

CHEIM & READ

Art in America

March 1995

Al Held at Robert Miller

This was a show of medium-size expressionistic abstractions painted by Al Held in Paris in 1950-52, when he was in his early 20s. Held's paintings of the late '50s and early '60s show blunt geometric forms in flat colors and an energetic, trembling line. Later, his line firmed and he pursued ever-more-complex geometric structures. These untitled early works, all oil on canvas or board, feature loose bands of colored energy emerging from black fields—usually one band per painting. Seven works are in the 4-by-3-foot range, while five others are smaller, about 2 by 3 feet.

In some respects, the Paris paintings show the influence of Abstract Expressionism. The paint is thickly applied, and the impression of the brush is omnipresent. On the other hand, the earthbound palette is reminiscent of Dubuffet, while the calligraphic element in many brings Mark Tobey to mind. And there is a studied quality about them—they seem formed, molded, not improvised. Even in areas of brushy impasto, placement of strokes is precise, almost delicate; the heavy, dark paint on the perimeters looks patted into

place, not brushed.

In many of the works, the colored band is horizontal, but in one it is vertical, running from the top to the bottom of the canvas. It has a totemic, human aura and is also formally reminiscent of Barnett Newman. In the most colorful painting in the show the underlying field is brown, not black. Strokes of red and green are visible near the bottom, and there are also individual black marks. In this work energy is concentrated in a central horizontal patch, and strokes are broader—the brush used is wider—than in the other paintings.

In the large works, colored elements sometimes seem forlorn, stranded in a domineering expanse. The most effective works are the small ones in which light tones vibrate powerfully in relation to the picture frame. One work features white shapes resembling human forms—heads, arms, legs—that seem to dance in a night space. The best paintings in the show may be two in which clear white emerges from the dark and swirls with a sinuous force. The white is paired with a cerulean blue, making the most vivid statement in the series, a clarity Held would carry into future efforts.

—Vincent Katz

Al Held: Untitled, 1950-52, oil on board, 28 1/2 by 24 1/2 inches; at Robert Miller.

