

# CHEIM & READ

## The New York Times

### Art in Review

March 22, 2013

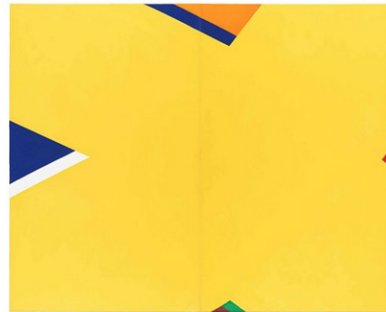
#### Al Held

'Alphabet Paintings'

*Cheim & Read*  
547 West 25th Street, Chelsea  
Through April 20

Al Held (1928-2005) was one of the last and best of the big-impact abstract painters to emerge from the postwar era. "Alphabet Paintings" is an exhilarating show of seven works dating from 1961 to '67, a transitional period during which Held based compositions on simple, geometric shapes and, more remarkably, letters of the Roman alphabet. In "Siegfried" (1966), in which a wide white band separates two brick red "L" shapes, he was in dialogue with reductivist contemporaries like Barnett Newman and Frank Stella.

In the show's most exciting painting, "The Yellow X" (1965), he anticipated his own future. Made on two conjoined canvases measuring 8½ by 12 feet over all, its surface is almost entirely given over to bright yellow, acrylic paint — "Naugahyde thick," as the critic Robert Storr puts it in the exhibition's catalog essay. Differently colored triangles intruding on each of the four sides define the image as the middle of a huge, slightly irregular X, which seems to be tilting forward in space. The inserts are divided



CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK

Al Held's "The Yellow X" from his "Alphabet Paintings" show at the Cheim & Read gallery.

into strips of contrasting color that suggest the depth of the sides of the X, as if it had been cut from a giant, six-inch thick slab. In this respect it prefigures the paintings of Mr. Held's last three decades: enormous, breathtaking pictures of impossibly complicated structures made from straight and curved, richly colorful girders that implicitly expand into cosmic distances.

Why no major museum has yet done retrospective justice to Held's singular career is beyond me.

KEN JOHNSON