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Swoon: Street Smart

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reviews

Philip Pearlstein and Al Held

Betty Cunningham

Figuration and abstraction have much more in common than critics often allow. That was amply demonstrated in this dazzling show, which traced the careers of good friends Philip Pearlstein (b. 1924) and Al Held (1928–2005) from the '50s onward. Painting in America opened up after the death of Jackson Pollock, in 1956; from then on, no single style would dominate the national scene.

Both artists' works from the '50s show self-liberation in the making. Pearlstein's 1954 *The Capture* looks like a riff on Rubens, and its struggling nudes have all the swirling compositional elements of the Baroque. Even the 17th-century technique of cutting pieces off figures to focus the viewer's eye is here—a device that became one of Pearlstein's trademarks. Held's *Untitled* (1958) seems more like a picture from its period: lots of energy and bold brushwork. But closer examination reveals this painting, which contains echoes of Hans Hofmann, to be a harbinger. Horizontal and vertical lines assert a geometric presence: order is about to take control of Held's work.

There was a coolness in the works from the '60s in the show. Held's *Echo* (1966) is geometric, but at the same time active, reminiscent of the ever-widening circles generated by a stone breaking the surface of a lake. The painterly Sturm und Drang of



LEFT Philip Pearlstein, *The Capture*, 1954, oil on canvas, 48" x 40".

RIGHT Al Held, *Untitled*, 1958, oil on canvas, 72½" x 54½".



the '50s were over, and Pearlstein's wonderful portrait *Al Held and Sylvia Stone* (1968) documents it: the two subjects are in a guarded repose against a wall that is itself a Minimalist surface.

By the '70s, each painter had found his idiom. Held's huge (114-by-168-inch) *Northwest*, from 1973, exults in its deployment of black-and-white geometric shapes. If not art for art's sake, then form for form's sake. Pearlstein, meanwhile, had moved closer to transforming the representation of the human figure into still-life. His *Female Model on Ladder* (1976) reduces the body to an artifact, as if to respond to the geometric abstractions of Held. That of course was not the case, though the later work of both artists shows them acquiring more intensity in their respective veins: Held's geometry becomes a world in itself, independent of lived reality, while Pearlstein's crowded scenes become more and more like dreamscapes, places in the mind where life and death, memory and desire are equally at home. All in all, this was a superb show of two great American artists.

—Alfred Mac Adam