PROFILES

PAINTERLY VIRTUES

Alex Katz's life in art.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

Alex Katz is on fire. He said so himself, when I visited his studio one day this spring. "One thing after another is coming up," the ninety-year-old said, flashing a wide smile that transformed his usual expression of slight gloom. His proposal to place a series of cutout sculptures of his wife, Ada, on the median of New York's Park Avenue had been accepted by the city, and he had been commissioned to enhance the interior of a subway station. "I told them a couple of little mosaics in the subway isn't going to change anything, what you need is an environment—and they went for it," he said. Nineteen five-foot-high paintings, transferred to glass by artisans and embedded in the walls, are now turning the F train's Fifty-seventh Street station into a playground for Katz's boldly colorful, high-intensity art. "I wanted the paintings done on porcelain," Katz told me, "but the guy said, 'Porcelain only lasts twenty-five years. This will last forever.'"

Paintings for several upcoming exhibitions, including a major survey show at the Lotte Museum, in Seoul, were stacked against the walls of Katz's studio on West Broadway. The most recent were from two new series, which he referred to as "Calvin Klein Girls" and "Coca-Cola Girls." Katz had seen a video for Calvin Klein underwear while riding in a taxicab, and it had led to a dozen or so very large oil paintings of nubile young women (and a few of young men) in skimpy black underwear. The backgrounds are uniformly dark blue, but the paintings are bathed in light, which emanates from suavely painted areas of bare skin. The Coca-Cola girls are in white one-piece bathing suits,

Katz next to a portrait of his wife, Ada. Since they met, in the fall of 1957, Katz has

painted Ada more than two hundred times. "She's a classic American beauty," he says. "She's also a European beauty."

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against red backgrounds. "That's Coca-Cola red, from the company's outdoor signs in the fifties," Katz explained. "You know, the blond girl in the red convertible, laughing with unlimited happiness. It's a romance image, and for me it has to do with Rembrandt's 'The Polish Rider.' I could never understand that painting, but my mother and Frank O'Hara both flipped over it, so I realized I was missing something. They saw it as a romantic figure, riding from the Black Sea to the Baltic."

Katz is on easy terms with art history, all the way back to Thutmose's exquisite portrait bust of Queen Nefertiti, circa 1340 B.C., which he's visited in the Neues Museum, in Berlin. He cites Thutmose as one of his favorite artists, right up there with Goya, Manet, and Matisse. In the nineteen-fifties, when most of the serious art being done was abstract, Katz outraged scores of artists and formalist critics by inventing new ways to paint the human figure. He has always had his own direction, which has not been the direction of mainstream art in any of the last seven decades. In a Katz painting, style—the way it's painted—is the primary element. His confident, crisply articulated technique makes us see the world the way he sees it, clear and up close, with all but the most essential details pared away. Even today, Katz's style is too stripped down for some people, who think it looks easy. "My work is like pablum to them," he tells me. "You know, pretty girls, flowers, you can't be serious. I refuse to make sincere art. Sincere art is art that relies on subject matter to carry it. An honest painter is one who doesn't paint very well. And it shows!" (Another wide grin.) Katz, as critics have increasingly come to realize, is a very good painter.

"He's like a master class in painterly virtues," the artist David Salle, whose admiration for Katz's work has led to a lasting friendship between them, told me recently. "A few years ago, I was at the Art Institute of Chicago, where they have a painting by Alex from the late sixties," he said. "There are two boys in the foreground, with a view to the bay stretching out behind them. The composition is incredibly complex—with wonderfully fitted-together shapes, colors, tones, and value patterns, executed with effortless perfection. It's an unsung masterpiece. As I was looking at the Katz, I turned my head to the left and saw in the adjacent room a wall of paintings by Gerhard Richter, and Richter's just collapsed." Paintings by Richter sell for tens of millions of dollars at auction. Katz's highest auction price, achieved at a Sotheby's sale in May, is nine hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Katz hasn't had a major survey exhibition in New York since the Whitney Museum gave him a retrospective, in 1986. "I never fit in," he told me. "I'm not a Pop artist, and people can't see my work as realistic, either." The Museum of Modern Art owns several of Katz's best paintings, but it hasn't given him a show. Katz's dealers—he was with Fischbach for about ten years, Marlborough for thirty, and Pace for ten—have had no trouble selling his work, and in recent years more and more European museums have been showing and buying it, but the art world does not consider him a major contemporary artist, in the same league as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and others of his generation. Gavin Brown, whose gallery Katz joined in 2011, believes he can change that. A cutting-edge, risk-prone dealer who launched the careers of Peter Doig, Elizabeth Peyton, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Chris Ofili, Brown is determined to get Katz into the pantheon. "Alex is in top mental and physical condition, and he's applying seventy-five years of eye, hand, and brain experience to this craft," Brown said to me this past spring. "He is also making astounding paintings—paintings that astound him. I think my job is to push him up in people's eyes to the premier league."

"Dan, you forgot to put on your out-of-office."

On one of my visits to his studio, Katz let me watch him paint. When I arrived, at ten o'clock on a Sunday morning, he was waiting on the sidewalk to let me in and bring me up in the elevator. The building has five floors, and when Katz and Ada moved into it, in 1968, every floor was occupied illegally by an artist. (The law against living in industrial lofts was eased for artists in his neighborhood in 1971.) Ada came out from the kitchen, calm and smiling and still beautiful, and considerably smaller than she appears in the many paintings her husband has made of her. They live in the front half of the loft, a large, impersonal space with high ceilings, not much furniture, and a few treasures that he's bought at auction—a small figure

painting by Marsden Hartley, a woman's head by Francis Picabia, a de Kooning drawing that's "better than anything they have at the Modern."

Katz's studio is in back, a single big room bisected at one point by a dividing wall. The blank canvas that he was planning to work on was ten feet high and fourteen feet wide. Katz, who is lean, wiry, agile, and flawlessly bald, had prepared the two colors he was going to use, black and ultramarine blue, in aluminum pie plates, with a third plate for the thinning medium. This was going to be a night painting, he explained, a landscape, something he had glimpsed through the rear window of his car when he was driving in the Pennsylvania countryside just before nightfall. "It doesn't happen very often that you see something and know you have to paint it," he said. He'd made a small sketch that evening, in oil on Masonite, and later, in the studio, he did a six-foot-by-eight-foot warmup painting, which was propped against a column to the left of the big canvas.

Moving deliberately, Katz climbed five steps to the top of a creaky wheeled platform and started applying ultramarine to the upper-right section of the canvas, using a housepainter's six-inch-wide brush. The paint went on easily, in smooth, unhurried strokes, back and forth and diagonally. One of his rules is "no noodling," which means no fussy brushwork. He came down, moved the platform a few feet to the left, and climbed up again to do the next part. Every now and then he paused to consult the smaller sketch, which he had with him on the platform, or the warmup canvas. He kept going back over the painted areas, to adjust the tone. "I'm not sure the blue is right," he said, at one point. "We'll see when the black comes into play." It took him about half an hour to finish the sky. Occasionally, between trips up and down the steps, he paused to wipe up drops of paint that had fallen beyond the brown paper he'd laid on the studio's faded but immaculate linoleum floor.

When he switched to black, for the lower half of the painting, he didn't need the platform. The black was lustrous, somewhere between glossy and matte. He worked upward from the bottom until the only strip of bare canvas was a narrow, uneven gap between the two colors. Still using a big brush, but painting more slowly, he began to fill in that space. Barely discernible shapes and outlines emerged in a few places: tree branches against the night sky. There was a sense of movement and distance. Katz was painting wet into wet, and not making mistakes.

He stepped away from the canvas, about ten feet back. "Looks pretty good," he said, after a minute or so. He got back up on the platform and worked for another twenty minutes, making deft finishing touches with a smaller brush. An hour and ten minutes after he'd started, he backed off, took another long look, and said, "It's perfect."

I asked Katz whether it was true that his father used to dive off bridges for money. "Not for money—for the hell of it," he said. "My father was a he-man. On our block in Queens, they got up a petition not to sell houses to Negroes. Twenty-three families signed it, but my father wouldn't sign. 'First they say that, and then they ban Jews,' he said. Some high-school kids came and threw rocks at the house, so what does the he-man do? Call the cops? No. He opened the door and charged them. He tackled the biggest guy, the fullback. 'I roughed him up a little,' he told us, which meant he didn't hurt him." Katz's parents, Isaac and Sima, had met in Russia before they emigrated, separately, to New York, Sima in 1918 and Isaac a few years later. She was an actress, a star in the Yiddish theatre on the Lower East Side—her stage name was Ella Marion. Isaac worked for Sima's brother in the wholesale-coffee business. He dressed well, rode a motorcycle, and cared about style and high culture—"an apprentice aristocrat," as Katz described him. When he found out that Sima was living in Brooklyn, Katz said, "he looked her up and knocked her up, and that was it."

Katz was born in 1927. A year later, the family moved from Brooklyn to St. Albans, in Queens, a mixed neighborhood of English, Irish, German, and Italian households with one other Jewish family, across the street. Bernard, Katz's younger brother, was born there in 1932. The boys grew up largely on their own. "I did whatever I wanted," Alex remembers. "If it was wrong, they didn't punish me—they just said don't do it again." His mother, who knew six languages, had him reciting Edgar Allen Poe when he was four. As a child, he read a lot—fiction, poetry, the Book of Knowledge—and he drew all the time. He covered the stairwell wall with crayon drawings; his parents were surprised, but not angry, and the drawings stayed.

When he was in second grade, he won the top prize in a citywide drawing contest for public-school children. The principal of his grade school urged him to go to the High School of Music and Art, in Manhattan, but Isaac and Sima didn't want him travelling that far on the subway. He went instead to the Woodrow Wilson Vocational High School, in Queens, because "you could do art half the day there." For the next three years, he studied industrial design and learned classical drawing techniques by copying antique plaster casts. His ambition was to be a commercial artist. He played a lot of basketball, made the track team, and became a very good social dancer and a snazzy dresser, with seven zoot suits in his closet.

The year Katz turned sixteen, a truck ran into his father's car when it was stopped at a red light, and killed him. The two boys were almost completely on their own after that. "I think Alex was closer to our father than I was," Bernie Katz remembers, but both of them had been somewhat intimidated by Isaac. Two weeks before the accident, Alex had seen an ad for life insurance in the back of a comic book, he recalled, and on an impulse he had sent in the initial payment (twenty-five cents) on a policy for his father. "We got a payout of ten thousand dollars," he said. "It was all the money we had then. My mother said I was born under a lucky moon."

Katz joined the Navy at eighteen, to avoid being drafted. It was 1945, and the war was nearly over. He shipped out on a converted luxury liner that went to Marseilles, then back to North America, through the Panama Canal, and across the Pacific to Honolulu and Tokyo. Released from service in 1946, he took the entrance exam to Cooper Union, the city's full-tuition-scholarship school of art and architecture, and got in easily. "When he went to Cooper, he had to get up at 7 A.M. and take a bus and a subway, and right then I knew he was

going to make it," Bernie said. The teaching was doctrinaire modernism—Cubism, Bauhaus design, and the inexorable triumph of abstract art—none of which impressed Katz. He'd decided to be a fine artist, but he had no use for the fixed positions of modernist dogma, and he was never tempted by abstraction. The technical side of art, the craft of painting and drawing, was what appealed to him. He developed a personal style that he describes as "very fashionable at Cooper," with borrowings from Paul Klee, Pierre Bonnard, and (especially) Henri Matisse. "But then I started painting outdoors, and I just ditched all that."

What took him outdoors was a summer scholarship to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine, which he attended in the summer of 1949, right after he graduated. Jean Cohen, his girlfriend at the time, an abstract painter and a fellow-student at Cooper Union, went too. The teaching at Skowhegan was more traditional than at Cooper Union. Students went out in trucks every morning to paint the Maine landscape. Katz had never done direct painting—looking at something and painting it on the spot, with no preliminary sketches. "It was like feeling lust for the first time," he wrote in "Invented Symbols," an informal autobiography that he published in 2012. He told me, "You're working from inside your head, not thinking, just doing it." He also discovered Maine light, which struck him as richer and darker than the light in Impressionist paintings. Katz and Cohen got married in 1950, and went back to Skowhegan that summer. "Jean was very pretty, and intellectually serious," Katz said. "We were married for six years, but it was more like being roommates." In 1954, after spending three summers in rented houses nearby, Katz, Cohen, and Cohen's painter friend Lois Dodd bought a house together outside the town of Lincolnville, on the seacoast near Camden. It came with twenty acres of land, and cost twelve hundred dollars. Katz and Cohen were divorced two years later, and Katz became the sole owner in 1963. The house has been his summer home for sixty-four years.

From the time he graduated from Cooper Union, Katz had known that he wanted to be a figurative painter. He saw no reason there couldn't be new forms of representational art that were as powerful and contemporary as Abstract Expressionism, and he was pretty sure he could find them. Katz was wildly competitive. "At Cooper, I went from someone who was basically incompetent to being the best painter in the school," he told me. His idol was Matisse. "I couldn't believe a human being could paint that well," he said. Katz wanted to do what sounded deceptively simple: "To paint what's in front of you." By choosing to represent the world he knew, Katz said, and to do so in ways that he was inventing, "I completely alienated myself from traditional modern art and from traditional realistic painting, and also from the avant-garde."

It took him ten years to find his way. Living in cheap downtown lofts, supporting himself by working for a framemaker three days a week, he experimented with small paintings—New York street scenes, Maine landscapes, still-lifes, and figure paintings adapted from amateur family photographs. He wanted to paint in an open style, like Jackson Pollock, with no fixed outlines or contained forms, "but I didn't know how to do it," he said. "I destroyed a thousand paintings, just tore them up and threw them in the fireplace." In the mid-fifties, he switched to small cut-paper collages that were clearly influenced by Matisse's late work. For a three-month period in 1957, his self-confidence faltered. "I kept making paintings, and they were good, but they were boring," he said. "It was the only time in my life when a thing like that happened." What pulled him out of it was deciding to paint what he called "specific" portraits, recognizable images of real people—a decision that coincided with meeting Ada Del Moro.

That was in the fall of 1957, at the opening of Katz's two-person show at the artist-run Tanager Gallery, on Tenth Street. "A whole bunch of us went out to have coffee afterward," Katz said. "Ada had a tan, and a *great* smile, and she was with this guy who looked like Robert Taylor—fantastic-looking guy. But he didn't put her coat on—I did." Katz called the next day, and invited her to a Billie Holiday concert. Poised, beautiful, and highly intelligent, Ada was a research biologist at Sloan Kettering.

Katz's New York studio, on West Broadway,

One of his earliest paintings of her, done soon after they met and now owned by the Colby College Museum of Art, in Maine, is called "Ada in Black Sweater." She stands facing us, arms folded, a dark-haired young woman with wide-set dark eyes and a full mouth, against a white background. Katz has included just enough detail to make her recognizable. She keeps her distance, self-contained and inscrutable. They were married in February, 1958. "Ours was like an arranged marriage, because our families were so similar," Katz told me. "We're Jewish off the boat, and they're Italian off the boat. On Sunday afternoons,

where his recent work includes a series he calls "Coca-Cola Girls" (on the right), inspired by advertising signs from the fifties.

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."

"Ada gave him a complex human presence that I don't think I had seen before in his work," Katz's friend Sanford Schwartz, the writer and critic, told me. Katz has painted her more than two hundred times, and she is the subject of countless drawings and prints. When a show called "Alex Katz Paints Ada" opened at the Jewish Museum, in 2006, Ada granted a brief and guarded interview to the *Times' T* magazine. "I was sitting with my hands in my lap," she said, "and this guy that I was interested in was looking at my eyes, my ears, my shoulders. The whole thing was just very sensual. And I didn't think I could handle it. But then it became just this thing that he did. I was sitting and he was painting, and that was it." I asked Katz what it was about Ada that made her such an irresistible subject. "She's got perfect gestures," he said. "And she's a classic American beauty—full lips, a short nose, and wide eyes. She's also a European beauty. When I started to paint Ada, I was influenced by Picasso's Dora Maar. Dora Maar had better eyes than Ada, but Ada had a better neck and shoulders, and a much better body."

Ada gave up her scientific career and stopped working when Vincent, their only child, was born, in 1960. It is unkind but tempting to think that her real life since then has been on canvas, personifying every stage in Katz's long career. With "Ada Ada" (1959) and "The Black Dress" (1960), he introduced paintings with more than one image of the same subject—two Adas in the first, and, in the second, six, each one subtly different, all wearing the same emblem

"Wait, people! Let's not rush into a bad deal."

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of New York chic. (Like most of her clothes at the time, the dress was made by her mother.) "The Red Smile," which sets Ada's tightly cropped profile and shoulder-length dark hair against a background of cadmium red, marks Katz's move into much larger paintings; the canvas is six and a half feet high by nine and a half feet wide. His main influences at this point were television ads, movie closeups, Japanese prints (by Utamaro, in particular), and billboards. He had decided that the way to "get the same velocity as de Kooning" was to go for flat, simplified images and really big scale. "There was no figurative painting with that kind of scale and muscle," he told me. "The field was wide open, and I just stepped in."

Katz had found a way to paint portraits that he described, in a 1961 statement, as "brand-new & terrific." Ignoring character and mood, he offered the pure sensation of outward appearance—not who the people were, but how they appeared at a specific moment. "I can't think of anything more exciting than the surface of things," he later told an interviewer. He painted everyone this way, not just Ada, and in the mid-sixties he started painting groups of people in social situations. "The Cocktail Party" shows a gathering of eleven smartly dressed people (including Ada) in a New York loft. In "Lawn Party," thirteen guests mingle convivially outside a shingled golden-brown country house. The clothes, the gestures, the hair styles, are all specific to the era, but the painting's immersion in a perpetual *now*—what Katz called "quick things passing"—keeps it from looking dated. Although Katz was friendly with Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, and other traditional realists of the period, his work was never realistic. The faces of his subjects are smooth and unblemished, almost generic, and the background details, when they exist, are minimal. His paint surfaces became thinner and smoother in the nineteen-sixties, with few visible brush marks (and no noodling). To resolve the compositional problems of people in groups, he moved away from direct painting. He taught himself the Renaissance technique of pinning a full-sized brown-paper "cartoon" to the canvas, and forcing ("pouncing") dry pigment through pinholes to establish the outlines. He still does this with large paintings. Katz will use any available means, including obsolete techniques, to get brand-new and terrific effects.

There have always been people who disliked his work. The *Times* critic Hilton Kramer, despite his frequent praise, questioned its "emotional vacancy" and "air of untroubled sociability." Robert Hughes, in *Time*, called Katz the Norman Rockwell of the intelligentsia, which was odd—the art-world intellectuals who wrote for *October* and the academic quarterlies consistently ignored him. Others found the paintings not just cool but cold, or took issue with their increasingly monumental size. Katz's work had started to get attention in the late fifties. For a brief period he felt he was "on the bubble," as he said, meaning ahead of just about everyone else. A 1959 solo show at the Tanager Gallery, which featured his portraits with flat backgrounds, had been a financial failure but a critical success. At the opening, de Kooning, whom Katz knew only slightly, came over to tell him that he liked the paintings. ("He said I shouldn't let people knock me out of my position.") Rauschenberg and Johns took him to dinner, and Rauschenberg posed for a Katz portrait—a double image of the artist, seated. Katz saw Rauschenberg and Johns socially a few times after that. Their work impressed him, but Katz thought he was a better artist. "He has this intense drive and competitiveness," Vincent Katz, who grew up to be a poet and a writer, told me. "He sees what everybody else is doing, and his goal is to be on top."

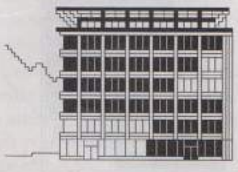
When Pop art made its sensational début, Katz's paintings, with their bold areas of color and closeup aggressiveness, seemed at first to be related to it, but there was no real connection—popular culture has never been his subject. Katz was not included in the game-changing 1962 "New Realists" show at the Sidney Janis Gallery, or in Henry Geldzahler's "New York Painting and Sculpture" show at the Met, in 1969. Leo

Castelli, who showed Rauschenberg, Johns, Frank Stella, and several of the Pop artists, visited Katz's studio, but didn't take him on. When Katz saw Roy Lichtenstein's new paintings at the Castelli Gallery, he said to himself, "'Alex, you're no longer on the bubble.' It was absolutely clear to me." Lichtenstein's comic-strip images and blown-up commercial ads made Pop a household term. Right behind Pop came minimal art and conceptual art, and appropriation and performance and video and the myriad varieties of postmodernism, none of which had much, or anything, to do with the craft-based work that Katz was doing. "Minimalism was excluding things, but my work was compression," he told me one day. As for conceptual art, it was "mostly philosophical ideas, and it comes from universities. A lot of artists don't master their craft until they're thirty-five, but you can be a first-class conceptual artist when you're eighteen."

Being off the bubble was "a bit of a shock," Katz admitted, but it didn't slow him down. He had no doubts about his work, and there were always people who believed in him. In the fifties and later, he had been close to Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, John Ashbery, and other New York poets. "They liked my paintings and I liked their poetry," he said. O'Hara reviewed Katz's work favorably in *ARTnews* and elsewhere, and bought two of his paintings in 1960. "I think Katz is one of the most interesting painters in America," O'Hara wrote. "He has the stubbornness of the 'great American tradition' in the dominating face of European influences." O'Hara was in Katz's studio at four o'clock one morning, telling him what to do, Katz recalled. "I said, 'Listen, Frank, I know how good I am,' and he said, 'Don't get porky with me. You're the one who's going to have to hang near Matisse.'" Katz's career might have taken a different path if O'Hara, who became an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art in 1960, hadn't died in 1966—he was hit by a beach buggy one night on Fire Island.

Katz's real mentor in those days was Edwin Denby, the poet and dance critic. "Edwin was like my graduate school," Katz said. "Through Edwin, I got involved with modern dance." Denby and the filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt are immortalized in one of the cutout-metal sculptural portraits that Katz started doing in the late fifties; they sit on folding chairs in his West Broadway loft, facing one another, deep in a discussion, so convincing that for a moment I thought they were real. Denby introduced Katz to the choreographer Paul Taylor, and for three decades Katz designed sets and costumes for Taylor's dance company. They had a falling-out at one point, over a Katz set design that Taylor disliked, but they eventually reconciled, and collaborated on one more dance. Fallings-out are not uncommon with Katz. He says exactly what he thinks, on every occasion, and his opinions can be abrasive.

The immense night landscape was still on the long wall in Katz's studio a week after he painted it. "This one turned out to be a real winner," he told me. "Several people have been in to see it." One of them was Richard Armstrong, the director of the Guggenheim Museum. "I could feel the wind coming through it," Armstrong told me. "That's a hard thing to do." The ultramarine night sky and the black foliage looked more clearly defined this time. "It's drying," Katz explained. "The thing I'm most proud of is my finish—the finish on the painting. After three months, the shine goes away, but the surface keeps changing. Oil paint moves, unlike acrylic. In five years, it's much



richer, and you can see into the black. It took me years to get to this finish." In the days before he started the painting, he explained, his longtime studio assistant, the painter Juan Gomez, had prepared the canvas by applying five undercoats—three coats of gesso and two coats of lead white. "And under that are two coats of rabbit-skin glue on the canvas," he said. "The light goes into it, and comes back out."

I asked him how often he did a painting as big as this one. "About once a year," he said. There was one in his last show at Gavin Brown's, a seven-foot-by-fourteen-foot landscape called "Field 1," with hints of brown foliage in an expanse of pale-yellow paint. ("The one with nothing in it," Katz said.) At this late stage in his career, after a lifetime of figurative painting, he is engaged in a strange dance with abstraction. For the past three years, he's been painting shadows on grass—six large versions were on view earlier this year, in a solo show at the Richard Gray Gallery, in Chicago. The shadows are green and the grass is mostly yellow, and for some reason that seems just right. "The grass paintings are really hard," he told me. "People liked them, but I didn't get what I wanted." He planned to try again this summer, in Maine.

Katz's mid-career retrospective at the Whitney Museum, in 1986, a selection of works from three decades, was widely and favorably reviewed. "The paintings look easy, the way Fred Astaire made dancing look easy and Cole Porter made words and music sound easy, but don't let's be fooled," John Russell wrote in the *Times*. "When it comes to art that conceals art, Katz is right in there with those two great exemplars." Seeing so much of his work together revealed something else, though: an unexpected range of emotion and complexity. Ada, without relinquishing her sphinxlike self-possession, could be many different people—a film star in "Blue Umbrella 2," a seductress in "Upside Down Ada," a chic suburban wife and mother in "Ada and Vincent in the Car," a Valkyrie in "The Red Smile." Friends and strangers, children, Katz himself, in a few searching self-portraits, are players in a social panorama that runs deeper than the flat surfaces and primary colors would suggest. "He has made in painting what John Updike and John Cheever did in literature—a choral portrait of a certain America," the New Museum's artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni, said recently. A vein of humor hovers beneath the surface, and sometimes breaks through. In "Moose Horn State Park," a fully antlered bull moose turns to look at us over its right shoulder—"Just like Betty Grable," Katz suggests.

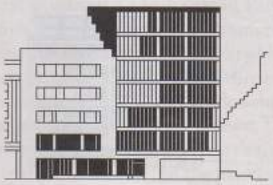
In spite of the good reviews, though,

the Whitney show did little to boost his reputation or his sales, and the art world's tepid reaction made Katz more competitive than ever. "I wanted to move to a place in art that was unstable and terrifying," he said. After many years of concentrating on the human figure, he began painting what he described as "environmental landscapes"—landscapes so large that they enveloped the viewer. ("You could be inside them," as he put it.) He also began a series of night paintings—cityscapes, black buildings with a few lighted windows, and seascapes and forests, precursors of the one I had watched him paint, all caught at the moment before last light fades to black. Many of Katz's best paintings capture the light and the atmosphere of a specific time of day—none more hauntingly than his 1982 image of an adolescent girl, alone, in "Tracy on the Raft at 7:30." His night paintings probed the outer limits of visible light.

Into the nineties and beyond, Katz found fresh subjects to explore: light falling through trees, or on fields of flowers; dancers and performers whose personal style or way of moving caught his eye. The European market for his work expanded dramatically in the late eighties. Younger artists, riding a new wave of figure painting by German and American neo-expressionists (Sigmar Polke, A. R. Penck, Julian Schnabel, David Salle), discovered Katz's work and recognized him as an ally. As the painter Jacqueline Humphries wrote to me recently, "I see in Alex's work so much of what I love in Manet: immediacy, grandeur, plus the keen, urbane and candid assessment of subject." Shara Hughes, an artist who is in her mid-thirties, said, "He does it right. At first, I thought he was boring, until I realized how hard it is to be that simple. Now I look at it all the time." I asked Katz if it felt like he was back on the bubble. "Yeah," he said. "I think I bounced twice. Matisse did that with his late cutouts, but Picasso didn't. Listen, one bubble is *miraculous*."

A possible excuse for not taking Katz's work seriously is that he has such a good time making it. Recognizing no taboos, he is free to experiment with whatever catches his interest. He has even had a fling with high-end fashion. Eternity only exists in the present moment, Katz decided, and fashion offered a direct line to the now. In the early nineteen-eighties, he did a number of paintings of fashion models wearing clothes by Norma Kamali, and this led, in 1984, to a twenty-two-foot-long painting called "Eleuthera," of four female couples in Kamali bathing suits. "I wanted to make a composition of people touching—how different girls touch each other," he explained. "They're sisters, jocks, lesbians, what have you, and they all touch differently." Fashion and art used to be considered incompatible, because fashion was decorative and art, supposedly, was not. Katz has no quarrel with decoration; it's an aspect of art, he says, and only suspect when it becomes the main aspect.

When I asked him if he considered himself a good decorator, he said, "I'm fair. I think my paintings are a little too aggressive to be good decoration." What about Warhol's?, I inquired. "Warhol is an illustrator, basically," he replied. "None of his paintings hold up as paintings. In terms of image-making the guy is fantastic, and as a decorator he's up there with Twombly." It's sometimes difficult to follow Katz's line of thought, which moves unpredictably. Jackson Pollock, he said, "is the epitome of good decorative painting." Francis Bacon "is perfect for a house, but Franz Kline is not housebroken—too much energy." I brought up David Hockney, the British-born figurative innovator whose career, like Katz's, has been consistently



outside the mainstream. "Hockney's an illustrator, but he learned to paint in the end," Katz said. "My hat is off to him."

The house in Maine is three miles inland from the pleasant coastal town of Lincolnville. It hasn't changed at all—aside from a new electric stove in the kitchen and modern plumbing—since Katz, Jean Cohen, and Lois Dodd pooled their resources to buy it, in 1954. The rooms are small and cramped, the ceilings are low. My wife and I drove up from New York in June. There was no place to park—the front yard and a small space across the street were occupied by Katz's three automobiles: a 1975 Cadillac Eldorado that his brother Bernie had sold him, secondhand, in the early nineteen-eighties, a dingy Oldsmobile, and a BMW that was temporarily out of commission. The Katzes had arrived a day earlier, by charter plane and taxi. Ada, who was moving with difficulty because of a bruised hip, came along as Katz took us on a short walk through the woods to his studio. We passed the cottage where their son, Vincent, and his Brazilian-born wife, Vivien, stay when they're there. (Vincent and Vivien have two children, twin boys just entering college.) The studio was built twenty years ago to replace Katz's original one, in a beautiful old barn adjoining the house; the barn wasn't big enough for his increasingly large paintings, and on hot days it was stifling. Designed to Katz's specifications by a Japanese architect, the new studio is a big, airy room, fifty feet long by thirty feet wide, with a high ceiling and unpainted wood beams. Through one window you can see a freshwater lake where Katz swims every day. "It's too small for motorboats, which is great," he said.

Ada, who has a way of being there and not there, went off to sit by herself on a bench outside. She had made it clear from the beginning that she did not want to be interviewed. ("I'm not part of this," she said.) "I think sometimes she's really bored," Katz admitted. "I'm a little difficult, because I do what I want to do. I spend most of the summer painting, and she's not particularly social, so a lot of the time she's by herself. She reads a lot. When Vincent's here everything's O.K., but Vincent isn't here that much, and I'm not going to stop painting to entertain her." Has she ever complained about that?, I asked him. "No," he said. He likes to tell about the time when, at one of his openings, a person asked, "Is that the artist?" and someone else said, "It must be, he's standing with Ada."

Two dozen stretched canvases in various sizes were lined up against the wall of the pristine studio, ready for use. The only painting in the room was propped on a table against the back wall—a nine-

inch-by-twelve-inch image, dark-green forms on a yellow background, that held the eye from across the room. "I had a real piece of luck this morning," Katz said, as we moved toward it. "I was going swimming, but on the way I saw something, and decided to go inside and paint it instead. It's the thing I've been after for three years. 'Bingo,' I said. 'It looks like shadows on grass to me.' I don't even know yet if it'll be horizontal or vertical, but I got the tonal thing, the tonal range." He was going to do three more small versions on Masonite right away, he said, before starting a big canvas. Katz, who turned ninety-one in July, keeps in shape with a daily regimen of swimming and rigorous exercises. "I used to do two hundred sit-ups, three hundred pushups, and a hundred chins," he said. (His chinning bar was in the doorway to a small studio kitchen.) "I can't do as many now." He paints seven days a week. "I never remember a time when he wasn't working," Vincent told me.

"Good boy!"

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We walked out to the road so that Katz could show us a house he'd bought recently. He'd heard that the owner had sold it, but the contract wasn't signed, so Katz offered fifty per cent more than the purchase price, sight unseen, and the owner agreed. It was one of a number of neighboring properties that Katz has bought, partly to preserve his and Ada's privacy, but also because he thinks he might eventually turn his land into a place for young artists to come and work. Local real estate is still relatively cheap. "The farming has always been terrible," Katz said. "We live in a rural slum."

Dinner that night was at the Whale's Tooth, in Lincolnville. The restaurant overlooks a meagre strip of beach, which is a good deal less meagre in several Katz paintings. Ada was more animated than she'd been earlier. When Katz was going on about his aggressive style in art, she said, "I'm going to be very aggressive and say it's time to eat." They'd had their sixtieth wedding anniversary on February 1st. "We almost missed it," Katz said.

The next day, the four of us drove to the Colby College Museum of Art, in Waterville, which has a wing devoted to Katz. The museum owns more than nine hundred of his works, including prints and drawings, a great many of them donated by the artist. "There I am again," Ada said, resignedly, as we passed a metal cutout portrait of her on the lawn. Sharon Corwin, the director, took us first on a tour of the museum's modern-and-contemporary collection. Many of its key works were donated by the Alex Katz Foundation, which buys works by lesser-known artists and gives them to museums that promise to keep them on view. Alex does the buying—there is no board of directors—and decides where the works will go. "Nothing to MOMA, or places that would just stick them in the closet," he explained. "I like to buy from artists who're having a hard time in their twenties, because I remember what that meant to my confidence as an artist." Since he lives frugally and doesn't play the horses, this appears to be one of his few extravagances.

The Katz exhibition, in the Paul J. Schupf Wing, changes periodically. The standout painting for me was "Canoe," a 1974 image of a faux-birch-bark canoe and its watery reflection. The painting is twelve feet long, about as big as a real canoe. The scale, the color, the light, the buttery surface, the virtuoso paint handling that doesn't call attention to itself—everything about it is top-level Katz. Another landmark is the thirty-foot-long "Pas de Deux," in which five male-female couples, most of whom are Katz's friends, touch one another with varying degrees of intimacy. This painting was donated by Paul J. Schupf. A private investor who became an avid collector of Katz's work in 1970 or so, Schupf put up half the funding for the wing that bears his name, and he has donated several other important paintings to it, but he and Katz no longer speak to each other. (Personal animosities—heightened by what Schupf considers Katz's insufficient gratitude and overinflated sense of entitlement—ended the friendship.) There were terrific paintings from the nineteen-fifties to the present in the wing's three large spaces. The exhibition struck me as a compelling argument for the great, revelatory New York retrospective that Katz wants and deserves—and should have while he's still around, but probably won't. Katz wastes no time in being bitter. "He knows who he is," Gavin Brown had told me. "As he said the other day, 'I'm alive, and in my studio every day, and people buy my paintings. I just want to keep throwing the dice against the wall.'"

Before leaving the gallery, my wife asked Katz to identify a dark-haired woman in a group of cutout paintings called "Wedding." "That's Ada," he said.

"But it doesn't look like Ada!"

Katz, with a big grin: "Nothing does." ♦