

CHEIM & READ

NEW YORK  OBSERVER

on VIEW

AN APPRAISAL OF CURRENT ART OFFERINGS

AL HELD

'Alphabet Paintings'

CHEIM & READ

"Alphabet paintings" is the right name for these enormous, iconic billboards of hard-edged abstraction—seven of them here at Cheim & Read, all made between 1961 and 1967—not because graphically they're more or less loosely based on letters of the Roman alphabet, but because they *function* like letters of the alphabet. Each canvas is the product of enormous, drawn-out labor—Held evolved them through multiple shapes and compositions, building up so many layers of paint that little imperfections became knuckle-sized bumps—but the composition reads as a single form in a single glance. Every separate element—the flat, clean color, the glistening sharp edges—is reduced to a part that can do nothing but support or disrupt the total function. And this applies in time, too, so that the expansive matte maroon field of *Upside Down Triangle* (1966), which otherwise might encompass the universe, is corralled by the addition of that titular triangle in the middle—noth-

ing is over till it's over. But when it is over, nothing matters except the way it ends.

With the exception of *The "T"* (1965), in which two white, trapezoidal notches in an otherwise all-black canvas make the whole thing seem to bend in like a lens, they also all press out, like text, as you read them, right up into the eye. *Ivan the Terrible*, for example, an asymmetrical, orange-yellow X on a blue ground set above a black-on-black truncated T, not only doesn't hang quietly—it practically pushes you out of the room. (*Through April 20*)
—W.H.