

HYPERALLERGIC

What Happens When Painting Is No Longer A Gateway?

by John Yau September 30, 2012



Installation view, "Ralph Humphrey" (2012) (all images courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery)

If anyone wants an indication of the ever-widening chasm between the art world and the museums, look no further than the career of Ralph Humphrey (1932–1990), a painter whose works calls into question every marker of progress brought to bear on art. The current exhibition at Garth Greenan— his first New York show in fourteen years — brought to mind the refrain that has been repeated since the artist died, not yet sixty, more than twenty years ago: a museum really ought to do his retrospective.

In 1998, a number of critics responded to Humphrey's exhibition at Danese, which was curated by his longtime champion and friend, Klaus Kertess, by emphasizing the need for a retrospective, but to no avail. In fact, instead of a museum exhibition, fourteen years have passed before a large selection of Humphrey's work could be seen again. In an early review of the current Garth Greenan show, Roberta Smith repeated the call for a museum to do a retrospective. Perhaps things will be different this time around.

What I find more striking is the degree to which Humphrey has been excised from surveys and historical shows focusing on the period between 1960 and 1990. It's as if he never existed. His absence from, or marginal inclusion in, nearly every narrative about postwar painting says a lot about how skewed these views are. During the past decade, the art world has repeatedly revisited the early work of two of Humphrey's contemporaries, Frank Stella and Jo Baer. In the meantime, the same tastemakers blithely ignore the fact that Humphrey was one of the few artists of his generation to follow the implications of his early work, no matter where it would eventually lead him. In this, he was courageous rather than conformist. Instead of doing the right thing — something museum curators love because it relieves them of responsibility — Humphrey resisted both the ideological pressures and market forces to make sanctioned art.

I still remember the deep consternation his muted window paintings caused many people in early 80s, which was ironic given the frenzied attention the art world was then paying to Julian Schnabel's *Sturm und Drang* plate paintings. In retrospect, it is useful to remember that people found Schnabel's oversized paintings entertaining, but were threatened by Humphrey's serious but modestly scaled works.

Completely lacking in histrionics, without references to the mass media, and rather slow to reveal themselves, Humphrey's paintings require the kind of looking that an out-of-control, consumerist world long ago rejected. In the middle of the constant hubbub and hoopla, with mindlessness careening full speed ahead, Humphrey made works — at once retinal and tactile — that allude to “frontal space,” as he put it in an interview with Amy Baker. I take “frontal space” to mean that area where one's body interfaces with the world, catching the light.

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“Sinclair” (1965) and “South Orange” (1981–82) were two paintings in the Danese show that I want to bring up before going on to the current exhibition at Garth Greenan. “Sinclair” is generally referred to as a “frame painting.” The painted border both frames the interior rectangle and reasserts the painting's physical structure. While many critics have pointed to Humphrey's connection to the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Mark Rothko, Humphrey's “frame” paintings can be said to underscore what Rothko ignored: the painting's edge. More importantly, however, Humphrey neither confined his understanding of the “frame” paintings to Clement Greenberg's view of flatness and the retinal nor aligned himself with Michael Fried's definition of objecthood. He rejected orthodoxy.

Between 1965 and '82, Humphrey went from an abstract “frame” to a referential painting of a window, complete with curtains blowing in the breeze. Those who felt that abstraction was the highest form of painting believed that Humphrey had taken a step back, had become, in that regard, like Philip Guston.

The difference with Guston was that Humphrey did not experience a cataclysmic change in his work, nor did he find it necessary to reject his earlier “frame” paintings, which first gained him attention. In the “frame” paintings and his even earlier monochromes, he always found new possibilities to explore. A painting was never the goal, but an embarkation point. And the possibilities these early paintings embodied led to all sorts of work, from “Conveyance #4” (1976–77) to “Christmas Story” (1979–1980). Bringing his considerable intellect and impulsive imagination to bear on these explorations, Humphrey recognized that anything might prove a useful source.

I have the sense that, starting in the 1970s and continuing until his death, the inspiration for many of Humphrey's paintings was something he saw in (or remembered about) everyday life. And these inspirations were unexpected and rather ordinary — industrial bins, personal mailboxes, architectural details, and Christmas displays, among others.

Each of Humphrey's paradigmatic forms stirred up a series of connections for him to allude to. For Humphrey, a man who loved art, and who clearly steeped himself in art history, painting was a way to establish dialogues with both ordinary life and artists such as Bonnard, Mondrian, and the Nabis. In contrast to the artists who wanted to take everything out of their work, Humphrey wanted to put everything back into play. This includes his intelligence and his love for other artists and works of art. And this is why the institutional world — museums and ideologically driven art historians — has ignored him. After all, if you can't be ironic, citational, or parodic, then you must believe in something other than the death of art and the individual.

Here is an example — Hal Foster has argued that Andy Warhol was the first artist to recognize that the relationship of the individual to consumer society had been reduced to an either/or situation. Either you tried to beat them and failed or you joined them. Warhol chose to join them. I suspect that Foster sees the art world in these terms as well. There are those who join his team and those who don't, like the artists he castigates. The schoolyard attitude behind Foster's argument posits that all anybody has in mind is beating the system. Humphrey was too gentle to think that way. Beating them — whoever they are — was never uppermost in his mind.

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With its rounded edges, “Untitled” (1973), the earliest painting in this exhibition, resembles the cabin door or bulkhead hatch on an ocean liner. This would justify why it is hung just above the floor. (Humphrey’s humor is quiet, but precise and even tender). He has used modeling paste to give the painting’s surface an uneven, stucco-like feel. The paint is not acrylic or oil, but casein, a fast drying medium that comes out matte. The palette consists of four different tonalities of brown.

There is a frame running around the edge of “Untitled.” Within the frame’s rounded rectangle, Humphrey paints another frame of nearly equal width on a slightly rougher surface. About a third of the way up from the interior frame’s bottom edge, a band joins the sides, dividing the interior into two different-sized rectangles. The upper one is vertically oriented and echoes the painting’s shape, while the lower, horizontal one is considerably smaller. Humphrey has also added a thin strip of darker brown along the band’s bottom edge, turning it into a palpable structure, a literal frame in which the smaller horizontal rectangle seems to have been inset.

Without suppressing metaphor and association, Humphrey pushes the literal as far as he can into the domain of real things. His encrusted painting-cum-door can neither be opened nor looked into. It is no longer possible to open the door onto a world of light, and transcend our physical bodies. Rooted in their materiality, Humphrey’s paintings advance that there is no such thing as heaven. Sanctuary is an illusion.

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Made up of a mix of colors — red and blue, for example, or pink and green — the paintings’ encrusted surfaces glow. Their rough tactility evokes the effects of time, as well as a thing’s deep persistence. At what point does something become so encrusted that it loses its identity? Humphrey seems to be betting that perseverance will win out, that painting—no matter how caked with the sludge of time — will still manage to smolder.

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Humphrey’s “windows” and “conveyances” are hybrids—they share the domain inhabited by Jasper Johns’ “flags” and “targets.” Using wood slats to build up the windows’ frames and crossbars before applying the modeling paste, Humphrey seems to be after a simplicity and even innocence. I say “seems” because I sense there is something far more complex and disquieting about the window paintings than what we first might think. I am thinking of “Thin Edge” (1981) or the window-like structure in “Heat” (1983), where the slight diagonal tilt of the three slats in the lower part of the painting, beneath the polka-dotted “shade,” evoke abandonment and neglect. The lifted curtains underscore the fact that life goes on, even after we are gone. (In this regard, Humphrey’s lifted curtains anticipate the string hanging in Johns’s “catenary” paintings.)

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Are we outside looking in? Or are we inside looking out? In either case, one feels an immense solitude — an awareness of the relation between’s life’s brevity and time’s endlessness. And yet, this recognition never leads to overt sorrow or lamentation. Humphrey’s unique combination of tactility and subdued light evokes our material existence, as well as its yearning and determination.

Ralph Humphrey continues until October 20 at the Garth Greenan Gallery (529 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan).