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Why Pay \$15 Million for a White Canvas?

A canvas by Robert Ryman fetched \$15 million at auction this week, creating a milestone in the history of white-on-white painting.

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by
Leonid Bershidsky

It is what you see.

Photographer: Linda Nylind/Hayward Gallery via Bloomberg

In a record month for New York art auctions, one standout was an all-white work that sold for \$15 million. Even if one lacks a href="http://www.amazon.com/The-Painted-Word-Tom-Wolfe/dp/0312427581" data-ata-web-url="http://www.amazon.com/The-Painted-Word-Tom-Wolfe/dp/0312427581" target="_blank" rel="nofollow noopener" style="color: #0000ff; max-width: 100%;">Tom Wolfe's courage to doubt the value of contemporary art, the multi-million-dollar price tag for some white paint on a canvas cannot but raise existential questions.

White paintings are something of a philosophical tradition. Kazimir Malevich started it in 1918 with "Suprematist Composition: White on White":

Source: The Museum of Modern Art

Here's what he had to say about it in the catalog for the Moscow exhibition where the cool white square on a warmer white background was first shown:

I have overcome the lining of the colored sky, torn it down and into the bag thus formed, put colour, tying it up with a knot. Swim in the white free abyss, infinity is before you.

American artist Robert Rauschenberg created five "White Paintings" in 1951. He went further than Malevich in his rejection of substance, simply rolling white house paint onto smooth surfaces.

Source: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Composer John Cage, author of the famous piece of silence known as 4'33", described the paintings as landing strips for invisible motes and shadows. Rauschenberg called them locks:

If one were sensitive enough that you could read it, that you would know how many people were in the room, what time it was, and what the weather was like outside.

Many artists have tried to follow convincingly in Malevich's and Rauschenberg's footsteps, with little success. Muscovite Vladimir Weisberg devoted much of his working life to painting ethereal, mostly geometric shapes in shades of white on white backgrounds. He explained:

Color exists but it constrains me. It's better when feelings, consciousness, an understanding of truth have a claim on me, I am not afraid to liberate myself from color.

Weisberg's work was too strange for the Soviet Union's tame official art scene, and his first big exhibition took place three years after he died, in 1988. One white-on-white painting, with just a hint of shyly glimmering shapes, sold for \$139,280 at Sotheby's in London in 2006. A stitched-together white canvas by Australian-born Lawrence Carroll was valued at between \$23,200 and \$32,200 at a Sotheby's auction in Milan. It failed to sell.

So what is so special about the 1961 work by American conceptualist Robert Ryman that fetched \$15 million in New York this week? Or the nearly identical one below, also by Ryman, which sold for \$5.2 million yesterday?

Source: Phillips via Bloomberg

It's white in a slightly different way than his predecessors' work, or his own previous oeuvre (he painted his first white canvases in the 1950s), but it's still, well, white. Ryman's explanation of his fondness for the purest of all colors echoes Rauschenberg's:

White has a tendency to make things visible. With white, you can see more of a nuance; you can see more. I've said before that, if you spill coffee on a white shirt, you can see the coffee very clearly. If you spill it on a dark shirt, you don't see it as well.

The most probable reason for the price lies outside the realm of art, even defined broadly as a symbiosis of painting and explanation. Alexander Rotter, co-head of the contemporary art department at auction house Sotheby's, simply decided that Ryman needed a push. "I thought there was really something to be done with the market, that's why it's been priced so high," the New York observer quoted him as saying of the untitled painting. "The public needs a great piece to elevate the market and give it an indication of where it could go. The sky is the limit for this painting."

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If one wanted to be poetic about this piece of marketing wisdom, one could say Rotter is talking of the same sky whose lining Malevich claimed to have overcome. I'm more inclined to call it cynical. In the end, the value of art is in the emotions it conveys, its power of holding one's eye and occupying one's thoughts. A white canvas may have had the requisite powers in 1918 or even in 1951, because it made a radical statement. In 2014, it's meaningless. The business decision behind the insane price is the only true piece of art in the case of Ryman's works.

Even in the highly unlikely event that certain art lovers are moved by the spectacle of unadulterated whiteness, there's no need to pay millions of dollars for the pleasure. They can simply follow Rauschenberg's advice: "Want one? Paint one."

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