# Alex Katz at the Guggenheim, New York – consoling yet scintillating

**A retrospective of this consummate painter of modern urban life also focuses on the muse who brought his work into focus**

– Ariella Budick, 8 November 2022

*Alex Katz, 'The Cocktail Party' (1965) © Alex Katz/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London*

Alex Katz is a consummate painter of modern life. Like the Impressionists who earned that title before him, he has probed pleasures both urban and urbane, populating his canvases with people who enjoy life's profound superficialities.

Alex *Katz: Gathering*, the Guggenheim's retrospective of a painter who remains busy and sharp at 95, turns out to be not just scintillating, but consoling too. When all around is vitriol, soul-baring, hyperbole and rage, Katz's muted emotional palette, ranging from quiet optimism to quiet melancholy, comes as an essential balm.
Katz rejected hysteria a long time ago. He parted ways with most of the artists of his generation back in the late 1940s. When they were hurling themselves into abstraction, picking fights, drinking, self-destructing and peacocking, he clung to the power of discretion. When his colleagues agitated and critiqued, Katz just watched and painted, savouring his city's bourgeois splendour.

He has always been a New Yorker through and through, despite his habit of absconding to Maine every summer. (Successful metropolitan artists frequently have dachas to restore their equipoise.) His wife, Ada, became the avatar of his art: chic, self-contained, impeccably turned out, a creature of Manhattan even when she deigned to leave it.

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Frank O'Hara, the New Yorkiest of the New York poets, wrote: "I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store, or some other sign that people do not totally regret life." Katz, who painted O'Hara, admired his friend's openness to the urban whirl and his lack of inhibition, and praised him in terms that expressed a certain sadness at his own restraint. "I don't have the courage to do what Frank did," he once said. "He's the poet of my time."

Katz's bravery was more understated but no less powerful. He avoided Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Minimalism when each in turn had a monopoly on the art world's attention. Instead, he followed his own ways of seeing, imbuing familiar urban oddments with a distinctive glamour. He was always the grown-up in the gallery.

"The Cocktail Party" is a time-capsule of a 1960s soirée among the creative set. Dapper men in thick-rimmed glasses mingle with neatly coiffed women and you can practically smell the cigarette smoke and hear the ice clink in crystal tumblers. Guests murmur, smile, and listen in an atmosphere dense with politeness, while the nocturnal metropolis swaggers beyond the big sash windows. Across the upper third of the painting, above the celebrants' heads, neon signs hum and office windows blaze like a grid of stars.

Katz based the picture on a get-together in his loft near Madison Square Park. It's an update of "Masked Ball at the Opera" (1873), Manet's paean to Paris in which dandies and coquettes join in cosmopolitan self-satisfaction. Katz invited writers, artists and musicians (who must have known to wear suits in his home), hoping to record what he called "gestures of his time". If this painting were all you knew of the New York art world in 1965, you would never suspect the scenes of druggy indolence and rebel chaos bubbling nearby. (Andy Warhol's Factory was less than a mile away.)

Katz grew up in the quasi-suburban enclave of St Albans, Queens, to Russian-born parents who cultivated a bohemian atmosphere. His mother Sima acted in the Yiddish theatre on the Lower East Side before settling down with her husband and two boys. "She took piano lessons, speech lessons, read a lot, and she said she would have been a great star if she could sing and dance," he recalled.

*'Round Hill' (1977) © Alex Katz/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London*

*'Blue Umbrella 2' (1972), one of many portraits by Katz of his wife, Ada*
*© Alex Katz/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London*

*'Departure (Ada)' (2016) © Alex Katz/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London*

**Sketching New York subway riders as a daily discipline, he was determined to make the city his own**

He captured her alluring vitality in 1946, just after she returned from a stint as a translator in postwar Europe. (She spoke six languages.) Dressed in red, chin resting in her cupped palms, she gazes at her son with a shrewd half-smile. She's a warmly human presence against a backdrop of nested rectangles, a refuge of tenderness in an implacably orthogonal habitat. He was 19 at the time, commuting from Queens to Cooper Union and sketching subway riders as a daily discipline — and out of determination to make the city his own.

Katz met Ada Del Moro of the Bronx in 1957, and that's when his art snapped into focus. A research biologist at Sloan Kettering, she had the same poise, smarts and allure that come through in the early portrait of his mother. They married and in hundreds of paintings over more than six decades, he proceeded to transform his wife from an elegant mortal into a gleaming object of awe.
"Ada in a Black Sweater" (1957) introduces us to a pale woman with pitch dark hair, eyes and brows. Wrapped in an inky cardigan, she folds her arms across her chest in self-protection. Yet she's not forbidding; her full lipsticked mouth offers a slash of colour that alludes to connection and conversation. She has served less as muse than as alter ego and soul mate; as portrait subject she remains studiously unrevealed. Not one of his pictures plumbs her psychological state or shows her unclothed or unguarded. Year after year, portrait after portrait, her expression never ranges far from cool nonchalance. And yet his treatment of her is constantly refreshing, mixing elusiveness with familiarity.

"Ours was like an arranged marriage, because our families were so similar," Katz told The New Yorker. "We're Jewish off the boat, and they're Italian off the boat. On Sunday afternoons, both families listened to opera on the radio. No one ever voted for a Republican. But Ada is only liberal in politics — aside from that she's a snob. Ada never makes a social mistake, but I make them all the time."

*'Yellow Tree 1' (2020) © Alex Katz/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London*

*'Lake Light' (1992) © Alex Katz/VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London*

Ada lent herself to paintings of manners and social observation, as well as compositions that border on abstraction. In some works, she's a creature of flat planes and bold lines, set among thickly painted panels. In others, we see her ensconced in comfort and privilege, enjoying the fact of being her. The deliciously buttery "4 PM" (1959) finds her perched on the bed in a high-ceilinged room suffused in autumnal light. When we see her outdoors, the surroundings are never too wild. Beach and garden allow her to retain the regal casualness of a fashionable lady in her second home.

Katz periodically detours into hushed, bright landscapes or urban nocturnes, all shadows and points of light. But he keeps returning to Ada and through her, offering an opaque but tender chronicle of a life together. Warmth radiates from her core, penetrating her cool crust and cycling through contentment, ageing and mortality. "Departure" (2016) depicts six nearly identical versions of Ada, in a sleeveless top and wide-brimmed straw hat, sauntering upstage like a chorus line, away from the audience and into a borderless expanse of green.

The magic hasn't ended. Just last year, Katz painted "Ada's Back 2", which is titled like the sequel to a sequel and has a valedictory feel. We see her from behind, white hair falling straight like a stand of silver birches on the dark slope of her shoulders. Portrait has merged with landscape: Her presence and his gaze have endured together long enough to become intertwined forces of nature.

*– 'Alex Katz: Gathering', guggenheim.org, until February 20*