

# WHITE CUBE

Al Held

*Modern Maverick*

22 November 2019 – 11 January 2020

White Cube Hong Kong

White Cube is pleased to present the first exhibition of works by Al Held (1928 – 2005) in Hong Kong. One of America's foremost post-war painters, the exhibition features works drawn from across Held's long career, focusing on his Modernist roots and his sustained exploration of abstract painting.

Born in Brooklyn in 1928, Held believed in the ability of abstraction to reach beyond our primary senses; to access what he saw as a 'reality in which our five senses are of little use'. Often linked with the Abstract Expressionists – although of a younger generation than Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock – his was a continuous search to expand the language of abstraction.

The earliest work in the exhibition, *Untitled* (1956), derives from Held's first body of work, the 'Pigment Paintings'. These all-over gestural abstractions, in colourful thick impasto, reference Abstract Expressionism while pointing to a new direction. Seeking to combine what he termed Piet Mondrian's 'total objectivity' with Pollock's 'total subjectivity', the young Held achieved international recognition with this seminal body of work.

An important painting from his subsequent 'Taxi Cab' series, *Untitled* (1959) represents a key development in Held's oeuvre. This defining series, which Held often painted directly onto paper strewn across his gallery floor, features dynamic compositions with jostling, roughly outlined colourful shapes. Towards the mid-1960s however, Held began to reduce his colour palette and favour pared-down compositions with monolithic forms, employing basic geometric shapes including the circle, square and triangle. These forms appeared barely contained within the limits of his canvas. Like his contemporaries Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella, he wanted to create more 'space' within the painting, using compositions that worked against its rectangular edge, constantly pushing outwards.

The 'Letter' series comprises Held's exploration of the linear forms and negative spaces of different letters, reducing them to bright, minimal abstractions. In *Untitled 'E'* and *Untitled 'C'* (both 1961), for example, a dominant rectangular shape is framed by various contrasting shades, while in the more expansive *Untitled 'H'* (1959) or *Untitled 'I'* (1960) two or three outlined geometric shapes float ungrounded against an airy, light-coloured background. In 1967 however, Held abandoned colour entirely for almost a decade, focusing instead on contradictory vanishing points and illusionistic space within his work. Using only

black and white and applying tape to create sharply defined lines and contours, the works from this period, such as *Inversion XVII* (1978), feature architectural, volumetric shapes in highly fractured, layered compositions. Termed 'ambistructural abstractions' by the acclaimed critic Irving Sandler, they reflect Held's desire for 'simultaneity' in his painting and the ability of forms to 'move in and out of focus'.

This sense of disorienting yet compelling spatial complexity continues in Held's later works, a selection of which is presented in the ground floor gallery. The so-called 'Luminous Construct' paintings, produced from the mid-1980s to the end of the artist's life, assert his position as a pioneer of hard-edged abstraction who consistently challenged the orthodoxies of Modernism. Reflecting his interest in chaos theory and the increasing complexity of contemporary life, Held treats each component part of the overall image individually, placing them within an extended three-dimensional pictorial space. Distorted, patterned forms, quasi-architectural structures, ribbons and lines lead the eye unexpectedly through, around and over the picture plane (as with *Through III*, 2001). Contrasting light with dark, transparent with opaque and void with solid, they take on the visceral quality of a hallucinatory dream. Appearing simultaneously near and distant, the internal space of the paintings are activated. Deeply influenced by classical painting, in particular the symmetry and perspective of Renaissance art, these late great works combine aspects of the Western painting tradition with his own post-modern abstraction. 'I began to see the world as increasingly complex, contradictory and paradoxical. This provoked my formal move away from flatness to spatial illusionism, simply to get more information into the paintings,' Held has said.

#### BIOGRAPHY

Al Held was born in Brooklyn in 1928 and died in Todi, Italy in 2005. He exhibited extensively throughout his career including solo exhibitions at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1966); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC (1968); Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (1968); Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (1969); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1974); and Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (1978). He produced major public artworks in cities around USA including Philadelphia, Washington DC, New York and Orlando. Held's work features in many museum and public collections including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; Neunationalgalerie, Berlin; and Kunstmuseum, Basel.

White Cube Hong Kong is open  
Tuesday – Saturday, 11am – 7pm.  
Admission is free.  
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