

ABOUT TOWN



Red Lamps by Roy Lichtenstein,
available at Mark Humphrey Gallery

An Artful Anniversary

Multifaceted Hamptons gallerist Mark Humphrey is going strong after 30 years in the biz.

BY CRISTINA GREEVEN CUOMO

NEARLY THIRTY YEARS AFTER OPENING HIS DOORS, Hamptons gallerist Mark Humphrey remains the top purveyor of local talent. Humphrey—who celebrates his anniversary next May—has represented the likes of Roy Lichtenstein, Donald Baechler, Donald Sultan, Robert Dash and Ross Bleckner, and has even made a name for himself as a minimalist artist. And his business has survived the highs and lows of art-collecting thanks in part to the gallery's framing business—a very important finishing touch to any work of art. We caught up with the Main Street gallery owner/framer/artist to get a glimpse of the changing landscape of art and his passion to keep it thriving in the Hamptons.

HAMPTONS: How did your curating career begin?

MARK HUMPHREY: When my partner, Larry Rundie, and I opened our gallery in May 1980, we were immediately inundated with artists and friends of artists, so the curatorial process began then.

H: When did you start painting?

MH: I was a sophomore at a small college in the Midwest when I took a painting class and immediately knew that I had found my calling. My three art instructors told me that if I wanted to be a painter I had to go to Syracuse University, and they helped me get in.

H: What do you love about painting?

MH: I have been painting for 40 years—but please don't do the math! When I paint, I'm in my own world—no phones, no people. I don't even listen to music, as I feel part of me *has* to be concentrating totally on the work. I love painting for hours without speaking to anyone. It's a very solitary experience for me and always has been. In my work, I'm always trying to reduce without taking away too much. My work is never quite minimal enough for me—that's why I keep painting.

H: What do you look for in the art you sell in your gallery?

MH: It's all about the surface and depth of the work.

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Mark Humphrey next to one of his own paintings (RIGHT)

H: What artists do you collect?

MH: I own a lot of Jim Dine, Donald Sultan, Ellsworth Kelly, Motherwell, Lichtenstein—that genre.

H: How has the art world changed, especially in the Hamptons, over the years?

MH: Fortunately the trend in art—and decorating, which can't be ignored—is contemporary, which is my love. Ten to 15 years ago the style du jour was antique, very traditional, and we were selling antique botanical prints like crazy. Larry and I would fly to Paris for the weekend just to replenish our stock, and of course everyone wanted them with elaborate French matting and ornate gold frames. I had employees who did nothing all day but make French mats. And, of course, the Hudson River landscapes were very popular, as well as the Dutch-style still lifes.

H: Does photography sell as well as paintings today?

MH: It really seems that photography is more prevalent than painting now, I'm sorry to say. Not that I feel photography is less of an art; in fact, back in the early '80s I was the only gallery showing photography in the Hamptons. If you were a photographer out here you knew to come to me. But with Photoshop and digital photography, more and more people are doing it. The nice thing about photography is that it can usually be much more affordable.

H: Why have so many artists migrated to the Hamptons over the years?

MH: The light on the East End is a big draw, and the day-to-day living is easier than in New York City. But it's also the proximity to the city that makes it so desirable as artists need stimulation.

H: Did you have a mentor?

MH: When I was an art student, before going to graduate school, I had the privilege of attending Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine for two months. My instructor was Brice Marden. I recently found a journal that I had kept at Skowhegan and there were daily notes about Brice's comments on my paintings. What a gift, then and now.

H: How will you celebrate the gallery's 30th anniversary on May 3, 2010?

MH: I have an unrealistic fantasy exhibition that has one piece from every artist who has ever had a show with us in the past 30 years—but it is just a dream. **H**