

Alex Katz

Juan Manuel Bonet

Alex Katz

A Great Figurative Voice

In this interview, the great North-American painter Alex Katz, who is ninety-five years old and whose works are part of the collections of the world's most important museums, talks to Juan Manuel Bonet about painting, colour, light, life and the places where it happens. It is an enchanting conversation, full of wisdom and subtlety. Juan Manuel Bonet is a profound connoisseur of the New York-born artist. He was the director of the Reina Sofía Art Centre and of IVAM [Institut Valencià d'Art Modern], where he organised a retrospective dedicated to the painter in 1997. Here, he offers a personal introduction to this powerful work, as well as choosing the images that represent it. Among the exhibitions that will take place in various cities around the world in 2022–23, this autumn Alex Katz's career will receive a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

The New York painter Alex Katz will be turning 95 in July. Born in Brooklyn, he spent his childhood in Queens, entering the Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture in 1946. This means he's been painting for approximately... seventy-five years. In his New York and Maine studios, (both of which I visited in 1996 in preparation for the retrospective I dedicated to him at the IVAM, where I was director at the time), he continues to take on the daily challenge of painting.

A painter's painter, as were Bonnard (about whom we will be speaking in the conversation the reader can find further on) and Morandi before him, I myself discovered him, much like the Californian Ed Ruscha, thanks to one of the major figures from my generation in Spain, the since-departed Carlos Alcolea, another master of the paintbrush. It was from the well-stocked bookshelves of this lover of literature that I came across the goldmine that was Abrams' 1979 monograph of Katz, from the pen of the insightful critic Irving Sandler. This was why I dedicated the 1996 show to him, *in memoriam*.

One of the most common mistakes made by Wikipedia and a certain sort of journalism, not to mention, alas, the occasional art historian, is to consider Katz a precursor of pop art. That same mistake has tended to be made with another of his peers, the recently-deceased Wayne Thiebaud, another voice of the West Coast, though a contrasting one to Ruscha. And no, Katz is not a pop artist (as he makes quite clear in our conversation) but, rather, a sort of successor, though of course with a different approach, to Edward Hopper. A voice of New York and the North American plains. Boasting an extensive knowledge of the tradition of his *métier*, with guiding lights including the likes of Velázquez, Vermeer, Goya and Matisse, he is someone with whom it is always a pleasure to 'parler peinture', whether the conversation takes in Monet, Seurat, Vallotton, Le Douanier Rousseau, Marquet, the New York School or contemporary artists such as Peter Doig or Luc Tuymans. He admires some pop artists, for example Lichtenstein or the early Rosenquist. But it is clear that exalting the world of the *objet trouvé* was never his thing; but then nor were the interplay with the language of comics or the sociological critique of mass media.

Ultimately, it is only on a thematic level that he bears some comparison with pop artists. He is extremely close, on the other hand, to colleagues and friends whose art is far more figurative and pictorial, such as Jane Freilicher, Philip Pearlstein, Fairfield Porter or Larry Rivers. And also close, as was pointed out by the unforgettable Kevin Power, to the great Frank O'Hara and to other poets from the New York School, many of whom were also major art critics and followers of both the action painters and figurative artists such as those I have just mentioned. Katz illustrated bibliophile books by several of them, also including them in his gallery of subjects, sometimes on canvas, sometimes as sketches, on other occasions as what he called *cut outs*, with polychrome metallic outlines. His favourite of all was without doubt Frank O'Hara. He also depicted Joe LeSueur, one of the lovers of the poet/critic, in an incredibly sophisticated painting titled *Here's to You* (1961). Soon to follow it was *Passing* (1961), his brilliant self-portrait in a hat, which is in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). This aspect of his oeuvre produced some of his most definitive works, such as *The Cocktail Party* (1965) or *Thursday Night 2* (1974), both modern *conversation pieces*. Always within the spirit of dialogue between the arts, we should mention his penchant for jazz, and the collaboration with the Paul Taylor dance company, which serves as the subject for several of his large-scale paintings.

Maine, which he discovered in the summers of 1949 and 1950, while broadening his studies at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, was always, for Katz, an ideal counterpoint to his native city. To visit him there is akin to wandering through his paintings. And those that evoke his own summer residence are memorable, on whose yellow-painted wooden walls, where trees cast their fleeting shadows, the silhouettes of guests are outlined in as joyful and summery a painting as *Lawn Party* (1965), which belongs to the collection of the New York MoMA. A joy one can almost touch also oozes from the bucolic scene depicted in *Summer Picnic* (1967), whose subjects feature the unique painter, photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt, who we met in Maine through the Katzes, along with another of the figures

included, Burckhardt’s wife, the equally fascinating painter Yvonne Jacqueline. Furthermore, during my stay Katz took me in his sky-blue convertible Cadillac Eldorado to Waterville to show me Colby College, a museum where an entire wing (which is permanently expanding) is dedicated to his work, something that speaks volumes for the generosity he has shown this region where he feels particularly at home, and for an institution that has welcomed him with an enthusiasm that extends to other similar artists, whose works he has donated over the years. His own pieces, with their corresponding images, account for no less than 878 of the entries on the institution’s website.

I mention the Katzes. As well as Alex, the family includes the marvellous Ada Del Moro (of Italian origin, as her maiden name indicates), his wife since 1958, and their only child, the poet and art critic Vincent Katz, and his wife, the Brazilian Vivien Bittencourt. Every fan of the work of the *paterfamilias* knows the silhouettes of the other three members of the clan, who have posed for him on countless occasions, especially Ada, who was the subject in 2006 of an unforgettable monographic exhibition in New York’s Jewish Museum, *Alex Katz paints Ada*. In this regard, he estimates that the body of his works about her could number in excess of a thousand. Madrid’s Reina Sofia Museum houses a dazzling 1993 portrait of her, titled *Big Red Smile*, a second version of *The Red Smile* (1963), which is in the Whitney Museum of American Art. Equally dazzling is *Ada with Superb Lily* (1967). There are also now portraits of Vincent from when he was a child. Few contemporary painters have practised the art of portraiture with such originality or brilliance as Katz.

One especially important cycle (and for which I have always felt a particular affinity) from Katz’s oeuvre is that of his New York nocturnal paintings. The oldest has, since soon after the aforementioned retrospective, been housed in the IVAM collection. It measures some 3.35m in width and the same again in height, dates from 1986 and is titled *Wet Evening*. I first discovered it in 1995 in the solo exhibition held by the painter in the Baden-Baden Kunsthalle. I would refer the reader here to my dialogue with the artist, which may be read after

this introduction. Another important work is a canvas of smaller dimensions which exudes an intense and almost symbolist lyricism, titled *Purple Wind* (1995). In paintings such as these, the painter successfully expresses the rich mystery and enigma of neighbourhoods of office blocks, with their windows lit up in the twilight. And it is not just New York, but also Paris, Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Brussels (once very much a symbolist city whereas now the futuristic capital of Europe) and many other major cities across the world that come to mind when we consider the poetry of twilight in an area of similar characteristics.

Always Maine. From the 1960s onwards, that largely untouched Atlantic State, which has always attracted artists, has been one of the main sources of inspiration for this great landscape painter, who as I have already mentioned began to visit the area in 1949, and would throughout the following decade choose it as his regular holiday destination. Maine’s presence in his work is borne out by his essential trees (he also painted those of his native city’s Central Park); his visions of ponds with a certain nod to Monet, such as the one next to which he would end up building his current summer studio; his evocations of little ports; his ‘portraits’ of cows or moose or seagulls; and most of all his images of the coast. Some of his marine depictions from Maine are simply prodigious, with something of the best Albert Marquet, but more pared down to the essential. I remember, from Madrid’s 2008 Arco art fair, the love at first sight I felt on beholding one of these splendid Katzian aerial white and blue marine works of considerable size being presented by Thaddaeus Ropac. I went back to that stand so many times to take yet another close look at that painting that I got the impression the people representing the gallery must have started to suspect there was something odd about my behaviour.

From 1990 onwards, Katz has exhibited quite a lot in my country, Spain. His work has been displayed by galleries in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. In 2002, some of his splendid pieces of graphic art were shown at an exhibition that La Caja Negra, a Madrid gallery specialising in the field, dedicated to the books and prints by a range of artists published by that great New

York gallerist and publisher Peter Blum, who has also released marvellous publications of works by Tacita Dean and Helmut Federle. Katz’s most important retrospective in Spain to date was the aforementioned one at the IVAM. Although it was less comprehensive in terms of his entire corpus, it is also worth mentioning the 2015 exhibition held in the MACUF (Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Union Fenosa), a museum in Coruña financed by the Unión Fenosa energy company, which sadly closed its doors soon after. Curated by David Barro, one of the best critics of the new generation, it included works from Portugal (specifically from the gallerist Mário Sequeira’s collection), and included a monograph publication, *Alex Katz: Casi nada*, which emphasized the relevance of the North American for new figurative voices, both in his country and across the world, including Spain.

Our conversation took place online some months ago, and gives us a live insight into the subtle discourse of a superb painter who will soon become the subject of a new retrospective, which one presumes will consolidate him for good, in his native city’s Guggenheim. In terms of subsequent reading, I would heartily recommend his 2018 book, which I quote in one of my questions, *Looking at Art with Alex Katz*, which is structured as a dictionary.

JUAN MANUEL BONET When I visited you and Ada in Maine in the summer of 1996, it was like living in a Katz, in an atmosphere similar to the one in *Lawn Party* (1965). I remember that in my room there was a monograph about Bonnard. When did you discover this painter’s painter? A painter also admired by Mark Rothko. What is so unique about Bonnard?

ALEX KATZ They had a Bonnard show at the Museum of Modern Art; I think it was on tomato red walls. I wanted to get around Picasso and Matisse, who painted volumes descriptively. Bonnard opens it up into field, so I was more influenced by Bonnard and Pollock and Monet; they seemed to do the same thing.

J M B And what about Matisse?

A K When I was in art school my teacher told me to go up and see a Matisse show. He was in his 80s, and I’d never seen anything like it. I fainted. I think Matisse is one of the best painters who ever painted because he does what Velázquez and Vermeer do with a lot more ease.

J M B I think you also like Félix Vallotton, the cold, Swiss ‘nabi’, is it true?

A K I had a two-man show with Vallaton and his images are very interesting and they are a lot like mine but he doesn’t paint very well. So I was very delighted to have this two-man show. His woodcuts are terrific and the one with the woman going across the bed to the cat is in my memory forever.

J M B And what about Vuillard?

A K Vuillard had a show at the Museum of Modern Art at the same time as Pollock. I thought that Vuillard was interesting because he was painting whatever was in front of him. That painting with the electric light-bulb hanging in the middle of the canvas, I thought was outrageous. I liked Vuillard for that and besides he paints well. Fairfield Porter prefers Vuillard to Bonnard and I preferred Bonnard to Vuillard.

J M B And what about Henri Rousseau, the first artist about whom you possessed a book?



Sylvia, 1962



Passing, 1963

A K That was the only art book I had for twenty years. I think his images are out of sight and he has a big range. He does French plastic painting very well. I like the landscapes, still life, people.

J M B How did you discover Maine, and what does Maine represent for you? Do you continue to spend the summers in Maine?

A K I got a scholarship to go to Skowhegan Art school in Maine in 1949. I liked the freedom of Maine – you weren’t constrained by the bourgeoisie neighborhood where I was living in New York. I liked the light a lot too; it felt familiar, it felt like Queens where I grew up. I’ve been going to Maine ever since.

J M B I am a great admirer of your Maine marines, so white, so pure... I think in this field, in a certain way, you are the best continuator of Albert Marquet’s love of the sea...

A K Marquet painted the water very well. The water has to do with motion, weight, transparency and light. You can make a great painting without all of that but very few painters have all of it. I like the *Green Wave* of Monet that’s in the Metropolitan Museum.

J M B I remember our visit to Colby Museum, the biggest collection of your work. Do you continue to donate works to this collection?

A K Yes, I continue to give my work to the collection but I’ve given a lot of other people’s work as well. I think when you make paintings they should be for everybody.

J M B You have said: ‘Frank O’Hara is my hero.’ You have done a lot of collaborations with the New York School poets, and you have portrayed other members of the group. The late Kevin Power wrote very interesting things about this relationship. How was your relationship with them, and specially with O’Hara? As in the French scene in the time of cubism, it is interesting to see that many of these poets, not only O’Hara, but also John Ashbery or James Schuyler, were very good art critics.

A K When I went to Cooper Union we took an entrance test and 5% of the applicants got in. People were very bright at Cooper. When I met the New York poets, Koch, Ashbery, O’Hara, Schyuler, Edwin Denby, they were even brighter and we seemed to relate to each other. I think they were using everyday experiences in a very sophisticated manner; that’s what I was trying to do. I liked O’Hara best because he extended himself emotionally, more than the others. I think Jimmy Schuyler writes the greatest long line big poems of any American including Whitman!

J M B Some art historians continue to catalog you as a pop painter. What have you to say about this matter?

A K Pop Art deals with images that are from someplace else, commercial images. It’s not direct experience and all my images come from direct experience. It’s a huge difference. I relate to classical painting and most of Pop has to do with painting from new means. I think the consumer world and the world of people is wonderful subject matter. The old abstract expressionists knew form, but they seemed pretentious. Pop art is not pretentious at all and I’m sorry to see it go.

J M B In your wonderful book *Looking at Art*, you explain your constant admiration of Roy Lichtenstein. Are there other pop artists which interest you?

A K It has to do with how many minutes. Most of the pop artists were interesting to me for maybe several minutes, not longer.

J M B In the same book, you speak of some American geometrical painters, for example Ronald Bladen, or Al Held, whose studio was, at a certain time, in the same building as yours. There is also a mention of Ellsworth Kelly, and of the recently rediscovered Carmen Herrera. You have been a figurative in a time of abstracts. Have you now a different vision of abstract painting than your vision when you were in your twenties and you had to fight for your own space?

A K Not really. I think Al did some of the best art-work on the planet at that time and I was very lucky

to be near them. The time is gone. I think a lot of abstract painting got a little more effete in my mind, a little more pretentious than it was when it was new, young. And the spiritual quality they talk about, I wonder about it. It’s like a frozen truth.

J M B I love what you write about geometry in Mondrian, and about your distaste of his theories. Which part of Mondrian’s work do you prefer?

A K I like the late work. I like the work in the 30s a lot, but I like the work in the 40s because its... I think he had a studio that faced either north or south, so he had sun and he was getting a light like you see in New York. And I think he had a studio with a light coming in. The other ones look like they were made when there were clouds. Perfect paintings for Holland where it’s gray a lot (the 30s paintings). Mondrian paints the straightest line! He belongs to the period before the abstract expressionists, of certainty and absolutes. It was another time period.

J M B Also in the book, you say that Franz Kline is your favourite Abstract Expressionist. Which is the aspect of his work that you like the most?

A K I like the way he paints; it relates to European painting. It’s essentially romantic. As I’ve written, Franz Kline is more related to Frank O’Hara than he is to Clifford Still!

J M B How many Ada portraits have you painted? One of my favorites is *Ada With Superb Lily (1967)*. I also love *Big Red Smile (1993)*, which is in the Reina Sofia.

"I think a lot of abstract painting got a little more effete in my mind, a little more pretentious than it was when it was new, young. And the spiritual quality they talk about, I wonder about it. It’s like a frozen truth."

A K I lost count. Maybe over 1,000. *The Red Smile* (at the Whitney) is one of the best paintings I ever painted.

J M B How do you remember your collaborations with Paul Taylor?

A K I had a lot of fun working with Paul Taylor; it’s as much fun as a painting for me. You get a lot of energy out of collaboration and, if it works, the energy at the end of it is dynamite.

J M B I have always loved your New York nocturnes. Some of them are very symbolic (you have written about your own admiration of Whistler’s nocturnes), with their mauve atmosphere, the wind, the trees in autumn (*Purple Wind, 1995*), the windows... For the IVAM, I bought from Marlborough, *Wet Evening (1986)*, which I think is the first one of these paintings. In the catalog of the retrospective I curated for the museum, of which I was the director at this time, I said something like this: ‘this very large painting is a mixture of Stieglitz and Rothko’. I don’t know if you agree with this definition... Of course, I was thinking of his sombre paintings, not the luminous ones, not the ‘bonnardesques’...

A K I think that’s a fair comparison. Stieglitz is a fantastic photographer and the Rothkos from ’58 to ’62 are fantastic. (Regarding *Wet Evening*) I looked out the window for twenty years at that scene and one day I saw it; it clicked. The only problem I had was, should I make it 11 ft square, 12 ft square or 11 ½ ft square? There was no other problem because I saw it – and I could paint it because I saw it. *Wet Evening* led to other paintings.

J M B I have always seen you as the continuator, of course with a very different kind of painting, of Edward Hopper. What about his America, and what about yours? You have also written about Albert Pinkham Ryder, saying that for you, ‘he is the most complete American painter of his time’. Or about Winslow Homer, Marsden Hartley or Milton Avery. Are you especially interested in the American figurative tradition?



Lawn Party, 1965



Ada with Superb Lily, 1967

A K Albert Pinkham Ryder could be the best American painter who ever painted. I’m not involved in the romanticism. His detachment from the romanticism makes it real big art. I like his themes, a house, rural scenes. Hopper is sort of the most famous painter in America. More people relate to him than anyone. It’s a little illustrational and the colors are tonal, they’re not from perception and the compositions are all artificial, contrived; but they end up being a great image! With all the faults of them, the images relate to experiences people have had 50, 60, 70 years after he painted these works. The subject matter doesn’t affect the image. It’s powerful stuff. I have problems with it because I’m essentially a classic painter and when you see them next to people who are true to their perceptions, they make those paintings seem unnecessary.

J M B What about Fairfield Porter or Jane Freilicher? Are they not something like your spiritual brother and sister?

A K That would be ok. I like Fairfield because he has no style. Jane’s stuff in the 50s I thought was sensational because she let drawing go out the window and just painted images that were open. We have a relationship in taste more than anything.

J M B What about your three-dimensional works?

A K The first original cut-outs had to do with scale and perception. In other words, what is life size and when you go into life size, there isn’t any life size. A small figure is a certain distance away from you, close up is right next to you. That’s what the cut-outs were. They are all involved with the dematerialization of a thing. Sculpture starting in the 60s was about volume, then it became mass. My sculpture has neither volume nor mass. It’s there. In a way, Ronnie Bladen’s sculpture is gesture; the mass and the volume are unimportant. And these relate to that in a way.

J M B I visited your show in the Albertina, in which your paintings were installed next to the preparatory drawings. What importance has the drawing in your work?

A K I do the drawing before I paint. In the figures, the drawing enables me to put the paint on the canvas more direct and fresh. It’s very direct painting because I don’t have to worry about the drawing, it’s there. In the landscapes, it’s more gestural and I don’t need a cartoon; I just paint and that’s the way I’ve been doing the landscapes the last few years, with less preparatory drawing.

J M B And the graphic work?

A K I always liked doing graphic work. In our world, artists make paintings to sell and I think it is very nice when art is affordable. The graphic is usually the end of an image: there’s a sketch, there’s a drawing, there’s a painting and then there’s a graphic. Sometimes the sketch is the best, sometimes the painting is the best and sometimes the graphic is the best. The graphic of *The Green Cap* is better than the painting, by far.

J M B In your book, you include Luc Tuymans, a contemporary Belgian figurative painter, whose work I also appreciate very much. What aspect of this work interests you most? And what about Peter Doig?

A K Luc Tuymans is technically very good. I was in Germany and he had a show of very small paintings in a very big room and he held the room down. I can’t think of another painter who could do that. Very strong, he keeps his tones together. The subject matter for me is a little sentimental but the technique, the color, the strokes, the images are all absolutely first class, so you can disregard the sentimental part. Doig makes great images. His painting is indifferent. You don’t look at Doig for the painting, you’re looking at the image. It’s attitude. He doesn’t do the thing all at once. He puts a little bit of paint here, the next day more. It accumulates. Stylistically he’s very aggressive.

J M B How do you feel about Spain and Portugal? I suppose that you know that in both countries, you have a lot of admirers, especially among the painters of the last generations.

A K Spain has a history of very good painting that continued through the art schools. I’m pleased that you say I have admirers in Portugal and Spain because when you paint pictures you have no idea who likes what or would they even exist outside the studio. When I was young, people used to hate my painting wherever I showed it and I still slip back into it.

J M B Speaking about the *Infanta Margarita* in Vienna’s Kunshistorisches Museum, you say that this painting impressed you when it was shown in New York in the early 1950s: ‘It became my idea of what art should be’. Apart from Velázquez, which other Spanish artists are important for you?

A K Goya has the top painting in the Louvre for me, *Marquesa de Santa Cruz*. Goya’s portraits of men are fabulous. There’s no one that can make a man more interesting than Goya. It’s extraordinary painting, painting on a level you can’t believe. I like his Fresco in Chapel of St. Anthony of La Florida Church much better than Michelangelo. I prefer Velázquez’ values over Goya’s but Goya is a fantastic artist. I have a lithograph of his and I look at it every day with wonder. Everything is so extraordinarily defined; the cows, the bullfighters and their characters and everything else, the back part, is all blurs.

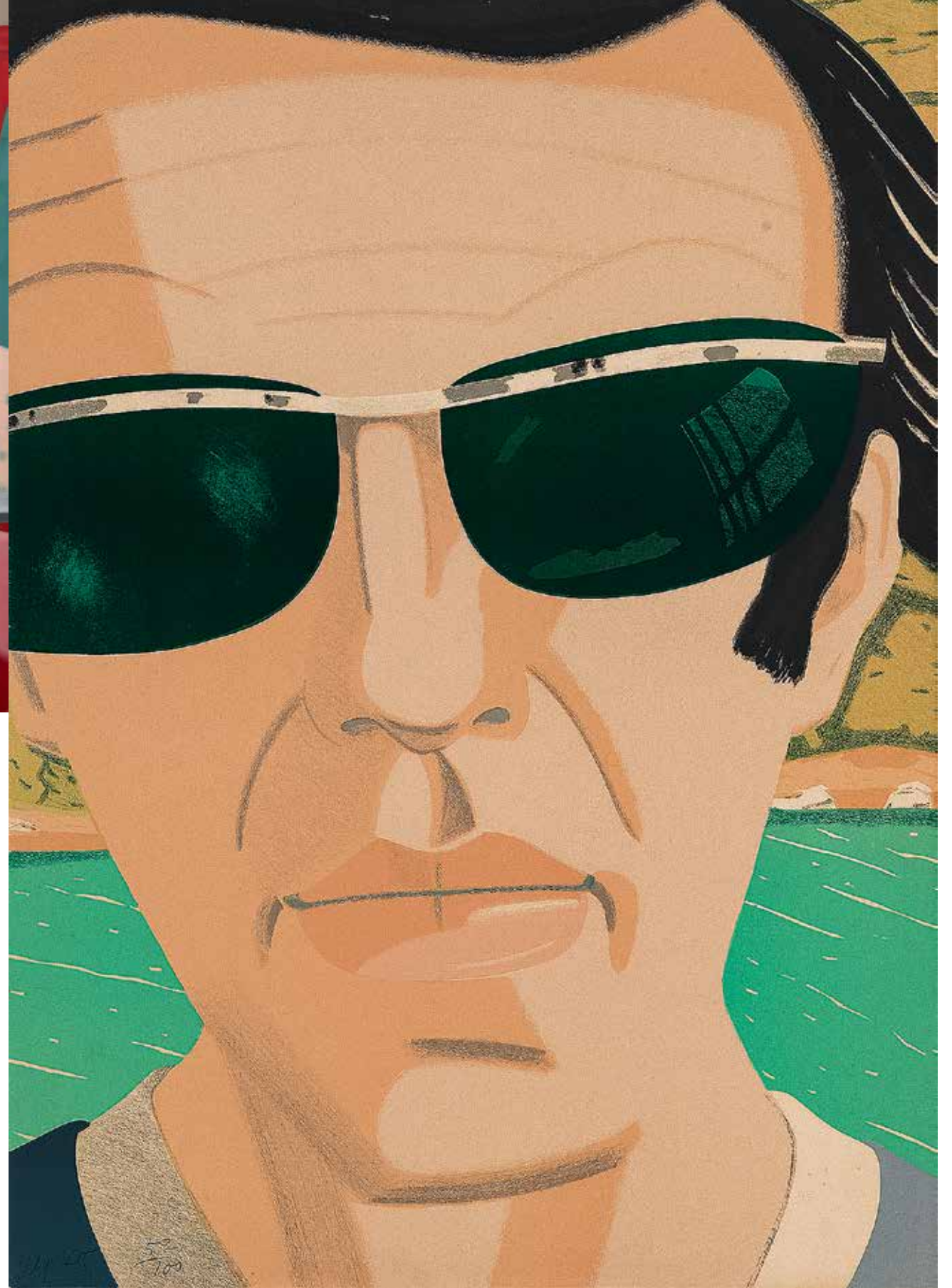
J M B When you write that Seurat ‘treats all people with love’, are you speaking of yourself?

A K I wish I were! A stockbroker and a beggar are all treated with love. It’s art for everybody; no one doesn’t like him.

TRANSLATED BY DAN WHITCOMBE / KENNIS TRANSLATIONS



Impala, 1968



Alex, 1970



Thursday Night 2, 1974



Summer Picnic, 1975



Round Hill, 1977



Red Tie, 1979



Red Coat, 1983



The Yellow House, 1985



Study for Wet Evening, 1986



Wet Evening, 1986



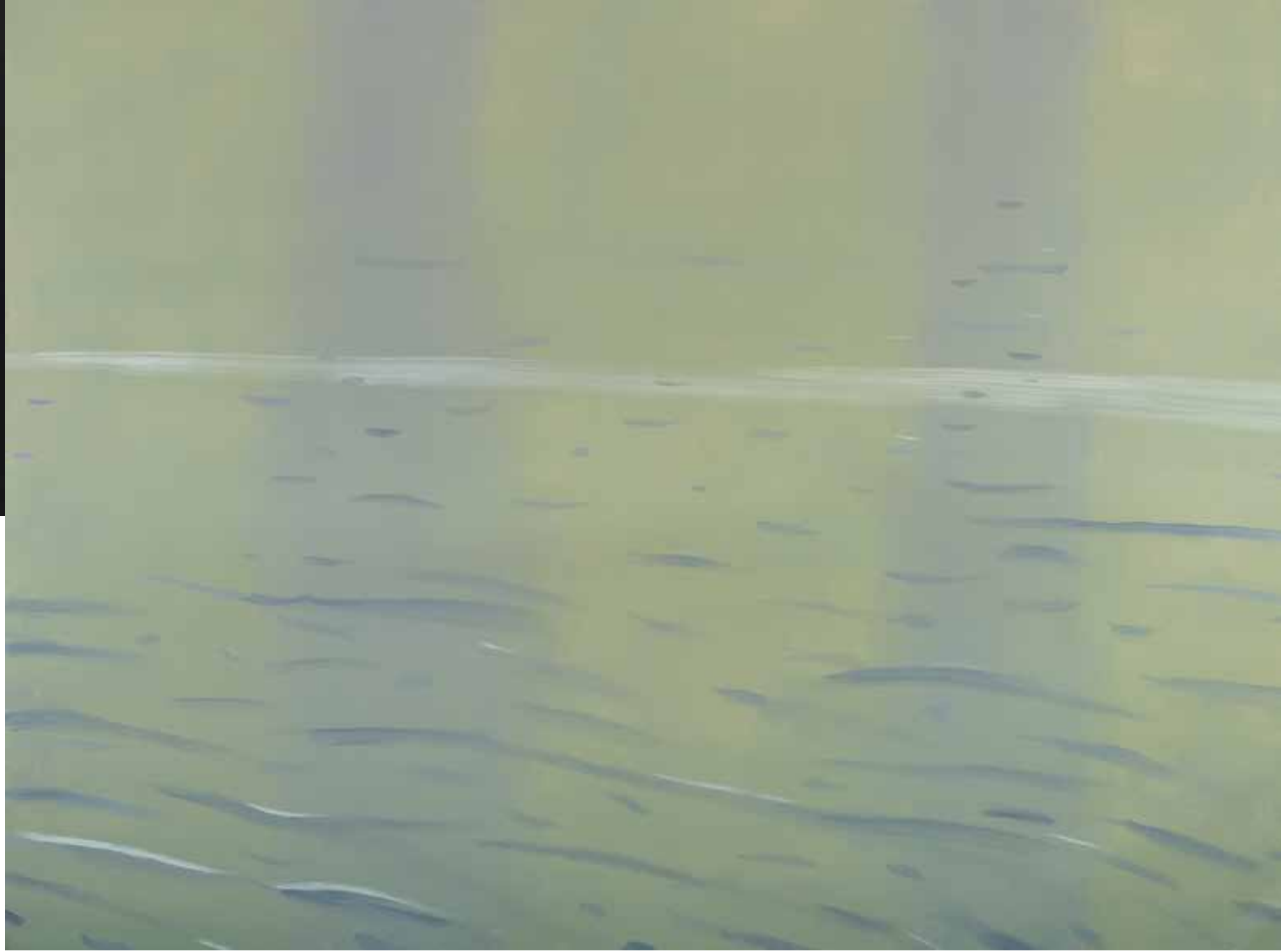
Beach Shoes, 1987



Green Shoes, 1987



Varick, 1988



10 AM, 1994



Purple Wind, 1995



Moonlight, 1997



Bond Street 2, 1998



Penobscot, 1999



Sunset 6, 2008



Sharon and Vivien, 2010



Alex, 2014



Ada with Pink Sweater, 2019