

JOHN BERGGRUEN GALLERY

228 GRANT AVENUE SAN FRANCISCO CALIFORNIA 94108 TEL 415-781-4629

FAX 415-781-0126 GALLERY@BERGGRUEN.COM WWW.BERGGRUEN.COM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Al Held

Watercolors

September 4 – September 27, 2008

John Berggruen Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of historic watercolors by American artist, Al Held. *Al Held: Watercolors* will be on view between September 4th and September 27, 2008. This exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with an introduction by Eleanor Heartney, art critic and contributing editor to *Art in America*. John Berggruen Gallery will hold an opening reception on Thursday, September 4th from 5:30 to 7:30pm.

Since the start of his artistic career, Al Held remained devoted to the constant exploration of the possibilities of the picture plane. Rather than focusing on what Clement Greenberg referred to in artistic practice as "revealing the flatness of a canvas," Held challenged this Modernist tendency with a predilection for hard-edged and geometric expressionist painting. With the influential work of Jackson Pollock and Piet Mondrian preceding him, Held was able to channel these inspirations into his own paintings - aligning him with what some identified as the second generation of Abstract Expressionism. His style became one of varied abstract expressionism that would redefine the art of painting over and over again until his death in 2005. However, with an irreverent disregard for contemporary artistic trends, Held himself has stated "I'm not an expressionist, I do not want to get something out of me but instead a truth out there into me."¹

The search for universal truth in art was an endeavor to which Held submitted himself for the duration of his lengthy career. As Irving Sandler has written, Held exhibited an "ambition to create a synthetic art that was additive and inclusive, rather than reductive, an art that combined diverse and often contradictory elements and which, thereby, would yield metaphors for contemporary reality in all its plurality, complexity, and ambiguity."² Intrinsicly connected to issues of space, color, volume, chaos and order as well as heavily guided by aspects of Roman art and architecture and contemporary design, the late watercolors represented in this exhibition poignantly attest to Held's lifelong preoccupation with "transform[ing] formal concepts into his own abstract language."³ Held's abstract language typically manifested itself through large scale paintings and murals but is also stunningly obvious in his smaller format and lesser known watercolors, many of which functioned as studies for his larger commissions. One such commission was for the Jacksonville Library (watercolor studies for which can be seen here), which Held was working on at the time of his death in 2005.

Al Held was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1928. He enlisted in the Navy between 1945 and 1947, and returned to New York briefly in 1948 before moving to Paris and enrolling in the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in 1949. Held returned once again to New York in 1952 and

¹ Sandler, Irving. "Appreciation, Al Held (1928-2005), A Maverick in the New York Art World," in *American Art*, Smithsonian Institution, (Volume 20, Issue 9, October 1983), 125.

² Sandler, Irving. 1984. *Al Held*. New York: Hudson Hills Press.

³ Labate, Lynn. "The Evolution of Style," in *Al Held: The Evolution of Style*. 2008. Long Beach: University Art Museum.

received his first American solo exhibition in 1959 at the Poindexter Gallery. In 1962, Held was appointed Associate Professor of Art at Yale University. He was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1966. Since then, Held has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, including shows at the San Francisco Museum of Art (now SFMoMA) (1968), Corcoran Gallery of Art (1968), P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (2002), and the Orlando Museum of Art (2007). He has also been included in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago, to name a few. His work is in the public collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, among others.