

PRESS RELEASE**AL HELD****Paintings 1989–1993****26 November–19 December 2008****Monday–Friday 10am–6pm****Saturday 10am–1.30pm****TRITON III** 1990 acrylic on canvas 152.4 x 183 cm / 60 x 72 in

"I've reintroduced what I would consider the juice and the meat of painting – which is light, space and narrative"¹

Waddington Galleries is pleased to announce an exhibition of paintings by the late American artist Al Held. The exhibition consists of thirteen paintings, dating from 1989 to 1993, each showing Held's articulate, non-objective abstraction: the 12ft wide *Fathom Mark IX*, 1989, (a fathom mark being a measure for sea depths) evokes a geometric coral reef of drifting cubes, triangles and cylinders. The shapes are flatly painted in deep greens, blues and browns in an overall composition based on quartered diagonals, with differing focal lengths and bereft of gravity.

Al Held was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1928. After serving in the United States Navy from 1945 to 1947, he used his G.I. Bill to study in Paris at the Academié de la Grande Chaumiére where, among the artistic expatriate community, he met Jules Olitski, Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland and became friends with Sam Francis. In Paris, in 1952, Held had his first solo exhibition at the artist-run Galérié Huit. The following year he returned to New York, visiting the studios of Franz Kline and Mark Rothko. In 1959, Sam Francis gave Held the use of his New York loft/studio at 940 Broadway which at 100ft by 50ft, with 16ft high ceilings, meant Held could dramatically increase the size of his paintings. He started to paint in acrylic and to move away from his earlier gestural abstract expressionism, becoming more concerned with his paintings' underlying structure and the clarity of its forms.

In 1962 Held was appointed Associate Professor of Art at Yale University, a position he kept until 1980. Between 1967 and 1973 he restricted his palette to black and white, introducing space and volume by creating linear outlines of interconnecting geometric shapes with varying vanishing points. He began to use tape to mask and regulate the painted edges and to sand down the surface of the canvas to hide intuitive changes and over-workings, achieving a synthetically smooth finish. As the forms became more fragmented, Held introduced colour to provide structure. In 1981, Held spent six months at the American Academy in Rome and became inspired and influenced by the city's art and architecture. As in the monumental mural *Mantegna's Edge* (14 x 53ft), completed for the Southland Center, Dallas, his knowledge and sympathy for early Italian painting is referenced in works such as *Duccio II*, 1992 (after the Sienese painter Duccio di Buoninsegna) and *Quattro Centric XI*, 1989 (revealing his interest in the *Quattrocento* period of Italian art). In *Duccio II* the red cylinders on the left and blue cubes on the right give a harmonious sense of balance across the underlying yellow grid-work, the three dimensional volumes expressed in bright primary *chiaroscuro*. The symmetry is enhanced by a pair of architectural landscapes, framed *predella*-like at the bottom of the canvas. As in the four paintings that relate to Cosmology: *Auriga IV*, 1991; *Centauri III*, 1990; *Geocentric II*, 1989; *Triton III*, 1990, Held alludes to the mystery of interconnecting structures. His use of the square and the circle have an emblematic presence evocative of Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing *The Vitruvian Man*, in which a standing male nude touches the inside of a circle and square. It depicts the symmetry of the human body, the proportions of man – a human aspiration echoed by Held who said: "in chaos I look for an ordering mechanism".²

Held's work is featured in many public collections including the Kunstmuseum, Basel; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. His public works include the 1970 mural *Rothko's Canvas* (10 x 90ft) for Governor Nelson. A Rockefeller, Empire State Plaza, Albany, and the laminated and glass mural *Gravity's Rainbow* (92 x 220ft) for the Ronald Reagan National Airport, Washington, D.C. In 1966, Held was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship and in 1984 he was elected to the American Institute of Arts and Letters. From 1988 he kept a second home in Italy, where he resided for six months of the year. Al Held died in Todi, Italy in 2005.

(¹; ² from *Al Held: The Evolution of Style*. The University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach .pp.16 & 17)

**A fully illustrated catalogue with an introduction by Martin Filler accompanies the exhibition
For further information or images, please contact Leonie Holzwarth**