

## Los Angeles Times

### One artist is from Italy, the other from New York; what happens when worlds collide?

by David Pagel

Inspired curatorial efforts are rare these days, so even the idea of pairing still lifes by Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964) with nearly monochrome abstractions by Robert Ryman (b. 1930) excites the imagination.

At Kohn Gallery, the juxtaposition of seven small oils on canvas and one pencil drawing by the Italian (made between 1920 and 1958) and eight small oils on canvas, linen, plastic, cardboard, aluminum and thin cotton fabric by the New Yorker (from 1961 to 2002) surprises in surprising ways.

First of all, sparks do not fly between Morandi's little pictures of bottles and boxes nestled together on tabletops and Ryman's loose clusters of individual brushstrokes, some nice and tidy, others swarming like bees. No revelations are to be had. Instead, each of the 16 works invites you into its own world, which is so sensitively rendered and full of subtle shifts in tone and atmosphere that you forget about its neighbors, not to mention the rest of the world.

A palpable silence descends, quieting distractions and making it easy to focus on details and to concentrate on idiosyncrasies. The quiet reminds me of libraries or off-the-beaten-track museums, where time seems suspended and you're not forced to rush — or even come to conclusions.

Morandi's still lifes are ghostly, as if seen through the haze or perched on the brink of disappearing. The solidity of real things is missing from his images of ordinary objects, whose quivering contours and diaphanous surfaces make you uncertain of what you are looking at. The perspective is distant, not up-close like most still lifes, but from across the room. It is as if an unbridgeable gulf has sprung up between your body and its surroundings. You cannot reach out and touch anything.

In contrast, Ryman's intimate abstractions are all about touch. Each treats every brushstroke as an experiment, a trial-and-error exploration of painting's most basic materials: pigments suspended in viscous liquids, flat surfaces over which they are spread and the brushes by which they are applied. The only constant is the curiosity that drives every gesture.

Ryman's love of paint's materiality is infectious. Morandi's fascination with elusiveness likewise transforms his works into acutely observed instances of life's mysteries. It takes time to get into each artist's world. But it's worth it. The exhibition is not to be missed.

