

Alex Katz at the NPG

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With the exception of Jo Hopper, whose husband Edward still painted her nude, in streaming sunlight, in her late 70s, there is no muse in postwar American art to equal Ada Katz. Walk into the cocktail party that is "One Flight Up", a set of cut-out heads, painted in oil on aluminium, pegged chest-height to a long table and now installed as the centrepiece of the National Portrait Gallery's *Alex Katz* display, and Ada's chilly poise immediately arrests and intimidates. Strong oval face, high cheekbones, aquiline nose, frame of black hair, the expression of a sphinx: her inscrutable but forthright looks match exactly the flat aesthetic, smooth surfaces and direct, economical gestures that make 82-year-old Alex Katz New York's king of painterly cool.

As an anatomy of a society, "One Flight Up" (1968) fixes urbane privileged Manhattan as effectively, and with some of the same characters, as David Hockney's boys and swimming pools distilled hedonistic 1960s Los Angeles. Here is the expansive brow and level gaze of Metropolitan Museum curator Henry Geldzahler, in sunglasses – and an equally compelling back view of the swelling dome of his head, steady and concentrated, as he talks to his boyfriend Christopher Scott. Seen face to face, young artist Joe Brainard rapidly sizes up the room; the same moment, viewed from behind, has him seductively tossing foppish curls as he turns to chat.



"Ada" (2009), Katz's wife and long-time muse

In some three dozen similarly front-and-back portraits, Katz depicts with laconic concision how style is the man: how people hold themselves, lean forward to engage, glance sideways beyond a conversation, occupy too much space or shrink themselves into very little. Katz has named Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese ukiyo-e woodcut artist, as a key influence. With subjects including poet John Ashbery, painter Philip Pearlstein and critic Irving Sandler, here on this glass table-top refined 18th-century Edo is updated to the floating world of bohemian New York.

Like all serious portrait painters, Katz is interested in form and surface at least as much as likeness and psychology. The wit of "One Flight Up" is that displaying painted portraits as sculptural installation draws attention precisely to the depthless, two-dimensional character of painting. Such formal play, making portraiture into almost an abstraction, incongruously enlarged to billboard scope, has sustained Katz through half a century. In the next room to "One Flight Up", we meet Ada again, painted in 2009: flamboyant-but-discreet as ever, thick black hair now streaked with grey and blending with a lush wet-on-wet black ground, classical profile bathed in a harsh, frontal light that eliminates secondary shadows and details such as lower eyelids. As flat light hits the face, the two-metre larger-than-life "Ada" delivers the sensation of an immediate personal encounter, intimate but at discomfotingly grand scale.

Katz's close-up figures against bare grounds have always been defined by the clean lines and graphic stylisation of pop art. "Edwin" (1972), a massive portrait of New York poet and dance critic Edwin Denby, severely cropped like a photograph, and "Vincent" (1997), depicting Katz's son, who has inherited his mother's powerful angular features, as a gilded youth, his languor challenged by the energetic horizontals and diagonals of a pink-red shirt, are top-flight examples showing his development across 25 years.

Compare these with "Ada" and "Anna" (2009), a portrait of Vogue editor Anna Wintour revealed here for the first time, and Katz's increasing simplification and interest in the effects of light, characteristic of many artists in old age, becomes clear. Starkly illuminated by a head-on glare, "Anna" offsets Wintour's glacial expression, frozen blue eyes and hard glamour with a sunburst yellow ground. It is, as ever with Katz, impassive, controlled, holding style and personality in tactful balance. Yet the bold clash of yellow with Wintour's auburn bob gives a livid charge, and the glowing surface enhances Katz's exquisite artifice, which in turn underlines Wintour's chiselled self-presentation.

The long debt to abstraction is ever more apparent in these latest works. A contemporary of Jasper Johns and Ellsworth Kelly, Katz came of age in the late 1950s and with stubborn daring diverted the heroic legacy of Pollock and Newman into almost-taboo figuration. He also assimilated the austerities of minimalism, and an older European grammar, referencing Matisse's push-pull of colour to achieve shape and structure. Sadly shorn of several promised works because of space limitations, this show is too brief to give a full overview of these strategies, but "Ada" speaks for an artist at the peak of his game, still more radical than the younger generation of fashionable American painters of the human figure – John Currin, Elizabeth Peyton – who remain under his spell.

'Alex Katz Portraits', National Portrait Gallery, London, until September 21. www.npg.org.uk

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