

# PRESS RELEASE

# Al Held

Armatures 1953–1954

The Art Show / Park Avenue Armory

March 4–8, 2015



*Untitled, 1953*  
oil on paper mounted on canvas  
97 1/8 x 45 5/8 inches

Cheim & Read is pleased to announce an exhibition of six large-scale paintings on paper by Al Held, dating from 1953–54, and shown for the first time in public in this exhibition. In the artist's collection through his lifetime, these paintings comprise a pivotal and formative series in Held's body of work, made when he had freshly come back to New York from a three-year course of study in Paris. Held at this juncture was deeply engaged in processing and responding to the achievements of Abstract Expressionism, notably those of Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko, and was, at age 25, taking the first sustained step in his journey to finding his own distinct voice. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Robert Knafo.

Born in Brooklyn in 1928, Held grew up in the Bronx in a working-class family, dropped out of high school at age 16, and after a stint in the Navy from 1945–47, and newly back in the city, began to travel downtown, frequent left political and cultural circles, and learn about modern art. After spending the years 1950–52 in Paris (attending La Gande Chaumiere art school), Held came back to New York and became fully engaged in the esthetic dialogue that followed the Abstract Expressionist revolution of the previous decade. Held's Abstract Expressionist period, stretching into the late fifties, was to be only the first of a number of distinct phases

to come, all quite distinct, but all also sharing the common trait of the artist's career-long exploration and ongoing redefinition of the formal and architectonic potentialities of abstract painting.

Ambitiously large—approximately eight feet tall and four feet wide—these tall swaths of paper are turned into fields or platforms of conscious experimentation; as Knafo observes, “these works are about the young painter initiating various dialogues with one or more of the looming, foundational figures of of the new abstraction, attempting to absorb, and work through, their respective legacies, and puzzling out how to add meaningfully, something new, to the conversation.” Animated by the idea of giving himself the greatest gestural and pictorial flexibility, Held chose to work on paper and to use a range of materials from paint to crayon, gouache, watercolor, and ink, a diversity that he fully exploits in work that bears a broad spectrum of effect, from broad, footlong, muscular strokes that may seems to variously channel or amalgamate Pollock, DeKooning and Kline, to a more close-quarter scribble, to scumbled veils and fields kindred to the evocative planes of Rothko and Still.

Equally manifest in these works, and of key conceptual importance to the artist—and also perhaps his most pronounced contribution to the conversation—is the matter of structure. Held was crucially interested in developing a structure, or armature, within which to organize or compose gestural activity. These works show him cycling through various structural possibilities. Among the twelve works in this selection, several distinct and principal structural tropes emerge. These tropes oscillate along a spectrum of possibility, from a spherical or cruciate emblematic central motif, that resonate of Kline; to a tall, Barnett Newmanesque vertical, anthropomorphic band, to planar veils and fields that hang tremulously on, or parallel to, the picture plane; to a structure that Held goes back to more than once in this series, and the structure that would outlive the others and provide an embryo for succeeding works—a kind of allover, tightly interlocking grid work of thick looping stripes that ultimately lives up to Held's stated objective to synthesize Pollock's and DeKooning's gesturalism with the geometric armatures of Mondrian. In these very earliest works we see a young painter searching for his way within the myriad possibilities of abstract painting.

*Tal R: Altstadt Girl* remains on view through February 14.

*Sean Scully: Landlines* February 19–April 4.

**Cheim & Read** 547 West 25 Street, New York