



PHOTOGRAPH: GUY BELL/REX

Review

Sublime confidence and colour emerge from the darkness

Jonathan Jones

Art
Alex Katz: Black Paintings

Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

★★★★★

The veteran American artist Alex Katz was inspecting the hang of his new paintings while I looked at them, but I could not ask him any questions. I was dumbstruck. The only thing I could have said to him at that moment would have been a stuttered, "How come you paint so well?"

How can simple pictures of faces be so unexpected, exciting and fascinating? Katz has been painting portraits for a long time now – he's 87 and began his career in the age of Jackson Pollock – and his latest works do not shatter his established style.

Their main novelty is that all the figures are set against black. Many of the pictures have a wide CinemaScope

format so the people in them stand out as colourful shapes against a nightscape of glossy darkness. Nicole in a red coat looks like she's walking at midnight in Central Park. Vincent in a white shirt has his back turned to the artist, as if lost in black thoughts. All these people, identified by first names only, stand quietly and softly in a delicate nocturnal mood. Tender is the night.

It really is a mystery how Katz paints so very well, for he uses methods that seem doomed to fail. He summarises details of faces and hair in the stylish visual shorthand of an illustrator for *Vanity Fair* or the *New Yorker*. In the 1950s, Andy Warhol drew cute illustrations for adverts and magazines. Warhol dropped this charming style to become an avant-garde artist, but Katz has kept right on perfecting a manner rooted in cartoons. Yet he is utterly serious.

Confidence is everything. Katz has a sublime conviction that his portraits are the truth. The exhibition includes a small room of painted sketches of

the people in the main gallery. His initial paintings are fresh, direct, honest observations of the sitters. The difference between them and a finished Katz painting is instructive. As he translates his observations into big pictures he simplifies, purifies and abstracts. A nose becomes a pink shadow, eyebrows thin brown lines, wisps of hair yellow waves.

In the exhibition catalogue an interviewer asks Katz about the abstract artist Kazimir Malevich. Because of the

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black, you see – Malevich painted the Black Square in 1915. This is why I am glad I did not try to question Alex Katz. The abstracted faces of his friends have more to do with ancient Egyptian portraits or Byzantine icons than with modernism. Katz seems to be looking for a truth hidden within appearances. He reveals the essence of a person in a few strong colours and lines. Like the Greek philosopher Plato, he is searching for the real forms that we usually see only as shadows on a cave wall. He is after a truth deeper than the passing moment.

And almost every time, it is there to see. Katz does not turn people into stylish clichés. On the contrary, he exposes their inner truth. That is what makes these paintings so powerful: they achieve the highest goals of portraiture in a gloriously American language. Alex Katz is a miraculous artist. That is what I wish I had said to him.

Alex Katz: Black Paintings at the Timothy Taylor Gallery, from 28 February to 2 April