Conservation notes relating to Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Painting* [three panel] (1951), 2012

**Artist:** Robert Rauschenberg  
**Title:** *White Painting* [three panel]  
**Creation Date:** 1951  
**Media:** latex paint on canvas  
**Dimensions:** 72 in. x 108 in. (182.88 cm x 274.32 cm)  
**Accession No.:** 98.308.A-C  
**Temp ID:** PS98.445.1-3

### The 1998 Treatment of *White Painting* [three panel]

Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Painting* [three panel] (1951) was acquired by SFMOMA in 1998. The terms of its acquisition stipulated that the painting be loaned to an exhibition of Rauschenberg’s works that was to be shown in Cologne and Bilbao before SFMOMA took possession of the work. While on exhibition in Cologne, *White Painting* [three panel] was damaged. A horizontal scuff, probably created when a hand or a visitor’s purse came in contact with the painting’s surface, disfigured one of the three panels in the central lower quadrant. The disfiguring scuff on the pristine white surface of the painting rendered the painting unacceptable for exhibition.

SFMOMA, as owner of the artwork, was notified of the damage and approved the repainting treatment that was proposed by the Rauschenberg studio. Rauschenberg and his assistant Darryl Pottorf traveled to Bilbao to repaint the artwork before its presentation at the exhibition in Bilbao. Pottorf carried out the repainting process under Rauschenberg’s supervision.

After treatment, *White Painting* [three panel] was examined in Bilbao by a member of the SFMOMA staff, who noted that the painting had been satisfactorily restored to its pristine condition, as mandated by the artist. No trace of the scuff could be observed.

### Construction

The three panels of this *White Painting* are identical in their construction. A medium-weight, plain-weave cotton canvas support is stretched over a wooden non-expandable strainer, which has mitered joins and wooden corner braces. There is one horizontal crossbar on each strainer. A thumbprint applied in red ink is observed on the upper left corner of each strainer, under the edge of the canvas, and is presumed to be that of the artist. A red thumbprint is also observed on the
other four works in the artist’s series of *White Paintings*. The fabric support is secured on the reverse tacking margin, not the side tacking edge, with staples.

An inscription in black felt marking pen is applied to the exposed raw fabric on the top reverse tacking margin of each panel: “Rauschenberg White Painting 1951 one of 3 [roman numeral] I,” etc. The black marker appears to have faded slightly. The inscription may have been added some time after the current version of *White Painting* [three panel] was created, as it is consistent with the inscriptions on the top reverse edges of the other *White Paintings*. It appears that the artist may have lined up all of the *White Paintings* and signed them in one session.

The fabric support does not appear to have been sized with a layer of glue, nor was a gesso ground layer applied to the support prior to the application of the paint layer. There is no varnish layer.

Commercial white latex house paint is applied evenly to the picture plane and on the tacking margins of each panel. Although the paint may have originally been applied with a roller, the surface of this work indicates that the most recent paint application, in the Bilbao repainting, was carried out with a brush. Pottorf also confirmed using a brush. The brushstrokes are somewhat random, with a fine texture that is only visible upon close inspection of the surface with the aid of a strong raking light source illuminating the painting at a sharp angle. The brush employed in Bilbao was probably between two and three inches wide. The visual effect of the paint application is one of an extremely uniform, flat, pristine white surface. The paint does not extend to cover the raw canvas on the reverse.

The paint used for the repainting of *White Painting* [three panel] in Bilbao is assumed to be that which the artist stipulated be used for repainting any of the *White Paintings*: Benjamin Moore Regal Wall Satin, Super White (215 02), which the manufacturer has renamed Regal Classic Flat Finish, Super White (N21502). According to the Benjamin Moore website, the composition of this paint is identical to that of the paint originally specified.

Because of their consistent surfaces, it is assumed that each of the three panels in *White Painting* was repainted in Bilbao, not just the damaged panel.

**Background and Supporting Research**

Rauschenberg always wished the *White Painting* works to be pristine. Due to the fragility of their white surfaces, the works would easily become damaged or soiled unless handled with extreme care. Repainting and refabrication of the *White Paintings* over the years was authorized by the artist and was carried out by his studio or other entities. Refabrications are known to have taken place in order to replace works in the series that Rauschenberg had painted over, turning them into new works.
The Rauschenberg studio’s repainting instructions call for a regular paint roller to be used when repainting the surfaces of the *White Paintings*, but, as noted above, the repainting of *White Painting* [three panel] undertaken in Bilbao was carried out with a brush instead of a roller. Interviews with several studio assistants who worked with Rauschenberg in the 1960s and 1970s, including Brice Marden and David Prentice, indicate that the paintings were refabricated on new stretchers and/or repainted with either a roller or a brush. In the 1970s, when Prentice was repainting one of the *White Paintings*, Rauschenberg advised him to add more paint and create a thicker, more built-up, less porous skin on the painting. The artist also instructed Prentice to brush the paint on randomly, and to make the painting look how it did when it was first shown. Brice Marden also used a brush in the repainting process. Most recently, Rauschenberg studio assistant Lawrence Voytek reconstructed one of the multi-panel *White Paintings* for an exhibition and used a brush to apply the paint.

In the SFMOMA conservation studio, mock-ups of *White Painting* [three panel] were constructed on two separate canvases with Benjamin Moore Regal Classic Flat Finish Super White paint. The paint application was carried out using paint rollers with two different naps (medium and longer length nap). The paint was also applied in areas of the canvas with a 1 1/2-inch bristle brush. The mock-ups enabled the SFMOMA staff to study paint application techniques that the Rauschenberg studio used to create the *White Paintings* and to compare mock-up paint surfaces to that of *White Painting* [three panel].

Based on this study and the research and observations described above, it is probable that the surface of *White Painting* [three panel] was originally applied with a roller, and subsequent repainting may have been carried out with a roller, a brush, or a combination of both. This is consistent with other works in the *White Paintings* series, which have been observed to have multiple paint applications, with surfaces exhibiting the textures of rollers, brushes, or a combination.

**Installation and Storage**

*White Painting*’s three panels are installed separately on the gallery wall on D-ring hanging hardware located on the upper set of the four Oz-clips attached to the vertical edges of each panel. Each panel is positioned so that the vertical edges are in contact with the adjacent panel. Normally the panels are installed in the proper left to right sequence, from panel I to panel III. In recent installations, it has sometimes been necessary to change the order of the panel installation to ensure that the alignment of the panels is as seamless as possible. In some installations, there have been gaps between the panels, caused by the slight torque of the works on their strainers that has occurred over time, or by unevenness of the wall. The SFMOMA installation crew typically undertakes whatever measures are necessary to install the panels so that they are flush with one another.
When not on exhibition, each panel of *White Painting* [three panel] is stored in a travel frame in its own crate. This storage system minimizes the handling of the panels by their edges and protects their fragile surfaces.

**Condition**

*White Painting* [three panel] is currently in very good condition. Although the surface has yellowed very slightly since it was repainted in 1998 in Bilbao, it still appears to be pristine white when installed for exhibition. The lower right edge of panel number three was scuffed several years ago when on exhibit at SFMOMA. The disfiguration of the light scuff was reduced by means of local treatment, although a trace of the scuff can be observed on the painting’s surface when the work is examined in critical light. An overall repainting treatment of the surface of *White Painting* [three panel] will be considered in the future when and if the condition of the work changes to the degree that the painting no longer represents the original intent of the artist.

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