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Ralph Humphrey

GARTH GREENAN GALLERY

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If you've never stood in front of a painting by Ralph Humphrey (1932–1990), you can have very little idea of what his work is really about. Photographs, even the best of them, fail to convey the work's dense materiality, which derives from amplified surface textures, a quasi-pointillist method of layering color, and thick, sculptural supports. All of these were compellingly on display in a recent show at Garth Greenan, the first Humphrey exhibition in New York for 14 years.

Restricted to works made between 1973 and 1984, this exhibition by necessity focused on the so-called Constructed Paintings, in which Humphrey covered wood and (sometimes) canvas armatures with thick layers of modeling paste and casein paint. In the mid-1970s Humphrey's palette was often subdued, especially compared to the festive hues of his 1980s paintings. A narrow range of charcoals dominates a gritty untitled 1975 polygonal painting whose tightly packed slabs suggest a rustic wooden gate. The Wedge Paintings (a subcategory of Constructed Paintings, resembling oversize vertical mailboxes) also tend toward monochrome but sometimes with intense luminosity. In his perceptive catalogue essay for this show, painter Stephen Westfall recalls the impact the Wedge Paintings had on him in 1976: he found them "radical in the way they conflated an aggressive physicality with their resurgent lyricism. They didn't seem to be pictorial wholes so much as bitten-off chunks of architecture in the scale of human bodies."

Around 1980, Humphrey embraced patterning and recognizable imagery, while also intensifying the chromatic and planar aspects of his paintings. *Christmas Story* (1979–80) takes a rather plain compositional structure (a central grid surrounded by rows of protruding nodules) and makes it into something marvelous by micro-managed (but never mechanical) color choices and maniacal paint application. Even the sides of this 7-inch-deep picture, where encrusted squares emerge from a de Kooning-esque ground, are treated with as much attention as the front. In *Desert* (1984), a more subdued composition that testifies to Humphrey's rich dialogue with Rothko, the artist uses thin slats of wood to subdivide the violet-hued work into windowlike rectangles. Because the slats vary in thickness and are layered in different sequences, the "picture plane" of *Desert* is in fact at least 10 different planes, each a fraction of an inch farther from or closer to the viewer.

The effect is crucial though its means are easy to miss. Humphrey never telegraphs his innovations, another of which, in an untitled 1973 work, is to "draw" lines with the tiny shadows created by impasto. In the early 1980s, Humphrey, who believed in the power of clichés, made the window reference explicit. This show included several great Window Paintings, as well as some highly finished studies. At once cartoony and symbolist, the Window Paintings remind us of Humphrey's debt to the granular atmospherics of Bonnard and Vuillard; they also follow a motto the artist inscribed in one of his notebooks: "The work should create its own light."