

Overview

Al Held

In 1992, when Al Held was in San Francisco working with us on prints, the Embarcadero Freeway was being torn down. It ran along the waterfront and had been damaged in the 1989 earthquake. "I helped build that freeway!" Held exclaimed, delighted, as were most San Franciscans, to see it go. He had lived in San Francisco for about a year in 1955 and worked as a laborer on the freeway while he painted at night. He had shared a house with Ronald Bladen, who became known as a Minimal sculptor, and Yvonne Rainier, a dancer who, later on in New York, influenced dance toward working with ideas then being used by painters and sculptors. There was a printing press in the basement used by Allen Ginsberg and other Beat poets.

Held was born in 1928 in New York City and his first art training was at the Art Students' League there in the late 1940s. He went to Paris in 1950 where he studied art for three years, then went back to New York. Before and after his year in San Francisco, he was part of a group of young artists who showed in a gallery on Tenth Street and met the older Abstract Expressionists at the Cedar Street Bar. As critic Dore Ashton has written, "he, and many of his cohorts, had been brought up on the language of painterly abstraction. They understood it. They could read it."

But they didn't want to speak it anymore. By 1960, Held had begun to paint flat big paintings of loosely-formed geometric shapes, like those in *House of Cards*, a large painting in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Constance Lewellan, when she interviewed Held for *View*, remarked that they often show it in their rotunda, "where you can get a lot of distance on it."

"From the early days," Held replied, "that notion of seeing my paintings from a distance, of their coming into focus from a distance, has been a consistent aspect of my work. In the fifties, artists like Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko wanted to have their paintings shown in a very contained

space. They painted in small studios, intentionally. They were interested in physical intimacy, forcing the viewer to be closer than he wanted to be. I always preferred my paintings to have bigger, more open spaces. It's as though the second generation, my generation, was more outgoing, and the generation of Still and Rothko was more truly existential." It was Held's outgoing approach that eventually led him to break away from current art theory about the flatness of the picture plane and create illusions of depth in his work.

"The kind of structure I am looking for in my paintings is not the kind you see in Minimal sculpture, or a Mondrian painting, both of which I think of as relating to a nineteenth century perfect-universe idea," he says. "I believe intuitively that there is such a thing as a structure in the world, but that it is like a three and a half footed stool. It is not totally logical, or reproducible. It is full of paradoxes and



Al Held with printers Mari Andrews, Lawrence Hamlin and Renee Bott, San Francisco, 1994.

contradictions, but that's part of the structure."

When Held made the choice to fly in the face of aesthetic canons of flatness and make his painting illusionistic, he did it in a disconcerting way, drawing great scaffoldings hanging in space, circles and triangles suspended all about them, creating, as he says, "three dimensional grids, twisting and moving in space." He used color rather than surface to define space. The paintings are smooth, both visually and physically.

The smoothness, he says, is anti-expressionist and artificial, totally about illusion. But Held's painting is in no way figurative. There is no

reference to anything in our experience, no houses, no sea, nor even the feeling of any figurative thing, but nevertheless Held speaks of his work as containing metaphors. "All formal elements—geometry, asymmetry, light, color, gravity, form—have metaphorical meaning," he asserts. They aren't design elements. They're about an abstract feeling of being in an environment where everything is relative."

Because of the large size of his paintings, the precision of his forms, and the smoothness of his paint surfaces, Held told me he had had limited success in attempts he had made at printmaking at various print shops. His first project with us, in 1985, happened simply because he wanted to go to Japan. After he had done a woodcut there with us, he tried to think of a way he could use intaglio printing.

He decided he wanted to do an engraving, or rather to have someone really skilled engrave an image for him. Looking for someone who could do that, I found an old man who had engraved currency for the United States government, and Held and I drove out to visit him in the country near San Francisco. He had invited several other old men who were engravers and friends of his, and we sat near a river in sunshine listening to their stories about counterfeiting and espionage. The engraver lived in a house trailer, and he had a little desk with his tools on it in a corner of the trailer. He tried a test plate, a few inches square, for us, and it was beautifully detailed. Then Held broached the subject of a three by four foot plate. He would have preferred larger, but that is the biggest size our press can handle. The engraver rolled his eyes and said he would think about it. After that day, he never returned my calls.

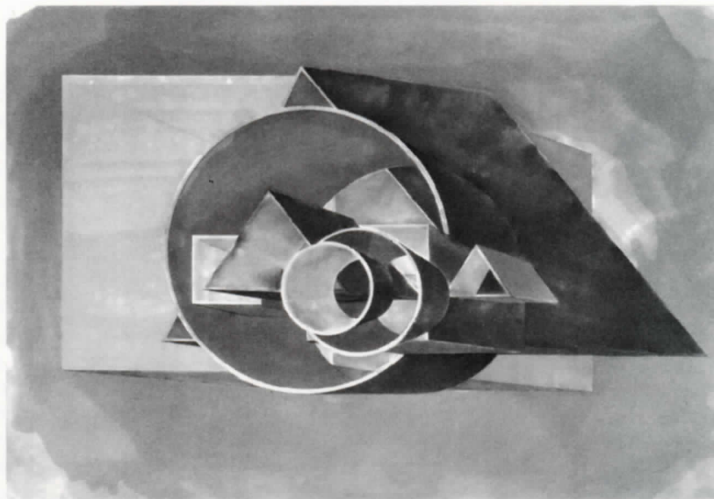
So, in 1986, we began with line etching, which our printers filled in with cross-hatching after Held had put an outline drawing on the plate. It took hours and hours of work ruling close lines. No matter how carefully made, however, eye-spaced ruled lines can never be as perfect as a painted finish, so the black and white prints, which Held likes very much, began to break down his desire for smoothness. Eventually, he started to work in color, and in 1987 began to paint the acid on his plates in a spirit of experimentation. He became interested in "the overlays of color that model and capture a kind of light that I wouldn't have gotten any other way."

Our work with spit bite led Held to a whole body of work in watercolor, and this led to another Japanese woodcut, *Pachinko*, in 1989. About the same time, Held began to make etchings with lots of complex color, culminating

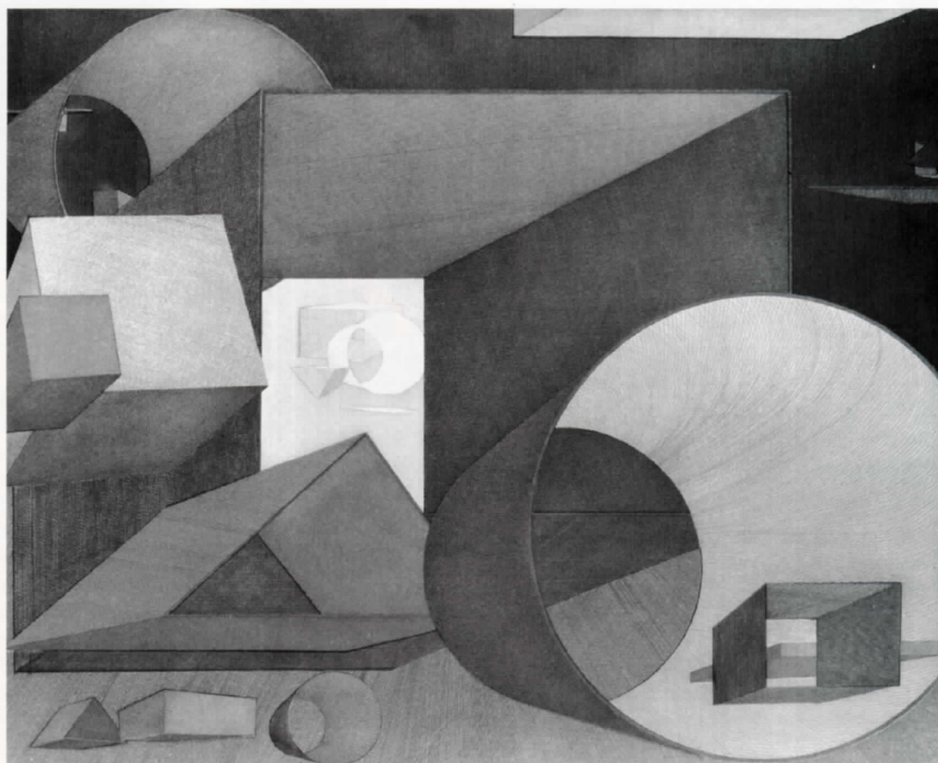
(continued on page 3)

Al Held

Selected Works



Al Held, *Fly Away*, 1992, spit bite aquatint, paper size: 31¼ x 39½"; image size: 20¾ x 30", edition 50.



Al Held, *Liv*, 1992, hard ground and aquatint etching, paper size: 40½ x 54¼"; image size: 35½ x 44¾", edition 30.

(Held continued from front cover)

in *Liv*, 1992, named for printer Renee Bott's daughter, born that year. Whenever Held comes to Crown Point, all our printers work with him at once, since it takes so many hands to accomplish his work. But it is astonishing to me what he has been able to do with the medium. *Liv* was as far as he could go with technical complexity. There are nine plates, some with lines and some with aquatint. For etching printing, that is almost an impossible number because of paper stretch. We had to cut the edition short because we were wasting so many prints with errors in registration. *Liv* also marked a change of viewpoint. "Next time," Held told me after seeing all his prints in a 1992 show in our gallery, "I'm going somewhere very different. I think my wacky space dislocation might start getting pulled by gravity."

When Held arrived in 1993 with a drawing for *Embarcadero*, it was a very different image from what we were used to. "This is like my new paintings," he said. "I'm closing down the floating world and going to the feet-on-the-earth world." And then he added, with a laugh, "Choices bring a lot of problems, and if the choices are infinite, it makes for a mind-boggling situation. But it's better than having only two choices, right or wrong."

Held chose the title, *Embarcadero*, for its suggestion of being a place from which to embark on a journey. To him, the journey is into a new way of thinking and painting. To us, Held's audience, the journey is into a fantasy of delicate space, color and air.

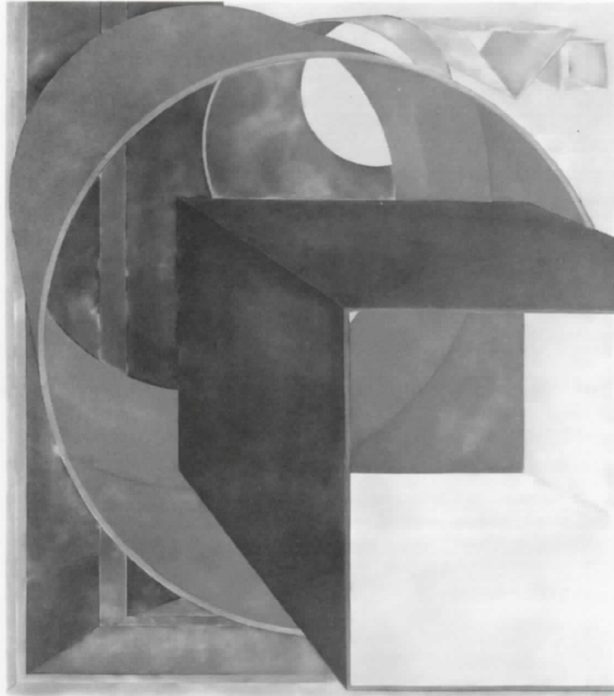
—Kathan Brown



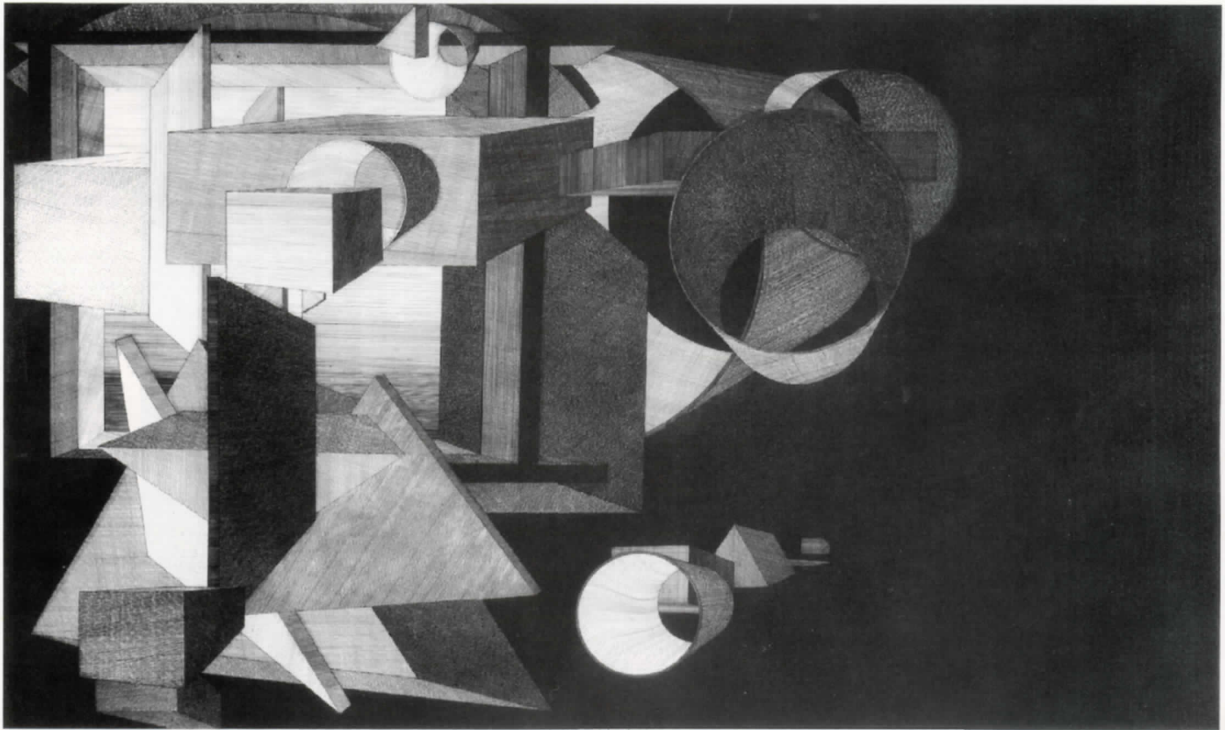
Al Held in the San Francisco studio with printer Daria Sywulak and proofs, 1994.



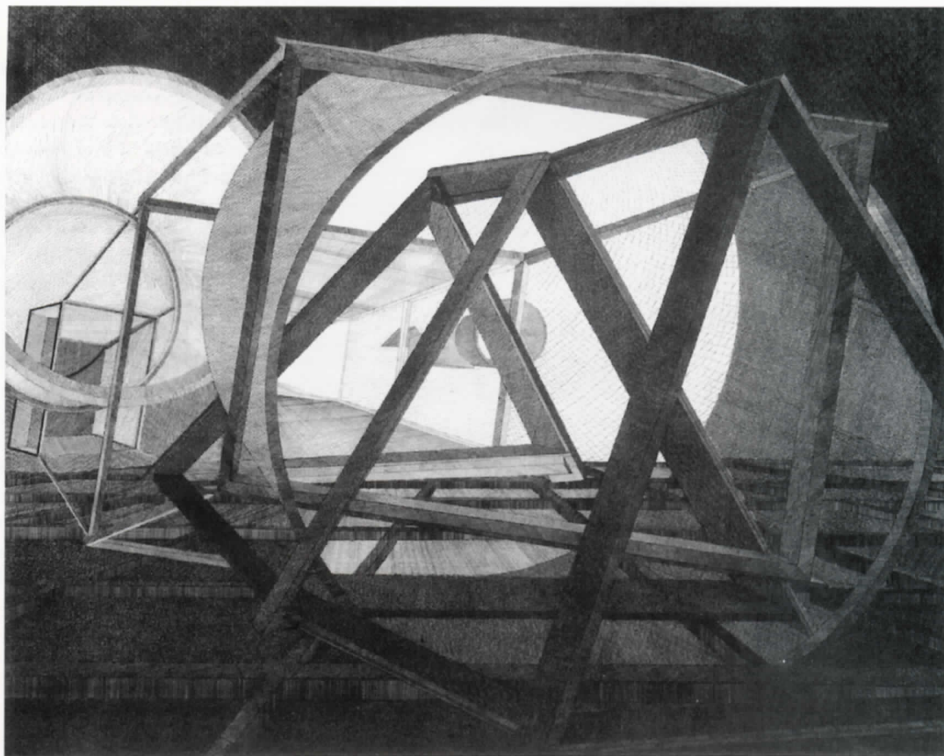
Al Held, *Embarcadero*, 1994, aquatint and spit bite aquatint, paper size: 41 x 54"; image size: 29 3/4 x 43 3/4", edition 50.



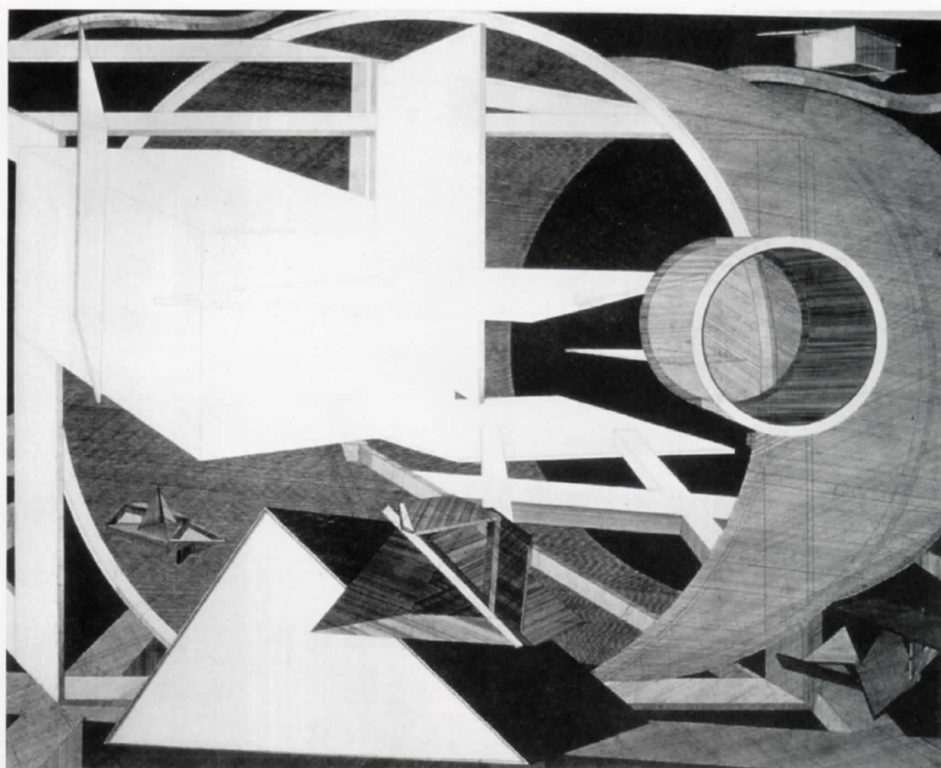
Al Held, *The Space Between the Two*, 1992, spit bite aquatint, paper size: 49½ x 41"; image size: 32½ x 28¾", edition 50.



Al Held, *Straits of Pobai*, 1990, hard ground etching, paper size: 45 x 67"; image size: 33 x 56", edition 50.



Al Held, *Straits of Malacca II*, 1989, hard ground etching, paper size: 41e x 51w"; image size: 35e x 44e", edition 20.



Al Held, *Straits of Magellan*, 1986, hard ground etching, paper size: 41e x 51w"; image size: 35e x 45", edition 50.

Calendar of Events and Exhibitions

New York

Through July 15

John Cage: On the Surface

In conjunction with Rolywholyover, a Circus, at the Guggenheim Museum, SoHo.

July 8 - September 3

Summer Group Show

San Francisco

June 23 - September 3

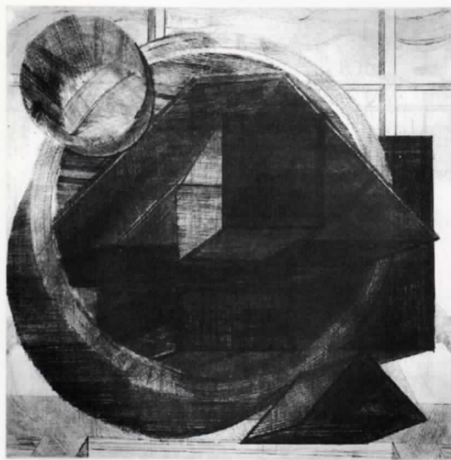
Summer Group Show

New York and San Francisco

September 8 - October 22

Christopher Brown

New Etchings



Al Held, *S.F.*, 1986, drypoint, paper size: 22½ x 22";
image size: 14¾ x 14¾", edition 25.

It's Seasons Club Time Again!

Memberships in Crown Point's Seasons Club are available only during the month of July. This year, during July only, both new and renewing members may select a Club print from our inventory and purchase it at half the regular price.

Club membership costs \$50, or \$35 for renewal. Seasons Club members receive *Overview*, along with advance notices of print releases, and invitations to special events. No print purchases are necessary, but once each season if you buy a print at the regular price, you may buy another of equal or lesser value at half price.

Club (or half-price) prints may be from any available edition, but do not include monoprints, monotypes, consignment prints, portfolios, proofs, or prints by Richard Diebenkorn or John Cage. The Seasons are as follows:

Summer - July, August, September

Fall - October, November, December

Winter - January, February, March

Spring - April, May, June

Our Club members are special clients to us. To join or re-join, send a check before July 31 with your name and address to:

Crown Point Press
657 Howard Street
San Francisco, California 94105

Then, during July, contact Karen McCready or Kim Schmidt in New York (212-226-5476), or Valerie Wade in San Francisco (415-974-6273) to choose your half-price Club print.

Notes

Sol LeWitt has a show, Drawings 1958-92, at the Fundacio Antonio Tapies in Barcelona, Spain, through August 17.

Christian Boltanski is showing at the Fundacio Espai Poble Nou in Barcelona, Spain, through October.

Markus Raetz is showing new work at the Farideh Cadot Gallery in Paris, through July 17.

Judy Pfaff is showing new drawings at the Andre Emmerich Gallery in New York, through July 15.

Per Kirkeby is showing new paintings at the Michael Werner Gallery in New York, through July 8.



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657 Howard Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
415.974.6273
FAX 415.495.4220

568 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
212.226.5476
FAX 212.966.7042