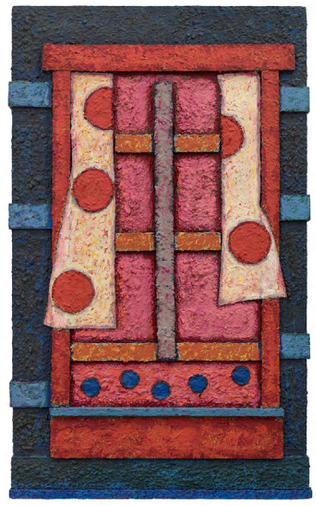
ARTFORUM
REVIEWS

Ralph Humphrey

GARY SNYDER GALLERY



Thin Edge, 1981, casein and modeling paste on wood, 60 x 36 x 4".

Because Ralph Humphrey is saddled anew with the unfortunate appellation "'70s painter" each time his work is rediscovered—as happens seemingly once a decade—the results of these excavations have typically been equivocal. Artists such as Elizabeth Murray, by contrast, have broken free of the faint praise built into that suspect moniker.

Humphrey entered the lists as the elusive obsession of Klaus Kertess (as he tells us in a Candide-like catalogue memoir) when the latter turned away from art history at Yale University to found the Bykert Gallery. The catalogue text by the fine painter/critic Stephen Westfall details Humphrey's technical evolution from the wood-supported, curveshouldered, shieldlike, tonal symmetries of the '70s through his more cobbled and quirky neo-Impressionist, densely chromatic compositions of the following decade. Throughout these stages of his career, Humphrey would typically apply a ground of modeling paste first, a layer that was then painted over with rapidly drying casein. Thus, Humphrey's friable surfaces resulted less from the built-up residue derived from a natural hand than from a coverage that duplicated the surface of an initially palpated ground; counterintuitive, perhaps, but it worked. Nineteen seventy-three was a banner year, as *Untitled*, a standout in this exhibition of sixteen works, amply demonstrates.

Humphrey's reductivist blazons—frontal, symmetrical, and of recherché, toned-down color—inevitably were compared unenthusiastically to the waxen sheens of contemporaneous work by Brice Marden (who also showed at Bykert). Similarities of Humphrey's work to that of other peers (say, the crusted surfaces of Gary Stephan's painting) added to his overshadowing. And there was always the matter of his dutiful relationship to the AbEx patriarchs—Barnett Newman and, with especial rigor, the Pentateuchal Mark Rothko, before whom Humphrey was virtually immobilized.

In a startling paragraph (published with the approval of the painter's family), Westfall astutely observes with regard to Humphrey's deeply closeted homosexuality—he was married, among other attendant stresses—that his gayness "would heighten [his] own sense of interiority as a place of both resistance and refuge." For Westfall, this is a way of adducing content in the artist's fine abstractions of the 1970s.

Though this aspect of the painter's affective life was quietly known to the small painterly art world of the day, the fugal episodes that characteristically accompanied being "in the life" go unrecorded in Humphrey's revelatory notebooks (which I was privileged to examine through the good offices of the Gary Snyder Gallery). Instead, these pages record existential aphorisms emphatically indicative of Humphrey's subservience to the unyielding parental model. Written, as was typical, in his identity-concealing, un-signature-like, jokey balloon letters (which oddly recall the diagrams of gametes and chromosomes fom high school biology class), one page from 1976 runs:

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Object—
red alone
I am an object
the color of the paint is red.
the red paint exists
as an object
the red object
on the white wall (object)

yellow could be tragic
—rothko

Westfall also notes that, in addition to Humphrey's evolution toward full Divisionist chromatics and touch, there is a concomitant affection for the nabis—particularly Bonnard and Vuillard. Humphrey's nabiesque hues also recall the speckled surfaces of recent painted ceramic sculpture by the late Ken Price—a happenstance West Coast affiliation noted in a droll essay by the LA critic and educator David Pagel, who takes account of eccentric developments on that coast that quasiparallel Humphrey's achievements of the 1980s. Humphrey's by then daffy fusion of stippled, painted surfaces with an offbeat Pop taste was seen as irredeemably parochial in chauvinist New York. *Thin Edge* 1981, for example, seemingly hangs curtains with dots as big as hockey pucks in the window of a Little Lulu house. This guileless intermingling long worked against a consensus advancement of Humphrey's work. Today, we are past assigning demerits to visual solecisms; indeed, a delight in such idiosyncratic conflations now acts as warranty for Humphrey's real shot at posthumous fame. At the time of his death, in 1990, Humphrey was only fifty-eight.

—Robert Pincus-Witten