

## What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week: Ralph Humphrey

By ROBERTA SMITH SEPTEMBER 20, 2018

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

*Through Oct. 20*



Installation view of *Ralph Humphrey: Monochromes*, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York, September 6–October 20, 2018

This knee-weakening revelation presents seven monochrome paintings dating from 1957 to 1960 by Ralph Humphrey (1932–1990), then in his late 20s. They are nearly mythic to painting fans of a certain age but known mostly from photographs, or seen one or two at a time. Neither experience prepares you for the visual power and fugue-like complexity of these works, last exhibited as a group at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1960.

Their astounding vitality results from extending different precedents while committing to none. They have the optical mysteries of Ad Reinhardt’s “black paintings,” though Humphrey’s are devoid of geometry or any composition at all. Their diffuse all-over fields recall Jackson Pollock’s freehand drip paintings but are made with brush, sponge and palette knife. They also evoke the improvisational brushwork of Willem de Kooning, and his hapless ’50s acolytes who messily combined several colors, but each Humphrey canvas confronts us with a single hue. Sort of.

Ostensible monochromes of red, orange, dark gray and burnt umber present wholeness and then shatter it with shifting textures, tones and pockets of space that encourage perusal of the entire canvas. The paint application masquerades as random, but bespeaks intense deliberation, the emotionality of which is veiled by the single colors, but also quickly felt. They could be said to mask yet reveal Humphrey’s painful ambivalence about his homosexuality. It is telling that most of the canvases here were titled for single-room-occupancy hotels on the Upper West Side, underscoring solitude and isolation.

These paintings deserve a place in the history of New York painting, operating as they do, for example, in the gap between Mark Rothko and Jasper Johns, and Pollock and Frank Stella. They are linchpins, specific objects and also gateways to subjectivity. Their greatness dignifies the often-disparaged term “second-generation Abstract Expressionism” without being contained by it.