






Search Artsy

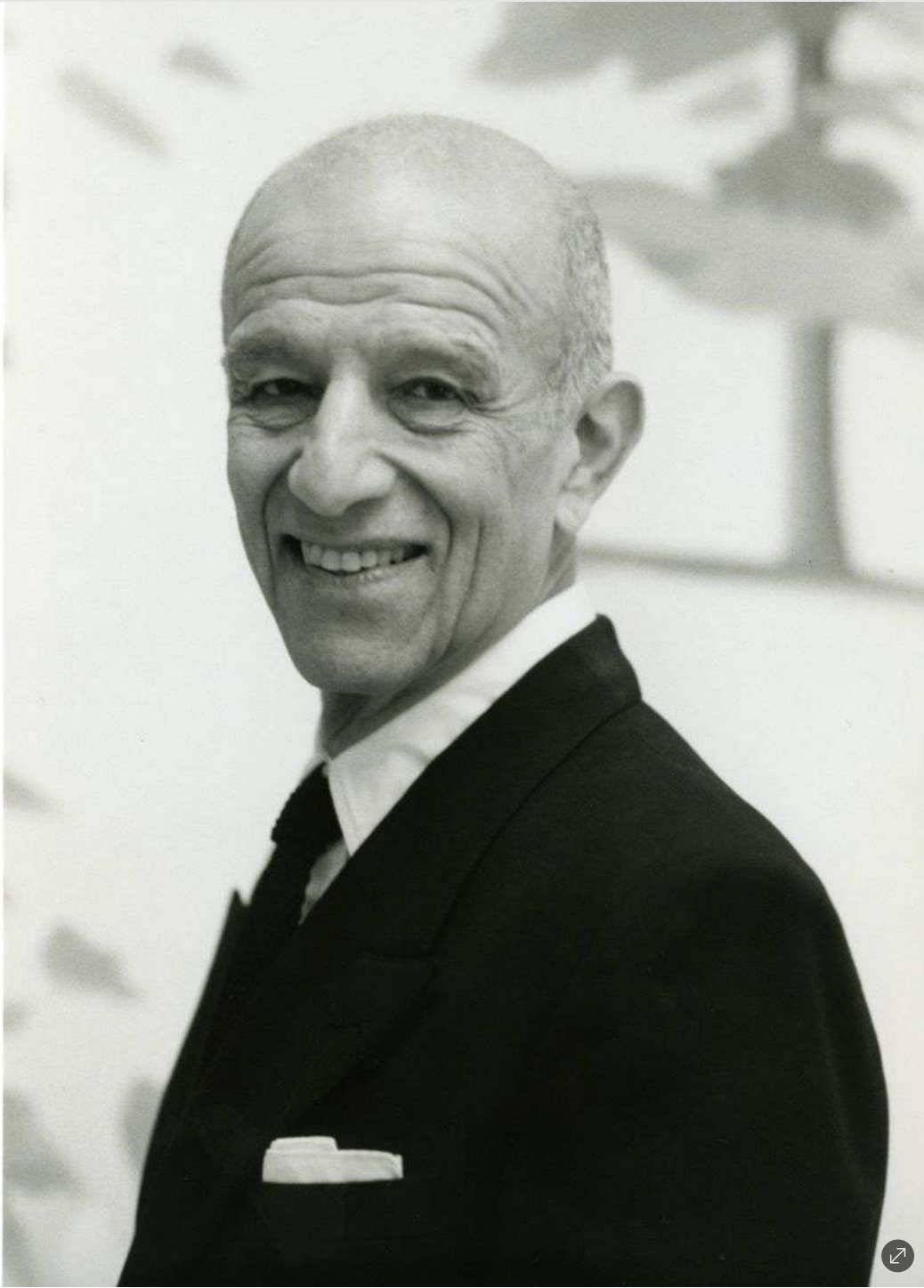


Advertisement

Art Market

Alex Katz's Seven-Decade Career Has Produced Masterpieces and Little Hype—Until Now

Alina Cohen Jun 2, 2020 5:27pm   



Alex Kat by Vivien Bittencourt, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.



Ada Del Moro Katz is one of the most frequently painted muses in Western art history. By some estimates, her husband of over 60 years, Alex Katz, has painted her more than 200 times. Throughout his canvases and prints, Ada alternately appears upside down, twinned into multiple selves in a single room, hidden behind sunglasses, strapped into a swim cap, young, old, and everywhere in between. Her dark hair, long forehead, straight nose, and withholding gaze are consistent traits across such divergent representations. When collectors purchase a picture of Ada, they're buying into her mystique, and into the painter's romantic obsessions—with both his wife and the act of painting itself.



paintings of Ada are his most coveted works. Recently, they began commanding seven figures at auction. Last year in London, Phillips set an auction record for Katz when it sold his 1972 portrait of Ada in the rain, *Blue Umbrella I*, for £3.3 million (around \$4.1 million): nearly three times its high estimate. Yet even with this excitement, Katz's market can seem chronically undervalued. Compared to painters of his generation, such as Jasper Johns, Brice Marden, and David Hockney, Katz makes art that sells at a remarkably low price point—partially, perhaps, because he's remained remarkably prolific, and his work has always resided outside dominant art-world paradigms. As Calvin Tomkins wrote in a 2018 *New Yorker* profile: "He has always had his own direction, which has not been the direction of mainstream art in any of the last seven decades."





Alex Katz *Bathing Cap Ada*, 2012
Soho Contemporary Art

Born in Brooklyn in 1927, Katz attended Cooper Union in the late 1940s, just as Abstract Expressionism was beginning to explode in American painting. Katz, on the other hand, sketched the subway and painted the Maine landscape from a perch at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Since then, he's been loyal to his subjects: portraiture and East Coast landscapes, particularly of Maine (he's owned a summer home in the state since 1963). After he married Ada in 1958, she became a dominant motif. As he's reconfigured the same subject matter for more than 60 years, always finding new ways of seeing the same things, Katz has developed an instantly recognizable style. Flat, serene smoothness characterizes his work, along with large blocks of color holding their own on the canvas.

Meanwhile, the art world—and New York's painting scene in particular—has embraced different coteries and styles over the years. After Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism took hold. Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein became the kings of Pop. Down on Lower Manhattan's Coenties Slip, artists such as Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Agnes Martin espoused radical new methods of picture-making. Neo-Expressionism swept the city, garnering fame and fortune for young male artists (Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, David Salle) working in a figurative mode. Figuration is now popular again, and works by women and artists of color are generally the biggest (and rightful) news-



Alex Katz *Red House*, 2016
Richard Levy Gallery



Alex Katz, *Crosslight*, 2019. © Alex Katz, 2019 / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Thomas Müller. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome.

Institutions have long recognized the merits of Katz's work, though he hasn't enjoyed as many major American museum shows as one might expect. In 1964, the Museum of Modern Art included him in a group exhibition, "Recent Landscapes by Eight Americans" (Katz began painting landscapes in the 1950s). The Whitney Museum of American Art, which mounted a major show of Katz's prints back in 1974, hosted his last major survey in 1986. In 2022, the Guggenheim Museum will present a career retrospective for Katz—which will surely spur his market as well.

This summer, Madrid's Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza was slated to host a major Katz survey, which is now delayed due to the pandemic. Artistic director Guillermo Solana is working to situate Katz within art history in as yet unexplored ways—significant scholarship that could, ultimately, affect Katz's perception in the eyes of dealers and collectors. "He chose to be a very independent fellow, making his own style and career out of his own resources," said Solana. "He chose his own path, and with this choice, making your own name takes more time."



Alex Katz *Yellow Flags 2*, 2018
Galerie Boisseree

with regards to subject matter. He also links Katz's large-scale, figurative works back to the WPA murals that allowed artists such as Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston to find their artistic grounding with monumental compositions. Solana also connects Katz to these abstract artists through his use of uniformly colored backgrounds. Such comparisons to Pollock and Guston only heighten an artist's perceived worth.

Yet Katz's auction prices have a long way to go before reaching the heights achieved by such 20th-century luminaries—as well as his own contemporaries. By means of comparison, Johns set his record in 2014 (for a signature 1983 *Flag* painting) at \$36 million; Hockney's *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)* (1972) splashed in at \$90.3 million in 2018; and Marden's *Number Two* (1983–84) achieved \$10.9 million at Sotheby's New York this past fall. Another useful comparison may be the 99-year-old Wayne Thiebaud, who, like Katz, has always worked in a smooth, delectable, Pop-adjacent figurative style outside mainstream fads. Thiebaud's auction record was smashed last November, when *Encased Cakes* (2010–11) sold for \$8.4 million at Sotheby's.





Alex Katz *Blue Umbrella 2, 2020*
Vogtle Contemporary

Over the past two decades, Katz's oeuvre had slowly crept in value. One major milestone was Charles Saatchi's 2001 sale of *Blue Umbrella No. 2* (1972, a counterpart to Katz's record-holding work) for \$660,000. The year 2007 had the potential to become a major one for the artist as well, when 35 of his works sold at auction. Yet his record just inched up when a floral canvas, *Red Tulips* (1967), sold for \$690,600 at Sotheby's Hong Kong. In 2018, his prices jumped when his large-scale painting *The Light I* (1975) sold for \$951,000. Momentum built, and just months later, he crossed the million-dollar mark, in 2019, with Christie's sale of *Ada and Louise* (1987) for £947,250 (\$1.25 million). In fact, all of Katz's top 10 auction results date from 2018 and 2019, and his three biggest sales all came during auctions in London and New York last fall.

Olivia Thornton, senior director and head of 20th-century and contemporary art at Phillips in Europe, believes the increased attention in Katz's work over the past few years is due to several factors: a historically undervalued market, a sudden influx of excellent paintings at auction, and renewed collecting interest in figurative paintings.



Nevertheless, Katz's figurative works are still relatively affordable, even in a market that has fawned on portraiture for around a decade. One theory for Katz's comparatively low prices and slow market trajectory is that his robust printmaking practice has diluted possible results for paintings, and that the supply for his canvases is too slim.

“Katz's print practice is really important to his market and output as an artist,” Thornton said, citing his “extraordinary” three-dimensional cutouts—freestanding prints that espouse the same surface flatness as Katz's paintings. “He was revolutionary with that,” Thornton added. Anna Katherine Brodbeck, the Dallas Museum of Art's (DMA) senior curator of contemporary art, noted that Katz has recently returned to making cutouts after a 30-year hiatus.





Alex Katz *Coca Cola Girl*, 2019
Van Ham

In 2020, 66 of Katz's prints and multiples have already come up for auction, compared to just 13 paintings. Yet Hockney, too, has maintained a robust printing practice, and his market has fared quite differently. This year, just two of Hockney's paintings have hit the auction block, while over 120 of the artist's prints and multiples reached auction. (Twenty-six Thiebaud prints have arrived at auction in 2020, and just four paintings—none of cakes.)

about queer art and theory has pervaded the academy and museums in recent decades, and Hockney's lush, nostalgia-inducing paintings of his own queer community are part of that narrative. Unlike Katz, he's enjoyed more distinct phases in his career, which has perhaps spurred demand for the limited numbers of paintings in specific series—of pool scenes or double portraits, for example. Meanwhile, specialists could merely divide Katz's work into "portraits" and "landscapes." Even further broken down to "pictures of Ada," there's significant supply across categories.





Paul Gray and Valerie Carberry, who represent Katz from Chicago's Richard Gray Gallery (he's also represented by Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York and Timothy Taylor in London), broke down Katz's oeuvre a bit further. Gray mentioned his preference for Katz's portraits of subjects' heads seen from the back, praising these pictures' "conceptual rigor." Carberry mentioned how much she likes Katz's paintings of the dirt road leading to his Maine property. "The more I understood his connection to the New York School poets, the more I was able to see the road as a metaphor," she said. With the "fewest possible components," the artist is able to "express something about life and mortality."

Brodbeck, who recently mounted "Focus On: Alex Katz," an exhibition at the DMA pairing old and new work by the artist, mentioned still more specific evolutions in the artist's outdoor scenes. His landscapes "have steadily grown in scale," she noted, and his brushstrokes throughout these paintings "have become quicker and more expressive." Katz "has described how the works have become environments for the viewer to enter," she added—an immersive quality that has found fans worldwide. Gray and Carberry mentioned that they sell Katz's work across Asia, Europe, and the United States. Given the August show slated for Brazil's Instituto Tomie Ohtake, curated by Robert Storr and timed to open during the São Paulo biennial, they also hoped he'd find a renewed collector base in South America.



Installation view of "Focus On: Alex Katz" at the Dallas Museum of Art, 2019–20. Courtesy of the Dallas Museum of Art.

Though Thornton concurs that Katz has been prolific, she doesn't think that's affected the market for his work. "Lots of artists are prolific," she said. Perhaps that's true, but among the living painting giants of Western art, Katz still seems uniquely productive and—on the surface, at least—consistent in a way that doesn't create a sense of scarcity, either.

"His works have had sustained global interest but his work hasn't been part of a hyped market," Thornton said. But what does Katz care? He's always found fans, from Willem de Kooning to poet and curator Frank O'Hara. Katz has his studio and, at 92 years old, is still enjoying a robust practice. And, of course, he's still got Ada.



Further reading in Art Market



This Art Fair Is Offering Aston Martins Alongside Alex Katz Paintings to Drive Sales

Nate Freeman Sep 18, 2018



10 Artists Who Had Breakout Moments in a Challenging Spring Auction Season

Annie Armstrong Jun 10, 2020



Galleries Are Urging Collectors to Support Social Justice and Police Reform

Alina Cohen Jun 9, 2020

[Home](#)

[Artists](#)

[Shows](#)

[Galleries](#)

[Museums](#)

[Fairs](#)

[Auctions](#)

[Editorial](#)

[SIGN UP](#)

[LOG IN](#)