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The Pursuit of Excellence, Alex Katz

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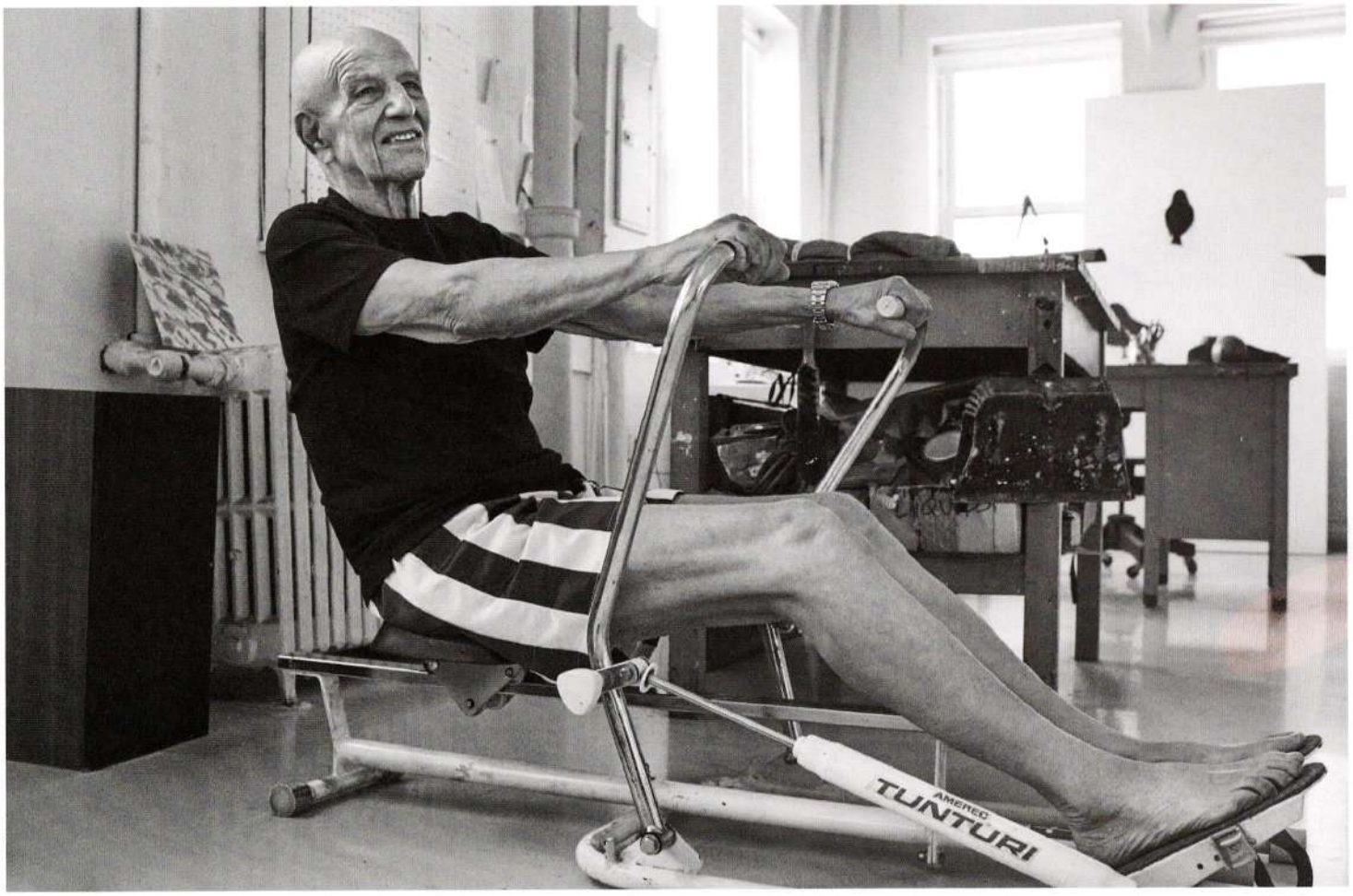
The REFINEMENT



# of Alex Katz

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
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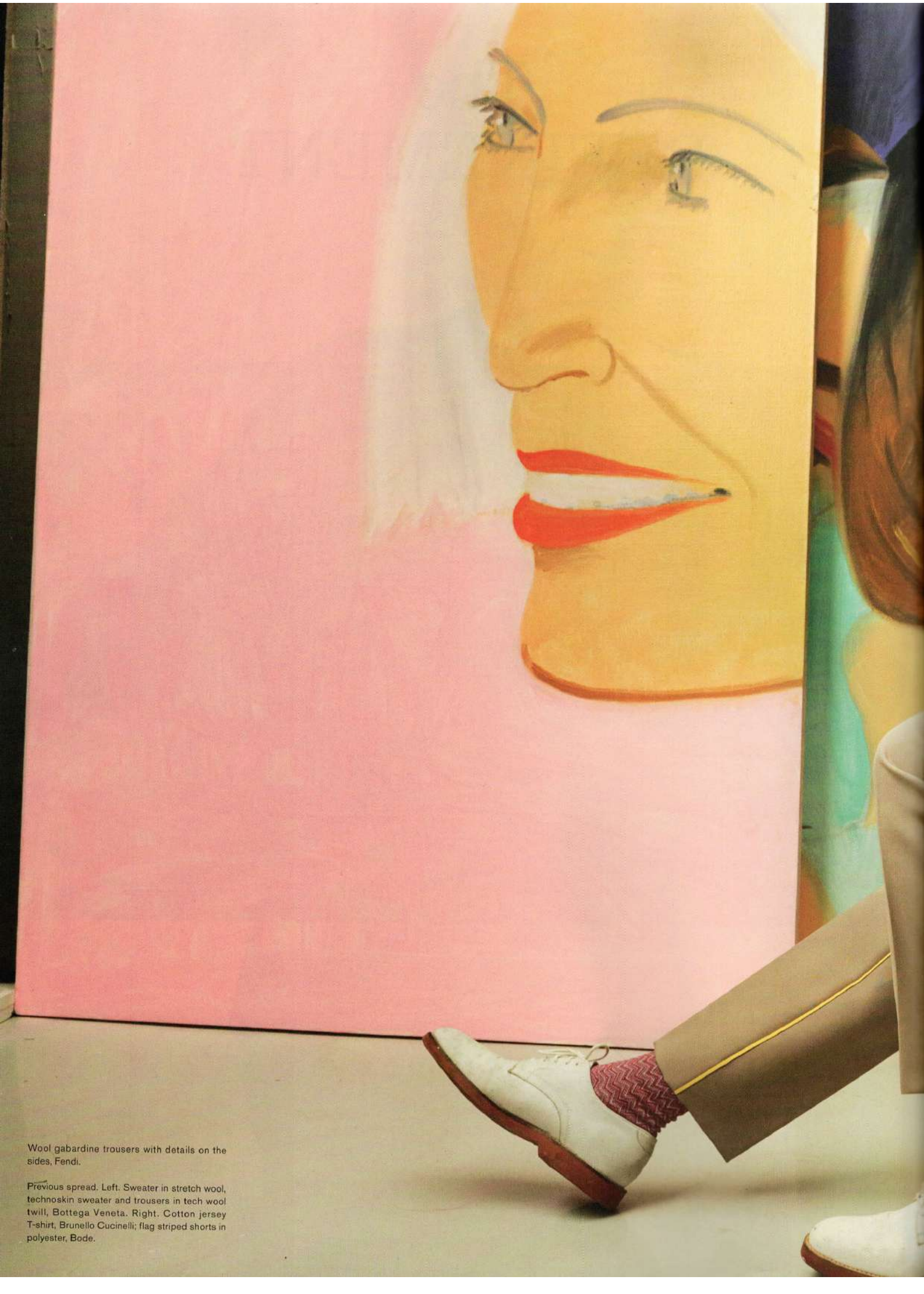
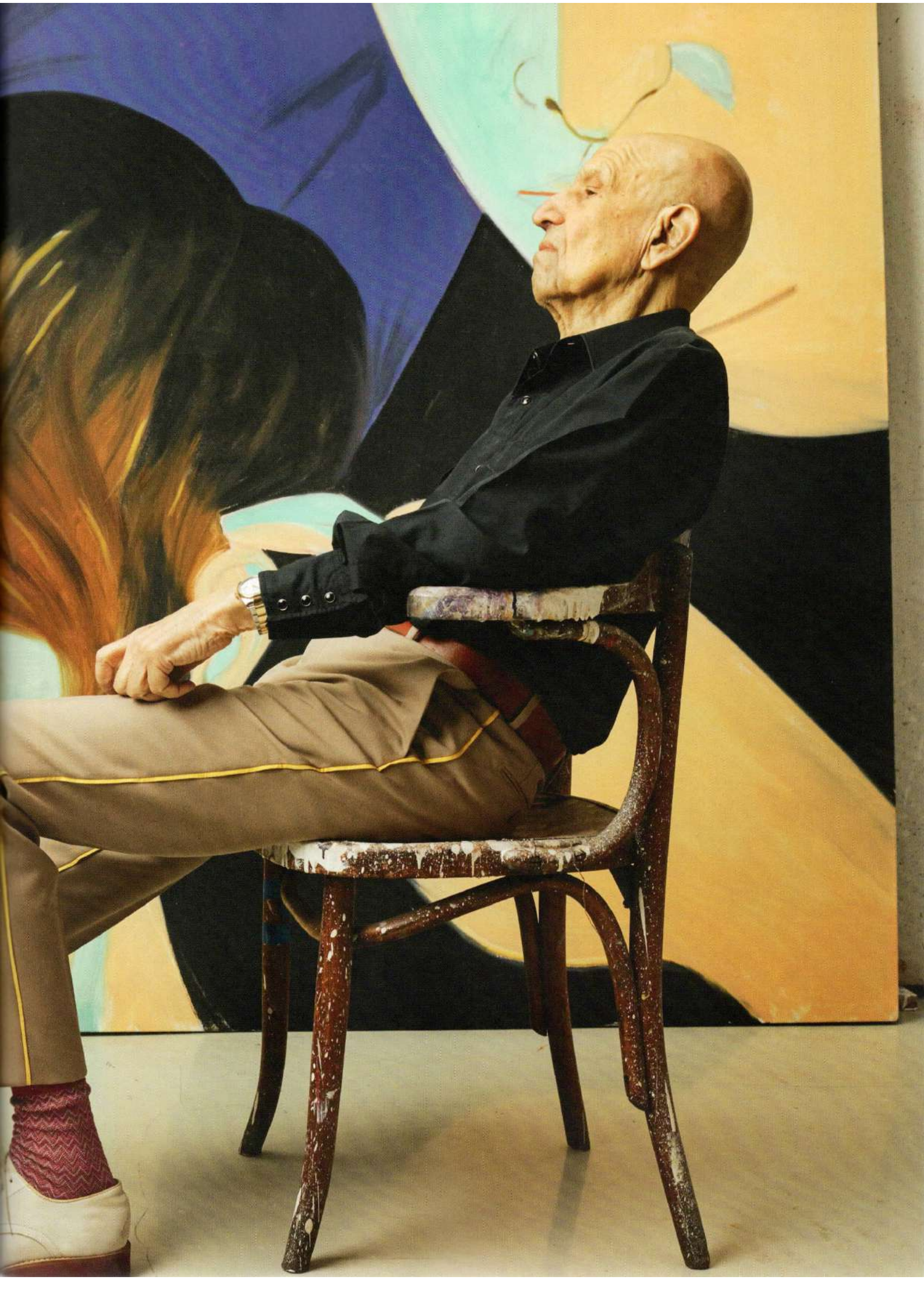
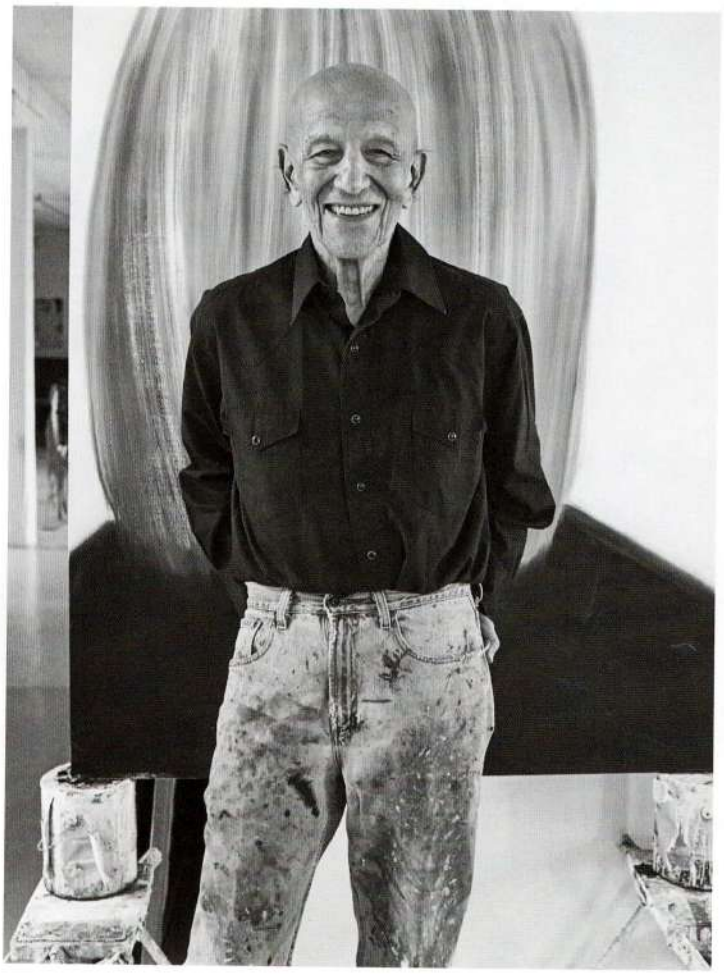
STELLA GREENSPAN

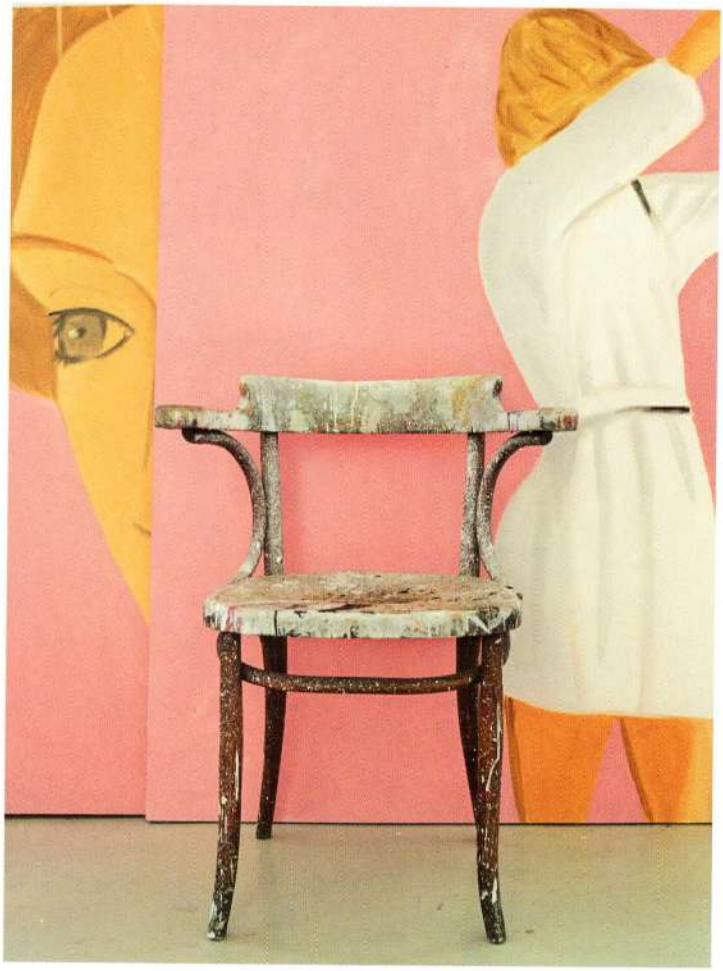


Wool gabardine trousers with details on the sides, Fendi.

Previous spread. Left. Sweater in stretch wool, technoskin sweater and trousers in tech wool twill, Bottega Veneta. Right. Cotton jersey T-shirt, Brunello Cucinelli; flag striped shorts in polyester, Bode.

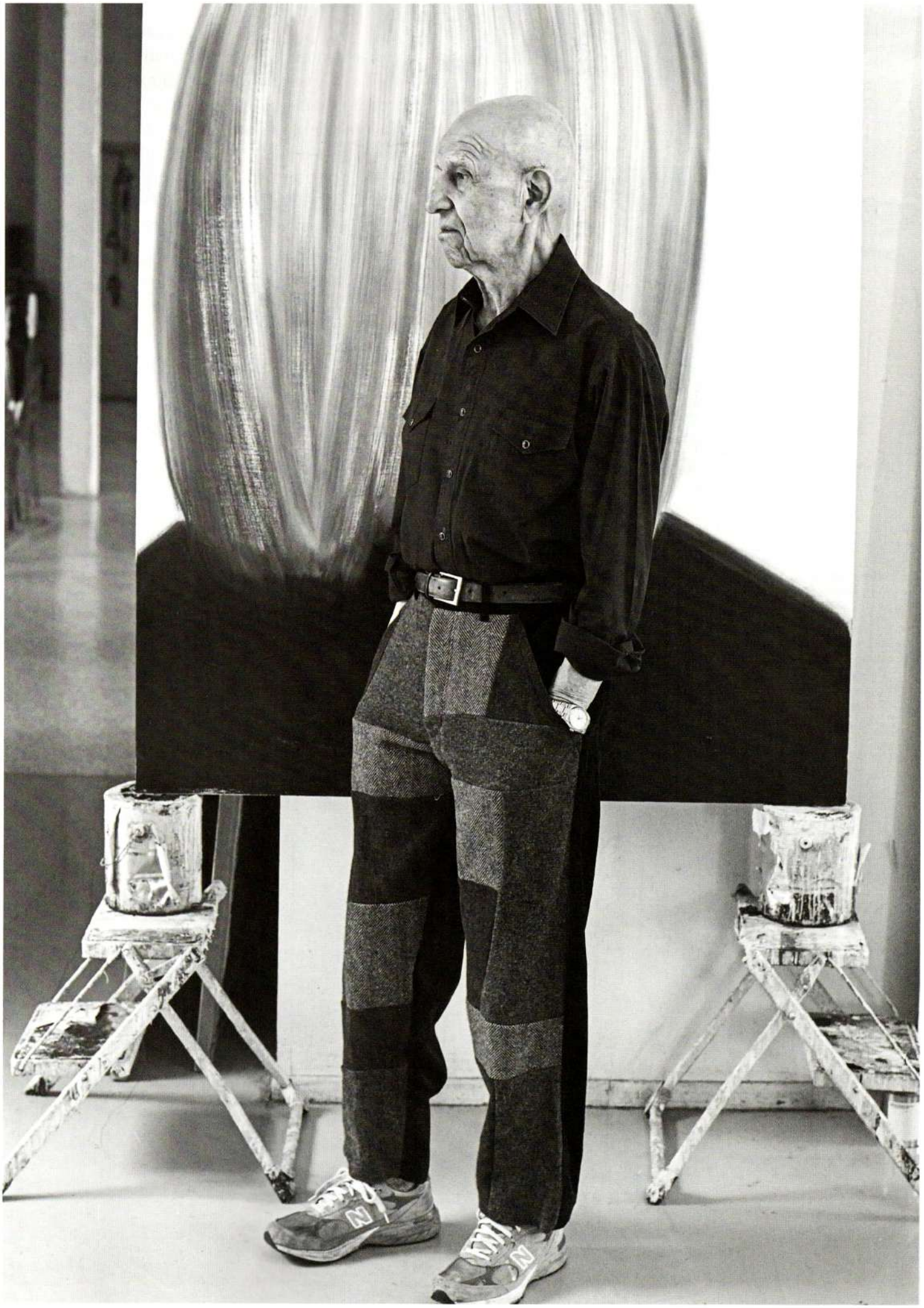






Top. Button-down shirt and denim trousers, artist's own.

Opposite page. Navy and grey woolen patchwork trousers, Comme des Garçons Shirt.



Sweater in stretch wool, technoskin sweater, Bottega Veneta.

Stylist assistant Rika Nurrahmah. Digital tech Tadaaki Shibuya. On set Art + Commerce.

Katz's Delicatessen

It might sound blasphemous to compare a great artist like Alex Katz to the namesake deli on the Lower East Side in Manhattan, but the paintings of this 20th-century master who has crossed the Delaware of the 21st-century in great form and spirit have the same immediate impact on the eyes as a Katz pastrami sandwich has on your mouth. You don't need to think much to enjoy both Katz's paintings and the pastrami sandwich. Art and food are at their best when words are of little use.

INTERVIEW BY
FRANCESCO BONAMI

When you ask younger artists which artist they most look up to, two names crop up more than any others: David Hockney and Alex Katz. Why? Because the younger generations seem to agree that this pair of exceptional artists are also genuine people who enjoy art and life in equal measure, taking both with a similar dose of healthy light-heartedness. Moreover, these two artists appear to have been extremely lucky, and being lucky in life and art is hardly something to be sniffed at. On top of all this, if we want to open the era of post-correctness, compared to Hockney, Alex Katz has the remarkable advantage of not being British. Katz's art celebrates New England, the Hamptons, and in general a certain lifestyle that skips through life with agility. We could say that Katz belongs to the Lobster School of painting. His light and inspiration come from the East, meaning the Japanese woodcut style. Now 93 years old, he was born in Brooklyn to a Jewish family that had arrived from Russia where the Bolsheviks had seized his father's factory. To look at him today, slender and sprightly dressed in colourful suits, he has the air of an animated brushstroke that has just jumped out of a Pixar movie. Painters like him rarely talk very much because their voice mostly belongs to the pictures they paint and the people they portray. His simple art made of people and nature is wonderfully at home on canvas, but it's equally phenomenal on the pages of a book. That's another big stroke of luck for an artist, since his works are as enjoyable in a museum as they are in a catalogue. His art has the same delightful impact whether the works are large or small. So it's hard to go wrong, which is a word that doesn't seem to belong to Katz's philosophy. Here, in a very concise series of answers, he explains to L'Uomo Vogue what art is for him, and maybe for us.

When did you start painting and why?
The first painting I did was of Jamaica Bay. I was the night watchman and I had extra time. I was 16 – it was a great job.

Spending 77 years painting isn't a bad way to live your life. You've gained classic status now, a sort of pop Goya but with the happiness of Tiepolo. Would you agree?
I wish I were! (Laughs)

Maybe Goya and Tiepolo would have wished they were you if they'd known what kind of life you've had and still have. With your exceptional normality, do you think you'll replace Edward Hopper in the collective imagination?
Yes, I will.

You're even more normal than Hopper, and your artistic career looks to be even longer than his, too. Of all your paintings, which is your favourite?
The one that has the most muscle and that people like the best is in the collection of Max Mara [Collezione Maramotti]. It's of *Ada in the Woods* [5 January 1992].

I'm not surprised. Max Mara's founder Achille Maramotti had this great art advisor, Mario Diacono, who had a gallery in Boston. He knew what he was talking about. It looks like Gauguin didn't go to Tahiti but chose to stop in Maine. Are there any of your pieces that you wish you could go back and destroy?
None. I destroyed too many.

I didn't think you were so tough on yourself. I imagined you as the kind of artist who gives his paintings an extra chance. I guess I was wrong. How do you define a good painting, not just your own but in general?
It's a big flash, and then it's perfect harmony.

It's safe to say you use a lot of flashes when you paint. How would you describe a bad painting?
A bad painting is boring. It's like I've been there or seen this before.

That's never something we want, right? Not even with a person whose story you're telling with your art.
Things are not always so bad.

That's true. Looking at your work, one never has the feeling things are so bad. I love your portrait on the canoe. It reminds me of a work at the Met by George Caleb Bingham called "Fur Traders Descending the Missouri" from 1845. How and when did this timeless image of yours come about?
Bingham's painting comes from similar sources: French neoclassicism. I saw this canoe in a store in Buxton and it had fake birch bark on it. I just thought it was great, so we put it on top of the car and took it back home. Then it just seemed to generate image after image after image.

That makes sense. Your whole painting career seems like a journey sailing down a beautiful long river. The unavoidable question is: has the pandemic affected your way of working?
Yes, I was holed up and all I could do was paint. I never painted so much.

It could have been worse, I guess. Can you share any secrets about your art?
I keep secrets so I don't have to share them.

Fair enough. Or maybe like your painting you have no secrets. Is there a painting for which you'd risk going to jail to steal from a museum?
It could be a Velásquez, which I'd like to look at, but I think the painting that I'd like to see every day would be a Ryder nocturne.

A Velásquez would be too big to carry on the canoe. Albert Pinkham Ryder (19 March 1847 – 28 March 1917) seems more appropriate in terms of size, but this also reveals a darker, moodier side of you that I wasn't expecting. Do you have a favourite museum?
I like the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. It has 12 Velásquez paintings, which is hard to compete with.

I have the feeling you don't even want to bother competing with him. The only king you seem to enjoy working with is yourself. And 12 Velásquez paintings definitely wouldn't fit in the canoe.