

# WHITE CUBE

## Press Release

Al Held

*Watercolours*

19 April – 27 May 2023

White Cube Paris

White Cube Paris is pleased to present an exhibition of watercolours by Al Held (1928-2005). An important facet within Held's exploration of form, colour and space, this selection is testament to the 'sheer, sensuous joy' that Held felt when working with the medium and lends insight to the visionary, hard-edged abstraction that preoccupied the artist throughout his career.

Joyfully chromatic, with many using a warm colour palette, Held's watercolours form a distinct body of work, demonstrating how he positioned the discipline in parallel to painting; they were a place where he could freely formulate ideas and willfully progress his imagery. This group of works was painted exclusively in Italy, where he maintained a studio from the late 1980s onwards following his prestigious American Academy residency in Rome. To provide him with a place to work in creative isolation, Held purchased a historic farmhouse in Umbria to complement his New York abodes, a Manhattan loft and Catskills barn.

Associated in his early years with a generation of American abstract painters, Held was drawn to Europe early on in his career, taking advantage of the GI Bill to move to Paris between 1951 and 1953, and acquaint himself with the Old Masters and European avant garde. Later on, when he spent time in Italy, Held committed to an intensive study of Renaissance painting, in order to widen his vocabulary at the service of his increasingly complex and monumental paintings.

Produced around the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Italian watercolours – like the paintings of Giotto, Piero della Francesca, and Michelangelo which he so admired – are suffused with light, appearing almost translucent as if lit from within. Most profoundly, watercolour offered Held a way to fill his images with light, lifting his solid forms into weightless mass.

In these watercolours, several of which are extremely large in scale, Held focused on constructing multidimensional space through a command of paradoxical structures and layered perspectives. Playing with a muscular geometry, and exploiting his demonstrable facility in draftsmanship, Held harnessed the medium's potential for transparency to layer and fuse his forms, resolving his semi-illusionistic compositions with an immediacy that belies their carefully organised interlocking structures.

Held's status as an exceptional colourist as well as a pioneer of hard edge abstraction is confirmed by his watercolours. Colliding perspectives and impossible trajectories, they produce the feeling of vast and vertiginous volumetric expanse, as if we are looking on the edge of ever-receding, three-dimensional space in which sinuous ribbons thread through patterned planes and architectonic forms loom large towards the viewer with magical intensity. The repeated motif of immense interlocking rings set in deep recessive space reflects his work on public murals at the time, while the domes, arcades and coffering might point to Italian Renaissance architecture.

Both finished works and prologues to the paintings, Held's watercolours visualise a depth of understanding beyond human perception, touching as they do on themes as unfathomable as multidimensionality and String Theory. Reflecting his preoccupation with the poetic re-interpretation of

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scientific theory and his thoughts on the multiverse, Held was able to channel the past and the future into these luminous, visionary works. As Barbara Rose has written: 'In the landscape where the Renaissance was born, [Held] drew and redrew paradoxical and conflicting forms floating in an infinite and uncharted space.'

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### Notes to Editors:

- Al Held was born in Brooklyn in 1928 and died in Todi, Italy in 2005. He exhibited extensively throughout his career including solo exhibitions at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1966); San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC (1968); ICA, Philadelphia (1968); Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (1969); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1974); and ICA, Boston (1978), among other museums. He produced major public artworks in prominent cities around the USA including Philadelphia, Washington DC, New York and Orlando. Held's work features in many museums and public collections including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin and Kunstmuseum, Basel. White Cube Paris is pleased to present 'Rara avis', a group exhibition curated by Jerry Stafford which brings together antiquities, artefacts and contemporary works of art sharing the subject of birds. Latin for 'rare bird', the exhibition title infers discovery and a sense of the wondrous or exquisite, but also intimates feelings of loss and lament.
- Admission to White Cube is free. White Cube Paris is by appointment only, contact: [enquiryparis@whitecube.com](mailto:enquiryparis@whitecube.com). The gallery is open Tuesday–Saturday 11am–7pm. Address: 10 avenue Matignon 75008 Paris. Phone: +33 (0) 1 87 39 85 97. Website: [whitecube.com](http://whitecube.com)
- White Cube's exhibition programme extends across locations in London, Hong Kong, Paris, New York, West Palm Beach and online. Since its inception in 1993, the gallery has exhibited the work of many of the world's most highly acclaimed contemporary artists.
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