

VAN DOREN WAXTER



Little-Seen Works From an Artist Who Influenced Stella and Kelly



Four of the artist Al Held's India ink drawings, 29 of which are on view at Van Doren Waxter starting next week.
Photos by Charles Benton / Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter

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By 1960, Al Held had the New York art scene sitting upright. His “Taxi Cab” series, riots of impasto geometry, were an unequivocal “feh” to the fashionable ideas of the New York School and the first inkling of what would become his signature hard-lined, “concrete” style — something that caught favor with people like Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, and which Held eventually developed into rigorous, near-trigonometric excursions into space and perspective.

Given the direction his work would end up going, the elegant, calligraphic brush-stroke drawings Held did that year, on view at Van Doren Waxter next week, might seem like

diversions or maybe quick studies, the equivalent of some light stretching. But this is Held we're talking about: an artist who took what he considered the mealy ambiguity of Abstract Expressionism and effectively threw it through a plate-glass window. So these works — which evoke a Noguchi “Paris Abstraction” and Chinese calligraphy — are more than an enigmatic stopover on the way to more meaningful work.

While Held's name perhaps hasn't aged as well as New York School nabobs like Pollock or De Kooning, he remains a crucial part of its history, and of the city itself. Born in Brooklyn to Jewish émigrés from Eastern Europe, he grew up poor in the East Bronx, a product of the city's public schools and the Art Students League on 57th Street. It would be fair to say Held contained multitudes: He was a burly outer-borough New Yorker who studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris; he worked construction on the freeways of the Bay Area and taught at Yale; he was the founder of both the Brata Gallery on 10th Street in New York and a moving company. As the critic Barbara Rose has [suggested](#), “he was a true dialectic all by himself.”

The 29 rarely-seen drawings on view at Van Doren Waxter confirm that. They're spare, each just one or two brush strokes of black India ink on waxed butcher paper — yet they have a raw, liberated energy, a gestural undertow at work. It's easy to wade into their inky pools before being swept out completely.

Like his mammoth “Alphabet” abstractions, in which he levitates hulking letterforms like Mylar balloons or lets them swallow his canvases whole, the forms here dilate toward the edges before spilling over. And just as the “Alphabet” series would riff on advertising's assaultive, screaming billboards that became a default visual signifier of the American landscape, Held's brush strokes can seem to anticipate graffiti's fervent squiggles and ecstatic physicality. That he worked on both within a year is more or less standard for his rapidly evolving explorations.

Undoubtedly Held's most-seen work, the undulating glass mosaic “Passing Though” at the Lexington Avenue-53rd Street subway station, is a joyously fractal expression of New York's unyielding thrum. It was the last artwork Held completed before he died in 2005, yet it's not hard to pluck out the forms present in the brush-stroke drawings done 45 years earlier — a sinuous line, a swooping plane, a tangled curve. It's as though Held swam in the same forms all that time, perpetually finding new ways they could breathe. As he once said, “We're not going to get rid of chaos and complexity, but we can find a way to live with them.”

“Al Held: Brushstrokes: India Ink Drawings From 1960” is on view from May 12 – July 8 at Van Doren Waxter, 23 E. 73rd Street, New York, vandorenwaxter.com.