

ART IN REVIEW

Ralph Humphrey

By ROBERTA SMITH

*Garth Greenan Gallery
529 West 20th Street, Chelsea*

Through Oct. 20

It's too bad that New York museums don't devote more space to artists not sanctioned by the market or the academy; the art of the New York painter Ralph Humphrey (1932–90) could yield an excellent retrospective.

In the meantime, the first solo show of his work in New York in 14 years is a welcome sight. It reintroduces a painter who grew out of Abstract Expressionism (especially the hovering color clouds of Mark Rothko), pointed toward Minimalism and resolutely went his own way. His forte lay in giving equal emphasis to the physical facts and to the retinal power of painting in ways at once satirical and implicitly elegiac, always with a skeptical awareness of formalism and the modernist attachment to monochrome.

Spanning 1973 to 1984, the works on view show Humphrey, whose first solo show was at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1959, emphatically hitting his stride. His penchant for lush, smoky colors complicated by bumpy surfaces that suggest stucco or moss and applied to shaped surfaces was in place and ready for development. A 1973 untitled work in two shades of milky brown is composed of rectangles within rectangles, its grave mood undercut by rounded corners that lend a cartoonish air.

By the late '70s, canvas often gave way to boxy plywood structures, encrusted with dark, purplish monochromes flecked with brighter underlying shades. By the end of the decade, vaguely representational checks and grids had arrived, and oranges, pinks, reds and yellows had joined the palette, as in the cheerfully sardonic "Christmas Story," which incorporates added blocks of wood to bulk up the images.

In the final works on view, the gridded and rectangular motifs have coalesced into open windows, with gentle, flapping polka-dot curtains and patterned wallpaper. Echoing painting's four-corneredness, they evoke lonely, quietly hallucinatory night visions.