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Katz's portrait captures 'lifelikeness' of friend

By **Sebastian Smee** | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 14, 2015

BRUNSWICK, Maine — Alex Katz made this strangely staggered portrait of his friend Edwin Denby in 1964. Denby was a famous figure in bohemian mid-century Manhattan. There was only one of him, but he was impressively manifold.

He was not only a poet but a dance critic — the greatest of his generation, as alive and responsive to classical ballet as to the experimentation of Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham. He became close friends with Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky in the 1930s, and with Franz Kline and Katz in the '50s and '60s.

Despite these relationships, he only wrote three essays about visual artists. Two were about de Kooning; the third was on Katz. (A subsequent poem, “Alex Katz paints his north window,” touched on both artists.)



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Katz liked Denby's poetry. "At first," he wrote in "Invented Symbols," his autobiography, "his sonnets seemed good but difficult. They are not smooth."

This was a problem for the smooth and concertedly hard-boiled Katz. But "after reading them over and over," he wrote, the poems "became good friends, more interesting, more thrilling, and more immediate."

This portrait, which belongs to the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, is made more immediate and yes, more thrilling, by the simple tactic of repeating the figure of Denby four times. (There is a second version with just a single figure of Denby at the Colby College Museum of Art.)

Each iteration, cut from a piece of Masonite and attached to the purple background, is subtly but significantly different. The differences are painterly rather than mechanical. You see them in, for instance, the eyes, the modeling of the arms, and the touches of yellow around the meeting point between Denby's black pants and white shirt.

These differences produce not a hollowing out of presence, as in the replications of Andy Warhol or the blur of Gerhard Richter, but a kind of uncanny increase, one that wavers between humorous surprise and outright alarm.

Upon seeing Katz's portrait for the first time, Denby wrote: "I saw not a flattering likeness, but the person I catch without warning in a mirror."

He described Katz's collages and cutouts as "foolery hinged on lifelikeness. . . . You think you see more of a likeness than the object shows, and you see much less than it shows."

Katz's works deal with a serious question, Denby continued: "How can everything in a picture appear faster than thought, and disappear slower than thought?"

Katz has been trying to make pictures that present convincing answers to this question for the past 50 years. He's been pretty successful.

EDWIN DENBY

By Alex Katz. At Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine. 207-725-3275, www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum

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