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Al Held watercolors at Berggruen: Midway through the career of second-generation Abstract Expressionist Al Held (1928-2005), his paintings underwent a kind of implosion.

He made his name with heavily coated abstractions jumbled edge to edge with geometry. Later, his paint thinned and his compositions took on a bold flatness. Then his paintings' implicit illusionistic depth dropped open like a trap door, and they quickly evolved into open structures full of contradictory spatial information, like what we see in the show of his watercolors at Berggruen.

Held's mature work can create such a riot of illusionism as almost to induce vertigo in a susceptible viewer. The powdery color and intimate scale of many of the watercolors at Berggruen mitigate that effect, with exceptions among the pieces mounted on stretched canvas, such as "Umbria XXIII" (1991).

Held exploited the fact that paintings cannot explain themselves, allowing the jumps in scale among forms and contradictory vanishing points to develop almost the effect of sporadically interrupted narrative. He also seemed to want to revise people's memories of minimalism: Many of the slab and open box forms that appear in the watercolors bring minimalist classics to mind, along with the term "anti-illusion," a bit of late 1960s New York art nomenclature.

In the catalog Berggruen has published on the occasion of this show, New York critic Eleanor Heartney argues that Held's late works link the legacy of Renaissance perspective and the dizzying new plasticity of cyberspace.

I see them instead as nostalgic: as abstractions of the movement of the eye through picture space that made narrative painting possible. For Held, that sense of abstraction may have proclaimed the end of authentic pictorial narrative and of one painting's connection to the ordinary world of experience.