

BETTY CUNINGHAM GALLERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PEARLSTEIN/HELD: Five Decades

November 19, 2009 – February 13, 2010

Opening reception: Thursday, November 19, 6 – 8pm

Gallery hours: Tuesday – Saturday: 10am – 6pm

New York, NY – October 16, 2009 – On November 19th, Betty Cuningham Gallery will open the two person show: *PEARLSTEIN/HELD Five Decades*. The exhibition compares the work of painters Philip Pearlstein and Al Held, both of whom have parallel careers spanning the last fifty years. The show will remain on view until February 13, 2010, at the gallery's space located at 541 W. 25th Street, between 10th and 11th Avenues.

Both artists were born in the mid – 1920's: Pearlstein in 1924 and Held in 1928. The artists arrived in the center of the "art scene" in the late 1940's at the time of the birth of Abstract Expressionism. Both tried their hand in Abstract Expressionism in the 1950's, but by 1960, both had left Abstract Expressionism behind. Philip Pearlstein chose the route of representation – particularly of the female nude, a classic subject throughout art history. Al Held moved toward clear abstraction. Both shared the position that "Expressionism" would be dropped from their paintings. By the late 1960's Pearlstein had committed to the "New Realism", as stated in John Perrault's manifesto:

No stories; no allegories; no symbols.
No hidden meanings; no obvious meanings.
No philosophy, religion, or psychology.
No jokes.
No political content.
No illustration.
No fantasy or imagination; no dreams; no poetry.

At the same time Held removed any evidence of his hand from the canvas, showing no obvious brushwork, and removed the color, producing his well recognized black and white paintings. Held in fact was to anticipate the Minimal Manifesto of Donald Judd as it appeared in *Time* magazine in May of 1971:

No movement, no gesture, no direction.
No Mass (only gleaming metal surfaces and transparencies of color Perspex).
No pedestal: the box on the floor in the sculpture.
No metaphor, no image, and especially
No relation or reference to the human figure.

From the late 1970's on, both painters, following their independent roads, chose to further challenge themselves by increasing the complexity to their compositions and their color.

Up to the time of his death in 2005, Held remained steadfastly committed to abstraction, and actually took abstraction a step further by removing his hand and allowing his paintings to be completed by assistants. His complex paintings based on linear perspective would be created on a working canvas, a canvas never to be shown, but to be executed perfectly on a fresh canvas.

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On the other hand, Pearlstein, the committed figurative artist, in his most recent work, jams figures and objects into his canvases to make a complex and tight abstract composition. In effect, Held's late canvases were oddly *representative* of a new world and Pearlstein's oversized nudes were clearly *abstractions* with elements of recognition.

The exhibition seeks to show the distinctive routes of Pearlstein and of Held. The two paths, which appeared at first to be antithetical one to the other, almost seem today to merge as one in contemporary eyes.

Irving Sandler, who has written extensively on Al Held and on Philip Pearlstein, will be contributing an essay to this exhibition. → [Please click here to read the essay](#)

→ *All images of the work by Al Held are copyright Al Held Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY*

The exhibition will remain on view through Saturday, February 13, 2010. The gallery will be closed from December 24 – January 2. For further information and/or images, please contact the gallery at 212.242.2772 or info@bettycunninghamgallery.com

Next exhibition: William Bailey, New work, February 18 – March 27, 2010