *Robert Ryman: Large-small, thick-thin, light reflecting, light absorbing*, PaceWildenstein, New York, 2010)

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. His first retrospective was organized by the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1974, and in 1992 a major retrospective travelled to The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Tate Gallery, London, Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. 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.

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