

MEDIUM COOL

Sam McKinniss on Alex Katz

AT LONG LAST, New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum gave the people exactly what we want. What we want is Alex Katz. We want him painting the city we live, work, and die in. We want him painting day and night in all seasons. We want him painting his friends and fellow artists, his son, and his grandsons. We also want him painting his wife, Ada Katz, more than a thousand times as an ongoing public expression of total fidelity to her and to craft. We want to witness one man's journey from midcentury Manhattan to midcoast Maine, a distance traveled through time as well as space. We want to forgive and forget the latent defect of Frank Lloyd Wright's slanting, curving cream-colored walls—so uplifting, yet so inhospitable to hanging flat art. We want to climb that sunlit ramp. While doing so, we want to chart the gradual movement away from dogmatic discourse toward civilized, painted



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oblivion. We want the ascendancy of style over substance, as if there were a difference, and frankly, we want to be moved.

We want to be moved because we need to move on. Twenty-two years into the twenty-first century, it is time to live freely. The time to be free is at all times, of course, yet in this instance it is past time, as well, to shake off whatever residual purchase twentieth-century



View of "Alex Katz: Gathering," 2022–23, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Foreground: Jack and D. D. Ryan, 1968. Photo: Ariel Ione Williams and Midge Wattles.

ARTFORUM



*Alex Katz, Paul Taylor Dance Company, 1963–64, oil on linen, 84 × 96".
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modernisms may still lay some claim to. “Gathering” is as much a celebration of Katz as it is a reminder of the isms that have dogged our good painter for decades, the arguments leveled against his specific will to work that once upon another time served as barriers for him to bristle against and surpass.

Establishment resistance to Katz all but evaporated back in 1986, however, when New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art mounted his first career retrospective. Prior to then, truculent Abstract Expressionists routinely picketed his gallery shows all over the world, enraged by what seemed a betrayal of the New York School’s progressive mission to rush international culture into a spiritual high-mindedness at odds with any type of quotidian life on the ground. According to his detractors, Katz’s crime against art was his optimistic embrace of fashion illustration and billboard advertising as compositional influences, which they viewed as nonredemptive and crass. Katz assimilated these popular forms despite his

refusal to identify with Abstract Expressionism’s most successful countermovement, Pop art, an identification that could have made him palatable or even as celebrated as Hockney or Warhol, and much sooner. Nevertheless, he was not, and still is not, a Pop artist, being much too invested in the depiction of observable, local phenomena involving light and color, his friends and family, his natural or citified surroundings. Much of his work was and is made en plein air, to boot—an outmoded nineteenth-century practice anathema to modernism’s strictest devotees.

Broad popular appeal eventually arrived anyway, as evinced by the Whitney retrospective. Quickly thereafter, however, Katz vowed to push his studio practice further into places “unstable and terrifying,” his words, to subsume several key aspects of nonobjective art into his signature style of large-scale figuration. He was fifty-nine then, will be ninety-six come July, and is still painting daily.* Now we are blessed with the opportunity to enjoy what



Alex Katz, *Round Hill*, 1977, oil on linen, 71 × 96". © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

followed, as well as to revisit the best of Katz's earlier oeuvre.

"Gathering," organized by curator Katherine Brinson, rises to the occasion of its title, in the sense of a get-together. When I first visited, on a weekday morning shortly after it opened, the line to gain entrance was lengthy. A party atmosphere pervades the inside as well, on account of there being so many well-painted, brightly colored pictures of people wearing fabulous clothes. Several are terrific group portraits, such as *Paul Taylor Dance Company*, 1963–64; *The Cocktail Party*, 1965; *Mr. and Mrs. R. Padgett*, *Mr. and Mrs. D. Gallup*, 1971; and *Round Hill*, 1977, a pleasantly hot beach scene featuring five suntanned figures lounging on sand. They are not doing much else aside from posing, save for one woman in stripes, mostly cropped out by the painting's right edge. She is reading a Pelican paperback of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, the rare outside reference to literature adding a dash of tragedy to an otherwise untroubled setting.

Most of the paintings can be seen up close as well as from afar, beyond the parapet edge on opposite ends of the spiraling promenade.

Landscapes, flowers, and faces remain legible at this distance because of their boldness and size, and peering out at them is a bit like stealing glances from across a crowded room. Almost everything benefits from this situation, from both the long view and the close-up, looking reminiscent yet immediate, all charming, supercool, and seductive.

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Taking in the painted aluminum cutout *Jack and D. D. Ryan*, 1968, a freestanding, two-dimensional, double-sided double portrait depicting the couple mid-conversation, you see right through the negative space separating D. D. from Jack. Viewed straight on, this void situates itself such that the conversing pair frame another painting clear on the other side of the museum, *Upside Down Ada*, 1965. Mr. Ryan is wearing a smart dark-blue suit and a loud shirt and tie, highball in hand. Mrs. Ryan, renowned for her eccentric chic, is in a

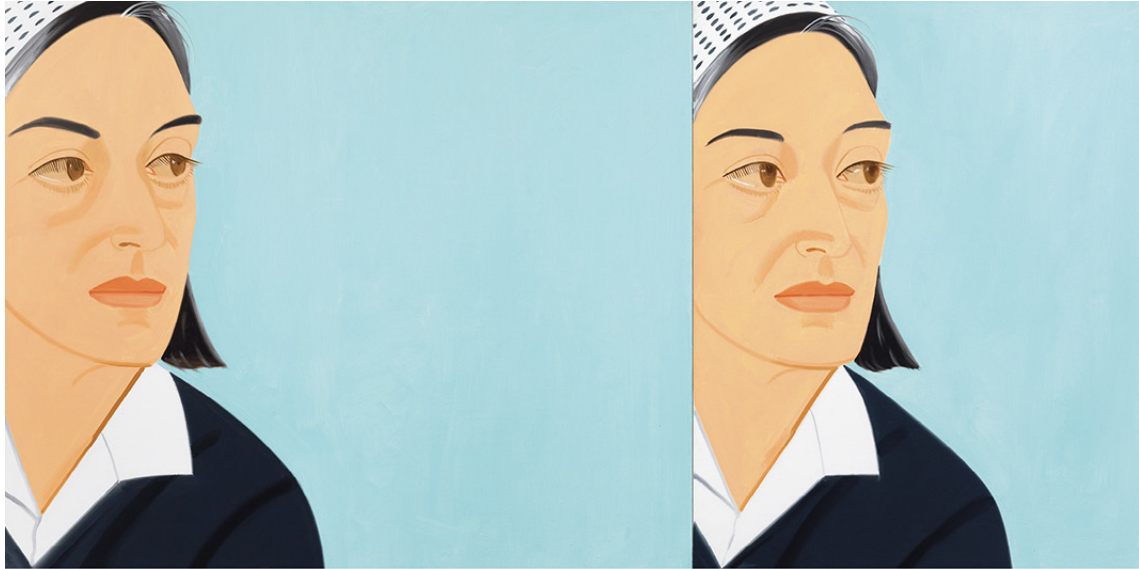
MONICA DE CARDENAS



Alex Katz, The Black Dress, 1960, oil on linen, 71 5/8 × 83 3/4". © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.



Alex Katz, Dogwood, 2013, oil on linen, 6' 7" × 11' 8". © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.



Alex Katz, *Ada Ada*, 1991, oil on linen, 4' 11 7/8" × 10' 1/2". © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

red-and-white windowpane-check minidress, red-and-pink polka-dot scarf, white tights, and white heels. Both figures' stances appear neatly hieroglyphic in their stiffness. But Ada from across the way? Hair down, bare-shouldered, presumably lying on her back, telegraphing bedroom eyes and a suggestive half smile, like a smoldering movie star blown up to fill a canvas the size of a large TV. Some party!

Katz's cutouts innovate the modern figure-ground dialectic, understood in the era of his youth as a productive tension negotiated by the pictorial or thematic subject, the "figure," and the rectangular object on which it is typically composed, the "ground." Early in his practice, Katz struck a rather plain deal on this front, for the most part deciding to center his figures on flat, nonemotive, monochrome backgrounds informed or inspired by the commercial arts, in clear opposition to the haptic working methods developed by his AbEx compatriots. The cutouts resemble standees, so-called, mass-produced novelty items often seen in movie-theater lobbies as promotions for upcoming features, still in use to this day, however not usually handpainted anymore and almost never exhibited in galleries. As two-sided portraits, suddenly freed from their rectangles, these figures enter the dazzling social world that surrounds them at any given moment and take that, instead, as their ground.

Jack and D. D. Ryan and others like it, such as the cutout portraits of poet Frank O'Hara or of painter-writer Joe Brainard, take full advantage

of Wright's difficult architecture in unexpected ways, well aware of how strenuously artists and critics alike voiced objection to the building when it was unveiled in 1959. At the New Yorker, critic Lewis Mumford excoriated the museum right after it opened, writing that its "dynamic flow is accentuated by the silhouettes of the spectators, who form a moving frieze against the intermittent spots of painting on the walls." He used this point to bolster the consensus that Wright's interior scheme was too ruinously distracting to accommodate amenable experiences with art.

It is fun, however, to imagine Katz visiting the Guggenheim in '59—the same year he embarked on his cutouts—and knowing ahead of time how good they would look here. They are silhouettes, after all, and somewhat friezelike. (For his part, Wright responded to his critics by saying, "Painters would produce finer art if they knew it would hang in my museum.") Thus Brinson and Katz's engagement with the challenge of the building is expert and quite often amusing. The handful of cutout figures are distributed throughout the exhibition, wherein they appear free to mingle, just like everybody else here to see them.

KATZ DESCRIBES those heady early years in his 2012 autobiography, *Invented Symbols*: "Making paintings isn't a thing you do by yourself. Your friends help a lot. I was helped a lot in 1953, when I first put a painting up at the Tanager [Gallery, on East Tenth Street], by a teacher who came by, and as a friendly gesture,

said, 'Alex, you can't do this.' I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'Figuration is obsolete, and color is French.' He helped a lot because I said to myself, 'That's what you think, Buster. I'm going to do it, and I'm going to push it down your throat.'"

That's Katz.

He sounds less combative, almost plaintive, elsewhere in the memoir, writing, "I didn't realize it, but when I decided to paint from life and paint in a representational style . . . I put myself into an extremely isolated position."

Ewa Lajer-Burcharth touches on this unique position in her "Gathering" catalogue essay, likening Katz to Manet and his role in nineteenth-century France as a "painter of modern life," one who spent his time and resources on nothing but the act of painting what was in front of him:

Katz's search for aesthetic originality amounted to a quest for a kind of painting that would articulate his modernity. What approach, what subject, and what style would best capture the mode and mood of one's time? In addition to the art of the past, it was the mass culture of the period—billboards, advertisements, the movies—that helped Katz find answers to these questions.

Obviously, Katz was and is modern, and he was and is fashionable, right now, even if never quite a modernist. He was and is something else altogether, asking his own questions, asserting his own style, arriving to the present with exquisite resolve. "The resulting practice, however, remains difficult to categorize despite the extensive exegesis of his output." Difficult, yes, but not hard to like. That's fashion!

Consider *The Black Dress*, 1960. For the sake of elucidating a fresh grasp on its virtues, it is worth comparing this early Katz picture to Picasso's 1907 masterpiece *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art since 1937. In the Picasso, five naked, anonymous prostitutes strut their stuff across a large, dynamically fractured picture plane, the title indicating a section of Barcelona known for its sex trade. The figures are aggressively rendered in a palette ranging from fleshy blush to earthy reds and browns, set off by blue, gray, and white draping fabrics. A fruit still life slides off a small table painted near the bottom edge, adding ever more turmoil. The advent of Cubism

transforms this vision of hot sensuality into strangely and emphatically planar angularity, the erotic-marketplace encounter made extra confrontational and sharp all around. It is a shocking monument to vulgarity, as if Mount Rushmore were whores carved from pink Himalayan sea salt.

By contrast, Katz's painting includes six representations of Ada happily dressed in the correct feminine attire of '60s urbanity, cycling through a distinct set of fashion-model poses. In all but two of these, she is making calm yet direct eye contact with viewers. She does so inside a beige but otherwise nondescript interior. On the "wall" in back and to the right of these Adas hangs another "portrait." In it, we see half a man wearing a suit and tie, really a painting-within-a-painting not unlike Picasso's aforementioned still life. What of Ada's skin that is visible is slapdash and pale, painted quickly and plainly. She's got on high heels to match the black dress. Her stylish dark hair is flipped into a Jackie O. bob, her facial expression serene . . . or coolly inexpressive.

The painted visages on *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)* were famously inspired by a collection of African carved-wood ceremonial masks that Picasso first viewed at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris. This visual reference is utterly apparent at face value, so to speak, if not also the painting's most salient feature. Katz, on the other hand, has often cited his admiration for the ancient Egyptian royal-court sculptor Thutmose as his major point of reference. Thutmose is best known for the bust of Nefertiti, ca. 1351–1334 BCE, one of the most ravishing artworks ever made in the history of humankind, which is housed, controversially, at the Neues Museum in Berlin. Its rediscovery in 1912 by German Egyptologists digging at Tell el-Amarna and subsequent introduction to contemporary viewers make it just as much a twentieth-century phenomenon as it is a marvel of antiquity, but I digress.

My point is thus: Whereas African occult objects held in Europe helped Picasso strike the radical breakpoint of Cubism in 1907, the master craftsman responsible for setting Nefertiti in stone helped Katz keep his cool for nearly eight decades. Now list all the art-world changes swirling around Picasso and Katz in terms of style revolutions alone, then think of the nonstop sociopolitical upheaval unfolding globally throughout the entire past century before proceeding apace into this one. Given



Alex Katz, *Ada*, 2009, oil on linen, 60 × 84". © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

that, it may be easier to countenance Picasso's anarchic genius than it is to behold Katz's even keel, but here we are.

Walking around in circles parsing the meaning of this or that, growing older all the while—such is a visit to the Guggenheim.

Ada, at least with respect to the art made about her, is a prime beneficiary of this steady commitment to remaining cool. In portrait after portrait, we never see her in anguish or even mildly annoyed, which is remarkable in light of her artist-husband's self-professed fighting spirit. At times, we see her smiling, but for the most part she remains smoothly without expression although still somewhat grand, self-possessed, self-contained. Her likeness has become eminently recognizable, familiar even, a natural result of an epic donation of image and time accumulating appreciatively over decades of marriage, deposited hither and thither amid the art-loving populace.

This is how we have come to know all that we know about Egypt's former queen, too. That is, via the repute of Thutmose's bust, by way of image alone. Winding up and around

"Gathering," however, one may discover other similarities if one cares to. For one, Katz shares a penchant for certain facial landmarks preeminently available on Nefertiti as well. Note the unbothered parabolic lines forming everyone's eyelids, plus the rhyming curve of the supraorbital margins along eye sockets. The slender prominence of necks, hats, noses, brows. Full lips. As the couple age, Katz's descriptive linear precision gradually intensifies, such as can be seen in *Ada Ada*, 1991, where we begin noticing gray hairs and wrinkles that were not there before. Katz's attention to the epidermal specifics of later life appears in contrast to the eternal youth ideal as expressed by the bust. That is, until a CT scan conducted by German scientists in 2007 revealed previously invisible details, such as creases at the sides of Nefertiti's mouth, cheeks, and neck, all carved by Thutmose into the original, inner limestone core. Layers of gypsum stucco and pigment were adhered later, most likely also by Thutmose, as cosmetic enhancements to smooth out and conceal the natural effects of real time on the monarch, though her basic naturalism shines through and remains evident, if only barely. Case in point and much to their surprise, museum personnel began noticing bags under Nefertiti's

eyes when better lighting was introduced in 2006, thus necessitating the subsequent CT scan analysis, but again I digress.

Walking around in circles parsing the meaning of this or that, growing older all the while—such is a visit to the Guggenheim. On level five, next to *Ada*, 2009, is *Dogwood*, 2013, an enormous bunch of white flowers on a black background punctuated by lime- and olive-green leaves. Katz's still-life paintings do exactly what the genre has always done, only more so, thanks to their impressive stature and scale. I appreciate the way they operate when placed in adjacency to the mature portraits or figure groups, seeming to tend to real, living people with impeccable decorative manners and reminding us, too, of transience, of fragility, of all other things passing.

Level six and the concluding tower gallery play host to the artist's more recent paintings, mostly "landscapes," for lack of a better categorical term. Here, the late work unspools before us

as Katz finally unwinds. Partial views of tree trunks, branches, and foliage, water and sky, daylight, nighttime, sunrise, twilight, *Ada*, fog: all here owing to the nonagenarian's marathon wet-on-wet brushwork. They are a staggering achievement, occupying the "unstable and terrifying" territory we were told he was gunning for. Paradoxically, at least in regard to wartime metaphors such as "gunning" and "occupying territory," admittedly mine, it turns out what Katz was referring to is an effort to relax all borders separating the artist from his immediate environment, as well as the border isolating pure abstraction from figurative depiction. They all fall in together. In place of these artificial checkpoints, now vanquished, a freedom of passage among thought, vision, and touch rushes in, yielding an all-encompassing vacillation between figure and ground.

Among these recent paintings, a small suite of studies Katz made at Greenwich Village's Washington Square in 2014 emphasizes my point. They do so by echoing the protomodern



Alex Katz, *Lake Light*, 1992, oil on linen, 66 1/4 × 78 1/4". © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.



Alex Katz, *Lake Light*, 1992, oil on linen, 66 1/4 × 78 1/4". © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

sublimity of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, the finest of which are at MoMA. Katz's studies picture an inverted skyscraper reflected in an autumn-leaf-ridden puddle at night, recalling in miniature how Monet did away with the separations pitting sky against pond sans horizon, obliterating the objection of figure to ground, so that, in effect, a viewer is never quite certain if she is looking up or down thanks to the gorgeous concurrence of everything. And much like Monet in old age, Katz possesses a will to keep painting that flows freely about the place, emboldened by proof positive that outward, worldly sensation is still here for the taking, with an insistence on human participation and pleasure, even as we have come this close to the end of a life.

Field 1, 2017, is rather large, measuring 84 inches high and 168 inches wide. Most of what is here for viewers to look at is an expanse of off-white paint representing a blanket of snow on the earth. Banding horizontally across this are three swaths of pale-yellow ocher accented with rapidly subsequent, calligraphic, yellow-ocher exclamation marks indicating tall blades of grass in dead winter. There is no sky. There is an exceedingly faint row of smudged baby blue here, however, also horizontal, perhaps sky reflecting on patches of ice or evidence of thaw. This thing is barely even a picture, and yet that is all that it is—one man's field of view blown all the way open.

* It is worth mentioning Katz's exit in 2011 from the venerable Pace Gallery to join a much younger, more cutting-edge program, the now-defunct Gavin Brown's Enterprise. This made headlines as an unexpected business decision shrewdly calculated to gin up what was, twelve years ago, a somewhat stagnant reputation, suffering from lackluster auction records, etc. When his first show with Brown opened that fall, Katz told *The Observer*, "We compete for audiences, as artists. I'm competing with the Abstract Expressionist guys. I'll knock 'em off the wall. If you put my work next to an aggressive A.E. painting, I'll eat most of 'em up. And I want to compete with the kids. I'm [at GBE] with the kids." After GBE folded in 2020, Katz followed Brown to the venerable Gladstone Gallery, the dealer's new place of employment.