

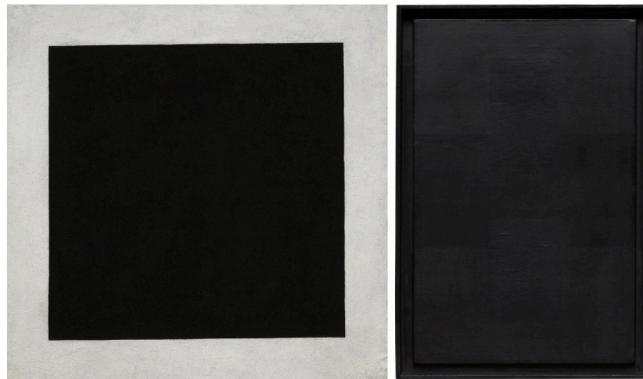
ART SY

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Art

What Makes a Monochrome Painting Good

• By Alina Cohen Mar 5, 2018 1:01 pm [f](#) [t](#) [e](#)



Kasimir Severinovich Malevich *Black Square*, 1923
Russian State Museum, St.
Petersburg, Russia

Ad Reinhardt *Abstract Painting*, 1955
Phillips

It's easy for museumgoers to make fun of monochrome paintings, since they offer the quintessential response to modern and contemporary art: "Couldn't *anyone* do that?" To some viewers, the works simply require one paint can and lots of brushstrokes. Artist Richard Prince turned the genre into an actual joke when, in the late 1980s and early '90s, he silkscreened humorous text against single-hued backdrops. The artist's "Monochromatic Jokes" made monochromatic paintings truly readable to any literate viewer.

In this vein, the value of monochrome paintings often lies more in the ideas they suggest than in their manifestation of an artist's technical skill. According to Leah Dickerman, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, a monochrome painting is "only as good as the question it asks." She helped curate a 1998 exhibition of work by Aleksandr Rodchenko, who made the first non-figurative monochromes in 1921: *Pure Red Color*; *Pure Blue Color*; and *Pure Yellow Color*. By painting solid blocks of primary colors, he reduced painting to its most essential element: a single, pure paint hue. Rodchenko, says Dickerman, was asking, "In what ways can we understand a painting as just making a thing like any other?" And the monochrome makes that question, and the material of making a painting, very visible." If these concepts may seem academic or erudite, Rodchenko intended just the opposite. He sought to demystify painting, suggesting it was as basic and mundane as any other act of creation.

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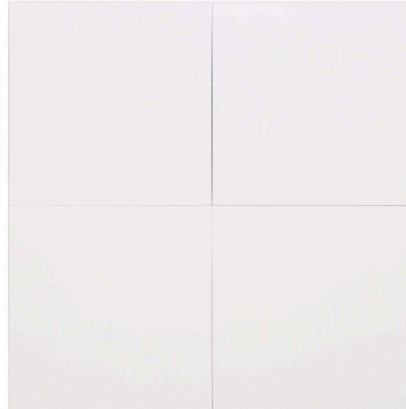
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Robert Ryman *Untitled*, 1958
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
(SFMOMA)



Robert Rauschenberg *White Painting (four panels)*, 1951
Robert Rauschenberg
Foundation

Rodchenko found inspiration in the work of Russian artist Kazimir Malevich, who introduced his *Black Square* painting in 1915. (100 years later, researchers discovered that underneath the composition, Malevich scrawled a reference to a 1882 work by Paul Bilhaud, the first-ever documented monochrome: “Battle of negroes in a dark cave.” This incited controversy over Malevich’s similarly racist starting point.) *Black Square* isn’t technically a monochrome, as it depicts a specific figure—a black shape—on a white background. Yet it still suggests the potency present in a simple block of color, relying on the black/white contrast to raise questions about presence, absence, signs, and symbols.

In the mid-20th century, artist Ad Reinhardt eliminated all traces of representation in the all-black monochrome paintings he made beginning around 1953 until his death in 1967. Obsessed with precision and paint viscosity, the artist laid down even, black surfaces and attempted to remove hints of his own creative gestures. The final products, five-by-five-foot canvases, leave the viewer gazing into a dark void while (Reinhardt hoped) questioning their own existence. He once summed up the power of abstractions in a cartoon. A gallery viewer mocks a painting on the wall: “Ha ha what does that represent?” The canvas, coming to life, angrily answers, “What do you represent?”

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These notions of paring down art and making it more about ideas than aesthetic presentations had a major impact on the Minimalist and Conceptual Art of future generations. Not one to underplay his achievements, Reinhardt called the series the last paintings that anyone could make. He felt he'd pushed the medium to its logical conclusion. Notably, Rodchenko before him had assumed a similar sentiment. The history of monochromes, in general, is full of (predominantly male) characters who liked to undermine other artists' achievements and believed they got painting's last laugh.



Robert Rauschenberg *Untitled [glossy black four-panel painting], ca. 1951*
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Shortly after Reinhardt embarked on his black paintings, artist Robert Ryman narrowed his own palette to white. In 1955, he exhibited what he considered his first professional work, asserting his interest in employing a single hue with the aptly-titled *Orange Painting*. Ryman eventually shifted to using white toward the end of the decade, drawn to the color's complex interactions with frames, walls, surfaces, and light itself. His "whites," which seem infused with other tones the more you look, invite long and meditative gazes. Both Ryman and Reinhardt opted to paint on square canvases. They were neutral shapes, unlike a rectangle, which could more easily conjure other associations: a portrait, landscape, door, or window.

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Ryman's diverse materials—Chemex filters, glassine—made his works as much about the paint as what lies underneath it (and how the two interact). “Ryman would never consider himself a monochromatic painter,” says Pace Gallery president Susan Dunne, who organized its current “Robert Ryman: Drawings” show. “He paints light. Even things that appear white have different colors of white. He’s using colors of canvas, the stretcher, everything.”

If Ryman and Reinhardt became associated with white and black monochromatic paintings, respectively, they shared an unlikely predecessor: Robert Rauschenberg. Perhaps best known for busy silkscreens and an assemblage that featured a stuffed goat inside a tire (*Monogram*, 1955–59), the artist experimented with simpler forms earlier in his career. Rejecting the Abstract Expressionists' bold, individualist gestures, Rauschenberg filled black paintings with crumpled newspaper—cheap, everyday material. In his white paintings, he defied rules of authorship by allowing his friends and lovers (including Cy Twombly) to generate, remake, and repaint some of them. Notably, these works helped spur musician John Cage to create his own, auditory version of the monochrome: *4'33"* (1952), which consists only of silence. Here, according to Dickerman, the lack of composition refocuses attention on music's primary element: time itself.



Chung Sang-Hwa
Untitled 84-3-1, 1984
Phillips



Park Seo-Bo
Ecriture (描法) No.47-81, 1981
Wellside Gallery

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At the same time that Rauschenberg, Ryman, and Reinhardt were experimenting with monochromes, interest in the form was blossoming in Korea. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the Korean movement Dansaekhwa (which translates to “monochrome painting”) created art centered on its basic, material elements. Park Seo-Bo created his “Ecriture” series by drawing in delicate lines atop wet white paint, then repainting and rescoring. A sense of rhythm and texture result.

Chung Sang-Hwa’s white monochromes utilize a similarly repetitive process. He coats his canvases with glue, water, and kaolin clay, then strips off the material. He fills in bare segments with acrylic paint, then repeats the process. If the paintings at first seem like simple monochromes, they belie an intensive process of creation that becomes apparent the longer the viewer looks. Dansaekhwa works have become more prominent in New York galleries and American scholarship within the last ten years, yet their long absence from Western art history discourse is a reminder that monochromatic painting, and abstraction at large, hardly developed in a Eurocentric vacuum.

“Monochromes are often test cases, pushing the limits of painting as it has been understood in different moments and places,” says Dickerman. Reinhardt sought the ultimate negation in painting, rejecting color, gesture, and composition. Ryman, alternately, pushed viewers to consider the infinite mutations of a single color (perhaps more accurately, the hue that’s supposedly the absence of color) for as long as possible.

“So to be good,” Dickerman continues, a monochrome “should make us see something about painting that we hadn’t seen before, defining its essence in a new way. It also means in some fundamental way that monochromes don’t stand in isolation, but in relation to the field of painting at large.”

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Ellen Gallagher *O.K. Corral, 2008*
Gagosian

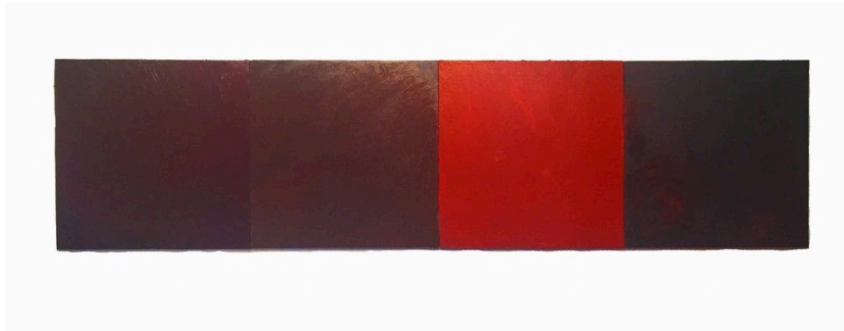


Jessica Dickinson *Of/How, 2013*
Altman Siegel

This may account, as well, for why many artists don't like to consider themselves "monochromatic painters"—they see themselves engaging with a larger conversation that extends far beyond a single color.

Contemporary artist Jessica Dickinson similarly rejects the label. "I'm an artist that makes paintings that end up to be monochromes at times," she says. Like Ryman, however, she's interested in the "speed" of the monochrome, or the way the viewer's perception shifts the longer she looks at the painting. Dickinson works slowly, taking several months (sometimes over a year) to finish a single panel. She builds up limestone polymer, then gradually layers oil paint on top. As she works, she gouges or etches into the surface, lending her paintings a sense of distress and decay—another marker of time. "I put my paintings through different stages and events," she describes. "Color is a result of all the events it goes through."

Increasingly, young artists and curators are using monochromes to explore "color" in a more figurative sense, addressing issues of identity. In 2016, curator Adrienne Edwards mounted an exhibition called "Blackness in Abstraction" at Pace Gallery, which used black monochromes to underscore the hue's conceptual and formal possibilities. Wangechi Mutu employed black paper splatters on a wall, while Ellen Gallagher specifically referenced Malevich's work in her own painting.



Alteronce Gumby *I'm Not Red I'm OJ, 2017*
Long Gallery Harlem

Elsewhere in New York City, artist Alteronce Gumby hopes to “redefine color as shade,” as he describes it to *Artsy*. He paints heavily layered monochromes with his hands, and mixes his own black paints by combining various shades together. “All of that adds to the experience of how we build our identities or our personalities,” he says. *Wakanda* (2017), for example, references the fictional African nation now trending on Twitter thanks to *Black Panther* (it’s the movie’s predominant setting). Upon first glance, the painting is an all-black monochrome. Look closer, and pinks, blues, and greens begin to appear.

Gumby’s work suggests that monochromatic painting will continue to evolve as artists grapple with ever-changing aesthetic, social, and autobiographical issues. “I think what makes a monochrome painting good is what makes any painting good,” he says. “Does it change the way I see the world around me?” ●

Alina Cohen