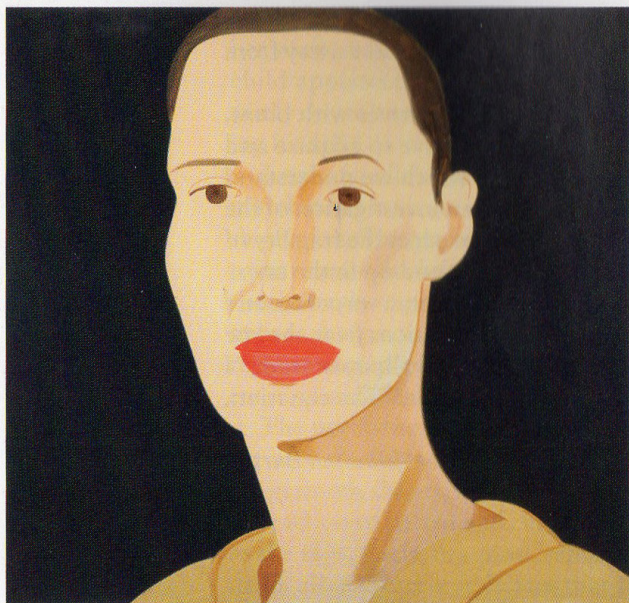


# Alex Katz

GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE

In considering Alex Katz's exhibition at Gavin Brown's enterprise, one might almost be forgiven for ignoring the paintings actually on view; it's hard to concentrate on the work, strong as it is, amid the chatter about its new location and the details of the artist's decampment from Pace. In Katz's very public retellings, Brown emerges as a well-intentioned enthusiast: To the artist's approval, Brown claims that Katz's art lies in picturing "the immediacy of light," which plays against figures and landscapes that, in this reading, serve as pretexts for the articulation of form. Indeed, the octogenarian artist's presence arguably represents not only an apotheosis of the stable's ethos (from the unremitting intimacy of Elizabeth Peyton to the weirdly affecting suspension of time in Peter Doig, or even, quite differently, the sociability posited by Rirkrit Tiravanija), but arguably a decisive influence on it, one that is all the more legible now.

Katz's brand of flatly rendered subjects composed of smooth, broad, near-monochromatic planes of color has changed little since the mid-1950s. Though the thematic stress has fallen in different places, from his wife, Ada (who appears in the present context, too, in *Ada*, 2010, an arrestingly simple raven-haired icon), to vacant nocturnes, a Katz is inimitably itself—and the artist is on the rise, again, anew, with upcoming shows at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Tate St. Ives in Cornwall, UK. Similar to Edward Hopper, with whom he is sometimes compared, Katz has long refurbished a realism that is actually a kind of abstraction spread across the skin of sensible things, and the spareness of Katz's work suggests he is a ruthless editor within the parameters of a single composition. His recent show benefited from the same rarefied tendency: The thirteen canvases here were installed pitch-perfectly, with a couple astringent white fields of sketchy fuchsia, cantaloupe, and



Alex Katz, *Ulla*, 2010, oil on linen, 80 x 84".

yellow wildflowers interspersed among his signature black-background portraits (whose subjects included friends and acquaintances, such as the wife of his London dealer, and, in *Rica*, 2011, and *Rica with Smile*, 2010, Francesco Clemente's studio manager) and punctuated by *Reflection 7*, 2008, a darkened, Rorschach-like landscape with a symmetrical thicket of leaves that is mirrored on the inky surface of water.

If these panels conjured a world both consummately material and oddly inaccessible, the three billboards adorning the gallery's facade

suggested an even bleaker reality. One trumpeted **HARD DAYS AHEAD**, while two others featured identical black-and-white portraits of Prince Charles. The version to the left presented his face cropped close, in a square, and the other showed the visage adrift in a horizontal rectangle. Although they're ostensibly designed to address the public, the panels in the triptych seemed smaller (in size but also scale) than the easel paintings inside. Perhaps this was an effect of the withering away of color—a worthy trade-off for the stark, graphic impact of black-and-white—or of the billboards' unadulterated facticity. In any case, these works manifested a return to the pleasures of illusionism, even a mode of classicism, that was also undeniably pop, and showed the two modes to be almost inextricable. The billboards, and Katz's more conventional canvases, too, may well be mementos of a golden age, albeit one that exists only in the here and now, since the game is nearly up.

—Suzanne Hudson