



THE ORIGINALS

The Originals: Alex Katz

by Stephanie Eckardt

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Alex Katz wears a Marni sweater; Linder pants. Photograph by Jeff Henrikson.

In an era where seemingly everything is mined for inspiration—or, let's be frank, appropriation—what does it take to be truly one of a kind? A willingness to break the rules is essential; a strong sense of personal style certainly doesn't hurt; but most of all, you need to have a truly meaningful point of view. At *W* we are all about celebrating originality, which is why we've rounded up some of our favorite people who are constantly pushing boundaries, and asked them to share valuable insights. They may be just starting out or in the prime of their careers, but they are all leading the conversation in their chosen fields—whether it's fashion, art, film, music, photography, or even skateboarding. The bottom line is that, regardless of their differences, they all share one very important trait: for them, standing out, rather than blending in, is not an option but a necessity.

Alex Katz is a pioneering artist widely regarded as a precursor to the Pop Art movement. At the age of 92, he has had more than 200 solo exhibitions around the world since he began working in sculpture, drawing, and figurative painting in the 1950s.

You've been living in SoHo since the '60s, apart from spending three months in Maine each year. Do you feel like the only artist who's still in SoHo? How have you seen it change?

Well, we bought the building for the price of the land. SoHo was like an industrial slum, with paper and fur all over the sidewalks. Many of the buildings were used as storage, and the others were usually servicing the garment industry, which was on Broadway. When we got the place, we figured the people always follow the artists. I think I'm the only one who's been there for this long. I'm very old, you know. [He's 92.]

You've definitely seen art world attitudes toward figurative art change over the years.

In the late '50s, even my wife, Ada, told me she thought that any intelligent painter would be painting abstract. But it just didn't interest me. I liked dancing, playing basketball, and the older artists liked existentialism. There were no large figurative paintings that were interesting, as far as I could see, so it was an open area.

One of the key reasons you started working on a massive scale was to defy the Abstract Expressionists. How did they respond?

When I had an opening, the Abstract Expressionist friends of mine wouldn't go into the gallery. They just stopped in to say, "We'll see you later at the bar." I wanted to knock de Kooning off the wall. He's a great painter, but I wanted to put something up that would beat him up. All the people not taking me seriously, I wanted to tell them: "I have more muscle than you have."

Do you still feel that competitiveness?

Yes. It never stops. I think it has to do with my father. He was always better than any man at anything he wanted to do. It comes from insecurity. He gave me the insecurity and the drive.

You would say that you're insecure?

When it comes to painting, yeah, sure.

Is there a moment or work in particular you think of as your creative breakthrough?

People say it's when I started to do figures on flat ground. Willem de Kooning liked them. Philip Guston called me up. Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns called me up. I was in shock. Poets liked my work too. They were all superbright people, so it made me feel I was okay, the world would follow. But I also got a ton of bad reviews. Bob Hughes [Robert Hughes, then the art critic of *Time*] really pissed me off—he called me the Norman Rockwell of the intelligentsia. But the worst one was Hilton Kramer, the art critic of *The New York Times*, telling me how I had lost my way, how I used to be a good painter, and how it was a moral decline. I called my mother up and she said, "Oh, you finally got someone interested in you."



Marni blazer and pants; his own top. Photograph by Jeff Henrikson.

Was the public at all negative?

When I showed my first painting in an avant-garde gallery, an older artist came over to me and said, "Figuration is obsolete." I just said, "Terrific." Twice I had people screaming in the gallery: in Provincetown in 1960 and in Paris in 1975—actually screaming. I was embarrassed, so I told the gallerists, "Jesus, I thought my paintings were pretty pleasant, I'm sorry about this." They said, "No, that's why we brought you here." They were trying to engage the public.

To find your style, you destroyed a thousand paintings you made in the '50s. Do you have any regrets?

Oh, no, absolutely not. We used to throw them in the fireplace. We were living on 28th Street, and I put in a bathtub illegally. It was near the fireplace, so you'd take a bath and throw some paintings in the fire, and warm up and dry yourself. I was experimenting a lot, and some of the paintings worked out and some didn't. I have a pretty strong technique, and it had to do with throwing out a thousand paintings.

Tell me about your relationship to fashion.

Fashion always seemed great to me. I grew up wearing zoot suits. The thing of fashion being a no-no in the art world certainly interested me, but it also has to do with how clothes are a defining feature of America socially. That's how we judge each other—who you want to talk to and who you don't want to talk to.

How has your personal style changed over the years?

Well, zoot suits were out by the time I got to art school at Cooper Union. So then I had no clothes because I was very poor for 10 years. But there were guys who were my size who just got a little bigger than me and gave me their suits. In the last couple of years, I've been wearing hoodies a lot.

You mentioned your wife, Ada, whom you've painted so many times over the years. Have you changed your style of how you've painted her?

Oh, yeah, it's completely changed. When I met her, she was like a generic beauty. In other words, you could put 10 other women into that same place. And as we grow older, the faces get more defined and she became more specific. I have a recent cutout sculpture that's the back of Ada, she's walking away from you, and yet she controls it all. Very few people can pull that off.

You've started using your iPhone to take photos for paintings.

Yeah. I use the iPhone to take pictures of gestures, because you can get gestures that you can't get by drawing. It speeds things up a lot.

You work seven days a week. How do you normally start your day?

I do 300 pushups and 200 sit-ups and stretching. Then I go outside and do a sprint. I get up at 7:30 and try to get to the studio by 9:30 or 10.

Who do you consider an Original?

Sigmar Polke. He's an original artist, a terrific painter.

What does originality mean to you?

You want to make something new, something through which people will see art and the world.