

Interview

Alex Katz: 'The smartest people bought my work'

Emma Brockes



Cézanne? Clumsy. Rothko? Pompous. Banksy? Not boring. At 91, Katz is still a painting powerhouse – and in a new book, he’s got a few choice words for other artists too

The first artworks Alex Katz ever sold were a series of collages he priced at \$40 a piece and, seven decades later, the 91-year-old titan of modern art is still indignant about how the sale went down. “He wanted discounts!” he says. “I said, ‘How can you ask for a discount on a \$40 collage?’ This was my uncle – and I told him to get lost.”

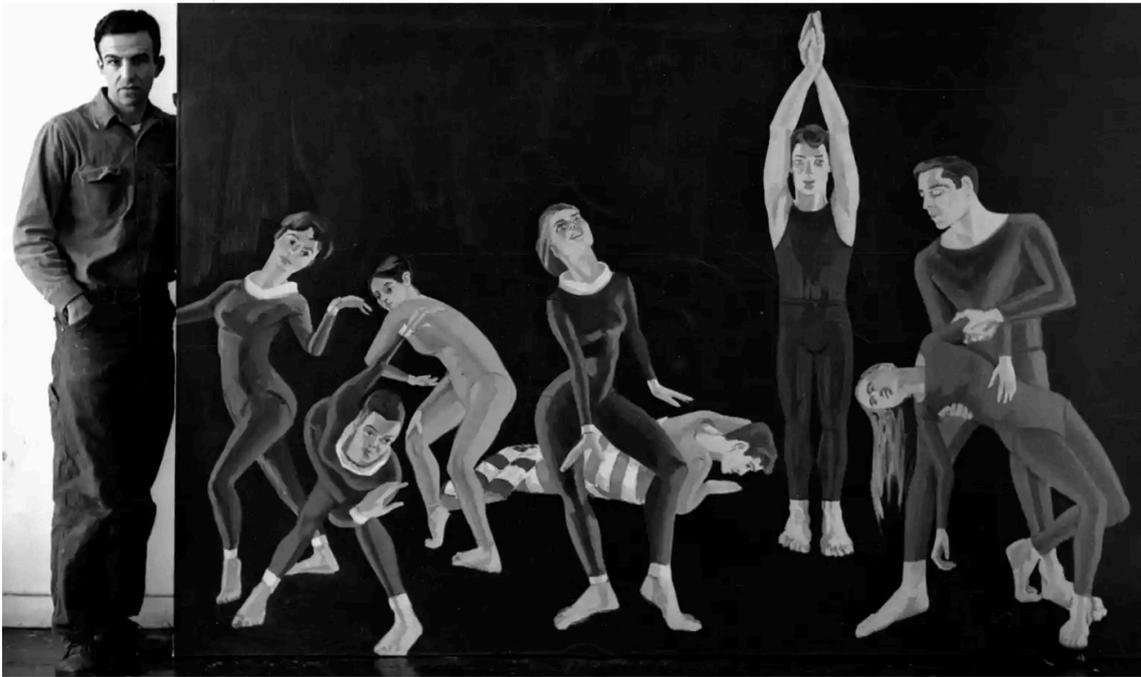
We are in Katz’s studio in downtown New York, a huge loft space where paintings as high as the ceiling lean three deep against every wall. Katz, who is spry and grinning, the very image of a troublemaker, has always been a quick painter, but this summer he found himself working faster than ever. “My production has gone insane,” he says. “I work seven days a week.”

The results are stunning. From the outset, Katz’s large, figurative paintings had a deceptive simplicity that anticipated pop art and his latest work is no different. Katz hired dancers to mimic the poses of ballerinas in Degas’s famous paintings, though he didn’t copy everything the French artist did. “The light doesn’t come from Degas,” he says. “Then there’s a question of the composition and the emotion. All these things are going on simultaneously in one painting, with a simple image. Walk into it.” I walk closer. “All of a sudden it’s perfect,” says Katz. “That’s virtuoso painting. That’s for the painters.”

This statement is typical: Katz’s great charm, in painting and in person, is his inability to beat around the bush. The reason for our meeting is the characteristically pithy book he has written, in which he zips through the major artists of world history, giving his opinion of each in a couple of paragraphs. You might think it would be hard to boil Van Gogh down to 200 words, but this was not Katz’s experience.

“It would be harder for me to extend it,” he says (he often describes his own art as an exercise in “compression”). Nor was deference a problem. Of Cézanne, he says: “I am conscious of his clumsy, overworked surfaces – his problems with human volumes – but on the train ride back I looked at the landscapes out of the window, and it was all Cézanne!” Rothko, meanwhile, is “decorative but beautiful, proficient and pompous” and Seurat’s showstopper, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, is “a disappointment. It is original and has great energy in styling, but it’s dry.” As for De Kooning’s assertion that he didn’t paint in any particular style, it’s “total baloney”. According to Katz, he had “been painting the same pictures for 10 years!”

The result of all this is an immensely readable book that is meant to be read “at street level” – something Katz’s old school buddies from Queens could enjoy. That’s the outer borough of New York he grew up in, the son of two Russian immigrants whose main ambition for their son was that he assimilate. Katz’s father was in business, his mother acted in the Yiddish theatre.



“They had very developed taste in the arts. My mother said she would never marry a Jew because they’re so skinny, and then she met Katz, who had muscles on top of muscles. And he was a playboy! He changed his clothes three times a day. My father lost everything in the revolution, and he came to America and worked in sweatshops and because he was so competitive he did OK. It took him six years to do what can take a generation. He was extremely smart. But he had no drive for business. He said, ‘I know I should get another guy in, but I like coming home at three in the afternoon so we can all go swimming.’”

As a child, Katz says he was “totally wild. I drew all over our staircase wall with crayons. It was there for about 10 years. My parents were very permissive. And because my father’s thing was assimilation, he wouldn’t speak foreign languages to me. So I was caught between two worlds, the world of home and the world of the streets.”

This duality may explain why Katz developed a sense, as an artist, of the unreliability of what we call realism. Technically, his paintings are realistic, but he has always found the term delusional. What he does is “paint what’s in front of me”. It’s a question of perspective. “People think that what they see is real and for ever. But it’s not true. What you see is conditioned by your culture. For example, when I was a kid, Washington Square was like a weak watercolour. Right? And now it’s a TV set. Someone from out of town sees Washington Square, they don’t see a weak watercolour, they see a TV set. They say, ‘Wow, it’s so real!’

“A realistic painting by Rembrandt does not look realistic to me. It’s a great piece of artwork, but it’s no longer realistic. And so you keep going with that and you understand that we don’t live in a time of absolutes any more. It’s all gone. The art world, communism, fascism – they all believed in absolutes. And things changed.”





Katz's only absolutism is the faith he has in the rightness of his taste. After studying art at Cooper Union in Manhattan, he graduated as part of a generation that included Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg – abstract impressionists with whom it was assumed someone of Katz's talent would fall into line. But it didn't interest him. "I wanted to make something look new. I wanted to do a new visual art. It was a big ambition. And kind of stupid. I was in the abstract art world, socially – they all thought I was really stupid. The poets all liked my work – I had some of the smartest people on the planet buying my work. I knew I was OK."

People these days are nostalgic for the art world of 50 years ago, because it wasn't dominated by money. "Yeah," says Katz. "It was real romantic. I was out carving antique frames and I could pay my rent on two days' work. Most artists' lives are sad. Either they get successful when they're young and the rest of their life is sad, or they're not successful and they tell themselves, 'Maybe some time in 300 years.' But they have lives where they can do what they want to do, which I think is terrific. That in itself should make your life successful."

Rather than his fellow artists, Katz looked to poets for inspiration: Frank O'Hara (whose portrait he painted in 1959) and Gertrude Stein. "The language is beautiful. And the ideas are kind of impressive too. The thing with the present tense is the thing that I bought."

This has long been Katz's ambition – to capture the fleeting moment, although not in what he considers the navel-gazing style of the French philosophers. In the 40s and 50s, he says, "a lot of the aesthetics in New York were coming from Paris and I felt it was absolutely of no use. I couldn't relate to it. Camus – he's depressed and can't figure out what to do on a Sunday? I was like, 'Oh, come on.' I mean there are so many great things to do on a Sunday. And the philosophy really was not applicable to my life. My life was basketball, dancing and painting. So the poets were on the same wavelength. They were sophisticated but they were using very common experiences."

Katz has painted his wife, Ada, a former research biologist, dozens of times over the years. The portraits are concerned primarily with surface energy, which he finds as meaningful as works that claim to unearth a "deeper" meaning. "When the dominant characteristic of a painting is called sincerity, that's a bad sign. Sincere painting means it relies on things outside of the painting. 'Sincere art' – as if painting pretty people isn't. Well, it depends who does it."

And the modern art world today? What does he think of Banksy's latest stunt? Katz barks with laughter. "Who knows? You think he'll be another Jeff Koons? I don't know. He puts a lot of energy out there." The 91-year-old looks briefly depressed. "In art, you compete for attention. For public engagement, he's much better than I am." But that's not the art, I say. "Well, that's another story. But we're both competing for public attention." There is a long pause. "I don't think he's boring. He's not boring! I wouldn't write about him." He shrugs.

He intends to keep painting at the same astonishing rate. "I know the fire is there. The fire hasn't abated!" All he wants to do, he adds, is show good manners in a painting. What does that mean? "Always be interesting. If it doesn't engage people," – he raises his eyebrows, teasing, devilish – "there's nothing worse."