

Ralph Humphrey

GARY SNYDER GALLERY SEPTEMBER 13–OCTOBER 27, 2012

BY SUSAN HARRIS NOVEMBER 6, 2012

“I think there is a great deal of longing in American art. Painting has a pathos and a profundity—a faith.”

(Ralph Humphrey, *BOMB* interview with Betsy Sussler, Winter 1985).

Ralph Humphrey’s exhibition at Gary Snyder Gallery illustrated his unique contribution to American abstract painting. In contrast to the metaphysical aspirations of the Abstract Expressionist painters whom he admired when he arrived in New York in the late 1950s, Humphrey’s territory was secular and nonspiritual. His own work was characterized by emotionality and raw materiality, qualities that he himself regarded as quintessentially American—if not the same kind of American as his famously tragic predecessors. The paint’s physicality and the substantial, protruding dimensionality of the pieces were, at once, obdurately real and emotionally expressive. Vibrating with hues, textures, and emotions, Humphrey’s paintings demonstrated a consistent commitment to color, space, and structure—elements he used to move abstraction beyond formal considerations to that of the human experience.

This exhibition, the first solo one of Humphrey’s work in a New York gallery since 1998, focused on the artist’s work from 1973–1984. The main gallery featured 15 physically imposing paintings constructed with wood armatures and built out with heavily encrusted surfaces of casein and modeling paste. With an idiosyncratic palette that ranged from the somber blacks, blues, and browns of the monochromes in the early ’70s to the exuberant pinks, blues, and reds of the cartoony windows in the early ’80s, Humphrey’s ponderous paintings literally and figuratively inserted themselves into the viewer’s space.

Humphrey’s interest in the actual space of a room guided his practice. He began considering paintings as objects in 1972–73. Beveled stretchers and rounded corners gave way to deeper, box-like structures with surfaces built up with densely textured paint. “Untitled” (1975), a 6 inch thick, black monochrome work whose surface flickered with notes of blues and greens embedded in the crevices of the paint, had strips of painted canvas collaged onto and pulling away from the surface and towards the viewer. “Untitled” (1975–76), an achingly tender work was an even deeper box whose gloppy, Monet- and Bonnard-inspired, purple surface bubbled, dripped, folded and peeled—again, into the viewer’s immediate space.

In paintings of the late ’70s, such as “Flamingo” (1979) and “Christmas Story” (1979–80), Humphrey activated the surface further by floating squares and circles in and around grids suggestive of windows, a rich metaphor for observing the world. “Thin Edge” (1981) was the most outrageously literal of all of the paintings. The depicted curtains pushed into the viewer’s space, creating an extraordinary powerful and thought-provoking balance between illusionistic and actual space. His repeated use of a common architectural feature and whimsical arrangements of cartoon-like elements within the larger language of abstraction asserted the humanity of his endeavor. The bright, almost ebullient palette and quirky dispositions of constructed and painted relief elements also reinforced the sense of the freedom and trust he clearly came to feel in his own vision. Humphrey said in a 1982 *Artforum* interview, “I became an artist to get free. For me my identity is my style and my style is the personality of the painting, the emotion of the object. It’s how I declare myself...”

In contrast to the saturated colors and cheerfulness of the works from the late ’70s and early ’80s, the paintings in the show from the mid ’80s were considerably less volumetric and more sober in color and design. “Mountain” (1983–84), “Forest” (1984), and “Desert” (1984) maintained Modernist grid-like configurations with rectilinear elements in relief but were moody, spare and even ominous. The muted mauves, blues, and pinks of “Desert,” for example, seemed to depict a window in a dimly lit place. It was unclear whether one was looking out from the inside or in from outside and there were no floating or cartoon-like elements to break the severity of the strongly horizontal composition. The depth of the painting was a relatively shallow 2 inches, which, in combination with the reduced relief elements and subdued palette, maintained a quieter formal and psychological presence.

Throughout the exhibition, Humphrey’s formal, aesthetic investigations were unmistakably at the service of his emotions. His consistent employment of volume, structure, color, image, and space resulted in an uncanny intimacy that was uncharacteristic of much of the art that was being made at the time. It is telling that he spoke of his impulse to actively push people into looking as a kind of performance art where he, the artist, was the art and the painting was the experience through which he was trying to get something to actually happen. The vitality and raw intensity inherent in Humphrey’s art was a distinct manifestation of his unique worldview even as it remained unequivocally American.