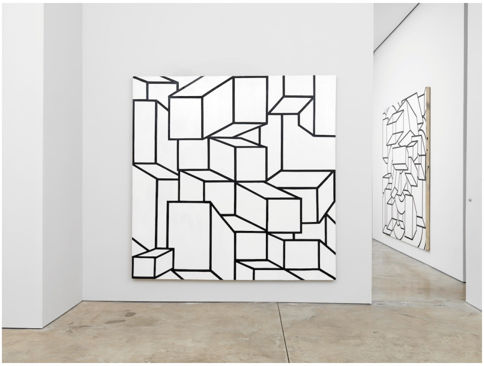
The Disorienting Power of Al Held’s Black-and-White Paintings

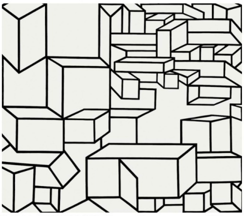
Dennis Kardon March 18, 2016



Installation view of ‘Al Held: Black and White Paintings’ at Cheim & Read with “B/W XIV” (1968) at center (photo by Brian Buckley for Cheim & Read, New York; all images courtesy Cheim & Read)

In 1967, the angel of ambiguity rescued Al Held from the burly heaviness of his body and the formalist ideology of his thinking. Coming to him in the form of the diagonal, as he passed from his late 30s to early 40s, it transformed his work from having the punch of a pugilist to the stealth of a ninja. The paintings suddenly engulfed viewers with webs of contradictions.

Held’s *Alphabet Paintings* — flat, geometric oils in the form of minimal letters made between 1961 and 1967 that Cheim & Read showed three years ago — were imposing in their monolithic size. But the mammoth scale of the work in *Black and White Paintings* takes one off guard. On a page, on a screen, or even from a good distance, the whole painting can be apprehended, despite its internal contradictions. But up close, at the distance from which they were painted, our physical relationship to these colossi distorts all perception. White spaces become enlarged or compressed as we pass from one end of the canvas to the other, and angles change as we get closer or further away. The sense of the whole becomes elusive. Rather than objects, the paintings behave as fields, where relationships dominate instead of physicality.



Al Held, “B/W XI” (1968), acrylic on canvas, 120 x 138 in (click to enlarge)

It is startling to realize that Held painted the eight paintings in this show, most measuring over nine feet in height, in just two years. The numbers in the titles — like “B/W XX” (not on view, but in the catalogue), “Phoenecia VII,” and “Esopus I” — imply at least 28 paintings. These are not scaled-up drawings but works that originated in the painting process itself. Even aided by assistants, as he was later in life, Held seemed to manipulate lines and forms with a deceptive dexterity.

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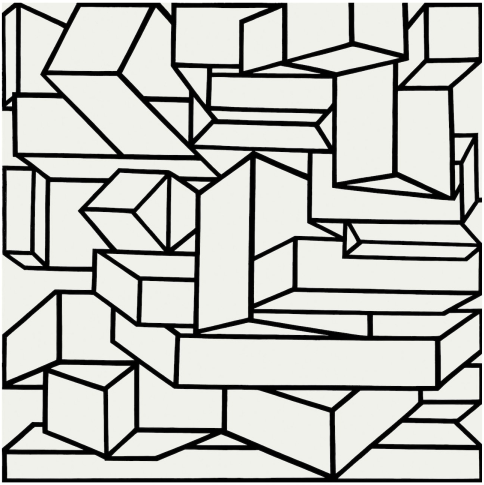
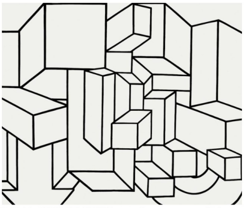
These paintings were both an assault on and acknowledgement of high Modernism’s insistence on the flatness of the picture plane. While horizontals and verticals are resolutely flat, diagonals and ellipses can be simultaneously flat or indicate the receding edge of perspectival space. Coupled with white shapes that could seem either solid or transparent, laying flat on the surface or implying a geometric solid, Held used these ambiguities to reintroduce the idea of imaginary space back into painting. With an amusing heresy, he subverted the structures of pictorial space in order to elicit feelings of uncertainty and disorientation.

What is so exciting about seeing these paintings now is that they show a great painter in the first stages of discovery. Held was methodical and rigorous, and he found a painting language that allowed him (and us as viewers) to consider the structures of visual thinking. Held took the popular description of the art of the time, “ABC minimalism,” quite literally, and went on from his *Alphabet Paintings* to more complex constructions, using black lines and white spaces for building blocks.



Al Held, “B/W V” (1967–68), acrylic on canvas, 114 x 114 in

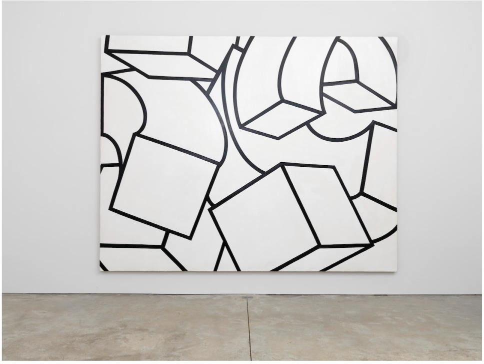
In the earliest painting here, “B/W V” (1967–68), each horizontal or vertical black line that dominates the painting intersects with at most two diagonals, and there are no curves. This produces a relatively stable, crystalline structure that is anchored to the four sides of the painting. It is surprising, then, given their geometric language, how deliberately irrational these paintings are. In front of and behind are constantly confused. Orthographic solids seem to emerge fleetingly, only to be collapsed by illogical intersections. The real forms that are Held’s specific contribution are precisely the leftovers and misalignments from those convergences — the strange, pointed, five-sided shape in the middle, or the odd, six-sided one on the lower left, as well as the sprinkling of triangles. Even the way the perimeter of the painting is dashed by alternate black alignments of forms with the painting’s perimeter indicates contradictory conjunctions.



Al Held, "B/W IX" (1968), acrylic on canvas, 114 x 136 in (click to enlarge)

Held methodically tried out different variations. In "B/W VI" (1967–68), two curved lines appear, attached to a rectangle to produce a totally anomalous shape. But then curves vanished until "B/W IX" (1968), which has four that produce a large O or zero, anchoring the bottom right section of the composition and counterbalancing a giant downward arrow, the love-child of a mating triangle and rectangle, in the lower left area. There are no curves in "B/W XI" (1968), but Held experiments with bunching small forms in the upper right, making them appear further away.

By the time we get to "Esopus I" (1969), all hell has majestically broken loose. Uneven curves abound, and there are only two small, straight lines parallel to the painting's edge. And though the white spaces are large and somewhat uniform, there is an exhilarating sense of crashing upheaval to this painting. In this and other pieces, all sorts of tumbling, three-dimensional forms and spaces have upended Greenbergian flatness.



Installation view of 'Al Held: Black and White Paintings' at Cheim & Read with "Esopus I" (1969) at center (photo by Brian Buckley for Cheim & Read, New York) (click to enlarge)

By 1969, observers were already pronouncing painting dead. But by showing how a large range of feeling could be produced through a simplified language, Held was doggedly determined to pound on its chest and breathe life into its lungs, even if it meant cracking some ideological ribs.

Al Held: Black and White Paintings *continues at* Cheim & Read *(547 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 26.*

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Dennis Kardon

Dennis Kardon is a painter and writer living and working in New York. A show of his recent paintings, Reflections on the Surface, can be seen at Valentine Gallery. Work and writing can be seen at denniskardon.com. More by Dennis Kardon

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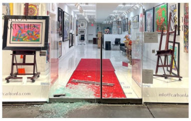

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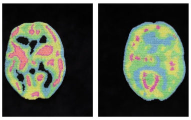

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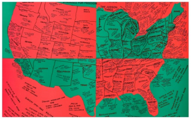

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Alexis Clements

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