

Sheets, Hilarie M., "At 90, Still Raising the Bar for Himself — and the Other Guys," *The New York Times*, October 2017

## The New York Times

### At 90, Still Raising the Bar for Himself — and the Other Guys



The artist Alex Katz in his studio space at his home with his most recent paintings, including, from left, "Susanne 7" (2017), "Laura Series" (2017) and "Grass 8" (2017). Credit All rights reserved, Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York; Adrienne Grunwald for The New York Times

Alex Katz lives and works on the top floor of a prime SoHo building, in a corner loft with the light and square footage most artists in New York only dream of.

"It was a pretty crummy place when we first came," said Mr. Katz, who moved there with his wife, Ada — a frequent model in his vibrant figurative paintings — in 1968 when the electrical wiring still dangled from the ceiling.

Today, heroically scaled paintings of faces, landscapes in Maine and city views — recently completed by Mr. Katz, who turned 90 in July — spill out of the studio into the spartan living quarters. Many will be on view Nov. 5 in his solo show filling all three floors of Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem.



Mr. Katz's collection includes a lithograph of Edvard Munch's "Berlin Girl" (1906).  
Credit: Adrienne Grunwald for The New York Times

They harmonize with works by artists Mr. Katz admires, including the Expressionist painters Edvard Munch and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the sculptor Joel Shapiro. In Mr. Katz's bathroom is a series of black-and-white photographs of New York City life by Rudy Burckhardt, the Swiss filmmaker and an ardent supporter of Mr. Katz in the 1950s, when he was scorned for daring to pursue figurative subject matter during the reign of Abstract Expressionism. The following are edited excerpts from the conversation.

**Not a lot of 90-year-olds are making paintings of this scale or verve.**

This is the most productive time in my whole life, right now. You try to do about five things at once, one of which is dare the other guys to try, raise the bar.

The painting "Golden Image," I never did anything like it. It was a sunset in Maine. I usually paint the sensation of what I'm seeing. Here, I'm actually painting the analysis of it, all memory. I made four or five little sketches in different colors. I lost any discernibility of which one was better. I said to Ada, "Which one do you like?" She said the yellow one. I heightened the colors. There's very little tonal difference [between the trees and the sky]. It sort of merges. I took it right up to 12 feet. It came out like dynamite.

Yeah, no sad songs. No minor key. Not for me.



A painting by Francis Picabia titled "Tête de femme au foulard" (1941-42). Credit Adrienne Grunwald for The New York Times

**This portrait of a disembodied face against the vivid yellow background also feels new to me.**

I was painting this woman [Susanne Ortner, in the portrait behind Mr. Katz, top, on the left] and all of a sudden I said, "I'm sick and tired of white." I just arbitrarily put the lemon yellow against the flesh, like an Indian combination. Then I kept cropping it and made it a less conventional, more aggressive image. You can get the whole feeling with parts missing.

**Do you consider yourself a collector?**

I'm not a collector type, actually. I throw everything out. But when I started making money, I thought I should buy some stuff for the education. Since I've been around for so long, it adds up.

That's a [Francis] Picabia. His work always fascinated me because he's such a lousy painter technically and such a great artist. I have a late piece from the 1940s when he went into kitschy figurative stuff. His image energy is fantastic, a lot of bounce.



Mr. Katz's home features a drawing of a woman by Matisse, displaying his economy of line.  
Credit Succession H. Matisse/Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York; Adrienne Grunwald for The New York Times

### **What was an early acquisition?**

I got this [Willem] de Kooning drawing from around 1959 from his gallery. He's like the opposite of my temperament, but he's a really good draftsman. He supported me when I had my first big show. He came over and said, "Your paintings are like photographs, but they're painted; don't let them knock you out of your position."

### **You share a Maine connection with Marsden Hartley. Was that part of your interest in collecting him?**

He's able to make you see what he saw. When I moved out to where I am now in Maine, it was three miles from the shore. I didn't want to go near his subject matter; it's too dominating. I got ["Hands"] at an auction. [The collector] Sandy Schwartz said, "You can't bid." I said, "O.K., when you run out of your money, use mine." So I got it.

### **This Matisse drawing of a woman reminds me of the economy of line in your work.**

I like his thin paint and the effortless way he paints and gets so much out of it. He and the Impressionists see the world with golden eyes. They don't do garbage pails and people suffering.

### **Do you have an affinity for that kind of outlook?**

Yeah, no sad songs. No minor key. Not for me.