

Haiku Reviews: Ralph Humphrey

Ralph Humphrey was a masterly painter at a time when painting was being summarily dismissed or challenged to do things it hadn't yet done. Respectful of painting's history but confident in paint's flexibility, Humphrey rose to the challenge, but was too smart — and too dedicated to painting — simply to take the bait. He could think about paintings as objects, but he knew their objecthood finally depended on their paint-hood, not the other way around. As this survey of work from the '70s and early

'80s attests, Humphrey valued paint not for what it is but for what it can do, as a way of securing color, building texture, and describing images — although, interestingly, many of the “images” described in these very curious painting-objects are fashioned in low relief out of modeling paste. And the paint Humphrey employed wasn't oil or acrylic, but casein — an ancient medium relegated since the introduction of oil medium to “minor” status. In one fell swoop (a swoop coursing well beyond the '70s, but coming to its apogee in the work here) Humphrey resuscitated an old painting method, shaped the picture plane and thus put it at the service of the picture (rather than the other way around), and obscured the boundary between pure and referential form by collapsing abstraction and image into a quasi-Pop stylization (notably in the window series of 1981–83). Interestingly, though, the show begins and ends with its most austere, frontal, and iconic works, painted — or “built,” as all Humphrey's works were in part — on canvases with rounded corners (a cellphone icon *avant la lettre*). Struggling to affirm the act of making paintings in the wake of minimalism, Humphrey's art, slyly taunting the obdurate grimness of his elders, brims with gimmickry; but few artists have conjured and then harnessed and integrated such quirks and jokes with greater visual and intellectual assuredness. (Garth Greenan, 529 West 20th St., New York; thru Oct. 20. www.garthgreenan.com)

— *Peter Frank*



Christmas Story, 1979–80. Casein and modeling paste on wood, 42 x 84 x 7 inches