

Alex Katz *Black Paintings*

Timothy Taylor Gallery, London 28 February – 2 April

'Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté / Luxe, calme et volupté.' Whatever world 'Là' is, it's probably the kind of world Alex Katz depicts, the world he somehow inhabits and the world he offers his viewer, in warm tones made bright by the light of a leisured sun, falling on the bodies and faces of people happy not to do much, nor needing to.

The *Black Paintings* are not *those* paintings, though – not the scenes of bathers in swimsuits or people in beachside groupings or genteel social gatherings or daylight playing on flowers and woodland foliage that tend to attract the greatest attention to Katz's work. The *Black Paintings* are figure portraits, all painted in 2014, with the scenery ditched in favour of a grand background of uniform black, against which his subjects stand, mostly looking to us, sometimes at each other, or into the middle distance. There's little for us to look at, then, apart from their expressions, their demeanour, their clothes – and Katz's laconic, winning, assured sense of line, contour and flat colour. And that is already plenty, even though that plenty is a kind of emptiness.

Three rows of three paintings fill one gallery wall to ceiling height, all of a sort

of 'widescreen' format, and all a uniform, 122 × 274 cm. Against these landscapes of nothing, there are Katz's models; styled, elegant, urbane, relaxed, some of them regular sitters for Katz – wife Ada, grey-haired, regal; the younger Vivien, looking back at her with that mix of familiarity and respect that marks out a good daughter-in-law (*Ada and Vivien*); Katz's son *Vincent*, one of two paintings (the other being *Don*) in which the male figure turns his back on us, face obscured, looking into the depths of the blackness, in well-pressed shirts.

Given the cue that Katz paints people he knows, we can fantasise about relationships and emotions – what are they thinking, what histories do these people share with each other and the artist? – and in their unstressed poise they advertise familiarity and intimacy. And yet, simultaneously, if that falls away, they become something else: a type of person, or a person who inhabits a particular group, and carries the subtle signs of their belonging. On an adjacent wall we find *Thor and Elizabeth*, in their minimal blacks and greys, subtly chic light coats, close together and face-to-face, looking into each other's eyes with wry amusement. Whoever they are, they're a couple, a suggestion

cutely slipped into *Elizabeth*, where she is reproduced almost identically but he is absent, while a grey band added to her ring finger points to his absence, and their relationship.

How could we not like these confident yet unostentatious residents of a happy life, with their flowing hair and designer outerwear? Smiling, dark-haired *Eve* in her vest top, no doubt on her way to yoga class, or blonde *Nicole*, steadfast and serious in her bright red storm jacket – a garment either exquisitely on-trend, or worn because she's *really* going yachting?

All this, given shape in Katz's optimistic, high-low cultural fusion of line and colour, somewhere between Matisse and Hergé, but without the latter's black outlines, which made everyone the master of *ligne claire* drew contained and dynamic and ready for action; here, everyone radiates actionless energy, which pushes the blackness into the background.

Even in his portraits, even suppressing all context, Katz can't help but conjure a utopian world of universal privilege – an aspiration for most, a reality for some – of happy, convivial people living in a fulfilled society. (T)here, everything is order and beauty; luxury, calm and sensuality. J.J. Charlesworth



Elizabeth, 2014, oil on linen, 213 × 152 cm.
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