

Alex Katz Is Still Perfecting His Craft

second career since his last retrospective, at the age of almost 60. His work is beautiful, technically inventive and a testament to following one's own artistic instincts while remaining alert to the new. But equally important are his endurance, discipline and unwavering commitment to a life lived in art. "He's devoted his life to one thing," his dealer Gavin Brown, a partner at New York's Gladstone Gallery, which represents Katz in the United States, told me. "He's kind of like a weird bird of paradise perfecting his dance, or perfecting the construction of this nest. That's what's in his DNA, to do this thing ... that's his project. In some ways, it's such a small project, but it's also more valuable than ever."

ALEX KATZ WAS born in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, in 1927 and raised in St. Albans, Queens, where his family moved in 1928, just before the start of the Depression. His earliest aesthetic influences came from his immigrant parents, who had met in Russia during the First World War and re-encountered each other in New York City. His mother, Sima, was an actress, a star of the Yiddish theater on the Lower East Side who performed under the stage name Ella Marion. She was "very literary," Katz says — she taught herself English from a dictionary and an Edgar Allan Poe collection, the poems of which she also made her 4-year-old son recite — and had a mordant wit. In his memoir, Katz recounts that once, as he wished her goodbye in a hotel lobby, he said, "It's been awfully nice talking to you," and she replied, "I hope you don't paint in clichés."

His father, Isaac, who died when Katz was 16, worked in the wholesale coffee business. Before he met and married Katz's mother, Katz tells me, "He played billiards and chased girls. He was a playboy; that was his job." Katz calls him "an apprentice aristocrat," with fine tastes that made an impression upon his young son. In his memoir, Katz remembers their house as "different from the other houses around there." His father had painted it in "refined colors": pale yellow walls with violet panels in the living room; pink walls with maroon triangles in the sun parlor. Around the house, his parents hung Expressionist paintings by a family friend. "No one had these European Expressionist paintings," Katz writes. "No one had paintings, period." Their parenting style was also eccentric. Katz and his younger brother, Bernard, who was born in 1931, had a free-range childhood



Katz's wife, Ada, has been a frequent subject for the artist. This painting, "Ada in Black Sweater," is from 1957, the year the couple met. Photo courtesy of Colby College Museum of Art © 2022 Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

before that was a term. "I was allowed to do anything I wanted," Katz recalls. "If I broke things or did something terrible, they'd say, 'That's OK. Don't do it again.'" When, for example, a young Katz drew all over the staircase walls in crayon, they didn't get angry. "It stayed there for 10 or 12 years," Katz says, laughing. "They thought it was nice."

Katz chose to attend Woodrow Wilson Vocational High School in Queens (against the advice of his grammar school principal, who favored the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan).

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A neighborhood kid, a fellow budding artist, had told him that at Woodrow Wilson you could “do art half the day,” which turned out to be true. For two years there, Katz spent afternoons drawing from antique casts, a practice dating back to at least the Renaissance in which students copy plaster reproductions of classical sculpture. It wasn’t bad training, but the school was also a hotbed of music, dance and fashion, and the true lessons it offered were about the importance of style, one of Katz’s ongoing preoccupations and a hallmark of his future paintings. “It’s an independent thing that everybody tries to hook onto,” he tells me, when I inquire about his antennae for what’s fashionable. “It’s in the air and there’s a drift to it, and artists hook onto it, to varying degrees.”

In 1946, after a brief stint in the Navy, Katz took the entrance exam to New York’s Cooper Union, the school of art, architecture and engineering that offered free tuition. Its curriculum emphasized modern art, with a focus on Cubism and Bauhaus design. Katz spent much of his time drawing, mostly “compositions of people” — around the city, in restaurants, on the subway. The Guggenheim show will contain several black-and-white subway drawings from his sketchbook at the time; in them, you can see the origins of his future stripped-down portraits.

Following graduation, while on scholarship at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine during the summers of 1949 and 1950, he had a major creative epiphany that would permanently alter his technique. There, students painted landscapes outdoors, en plein air. (At Cooper Union, they’d worked from drawings.) He found this “direct painting” faster and more organic. “It was like feeling lust for the first time,” he has said.

The light in Maine, too, was a revelation to him, he notes in his memoir, “richer and darker than the light in Impressionist paintings. ... It helped me separate myself from European painting and find my own eyes.” A few years later, Katz, the artist Lois Dodd and Katz’s then-wife, Jean Cohen, an abstract painter he’d met in school and married in 1950, bought a house (the yellow farmhouse that frequently appears in his paintings) and a parcel of land in Lincolnville, Maine, a small seaside town near Camden. (They paid \$1,200 for it.) The couple divorced in 1956, but Katz kept the house. Light, and the light in Maine



A portrait of Katz’s wife and son, “Ada and Vincent,” from 1967. Photo courtesy of Alex Katz Studio © 2022 Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

especially — dappling grass and leaves, hitting a lake with the blinding brightness of a mirror in the sun — would become, one might argue, the real subject of his landscapes.

Katz’s breakthrough as a painter came at the end of the ’50s with his foray into a new kind of portraiture, but he spent nearly a decade tunneling his way toward it. He declared his first solo show, at the Roko Gallery in New York in 1954, a flop. For the next few years, until 1959, he spent evenings making lyrical, diminutive, deliberately

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nostalgic 4-by-6-inch collages from colored paper — spare beach and nature scenes, sometimes with figures in them — that were influenced by the late cut-paper works of Matisse, who had died in 1954. “The size is intimate but the scale is vast,” the poet Frank O’Hara, a friend of Katz’s, wrote of these tiny, winsome pieces. But all the while, Katz was pursuing his first love, painting. “I destroyed a thousand paintings. I’d try something out, and if it didn’t work, I’d just throw it away,” he tells me, “but at the end of seven or eight years, I had a great technique. If you look at my paintings at the end of ’58 or ’59, they’re painted expertly.”

In conversation, Katz pitches between extremes of bombast and self-deprecation. “I’ve been on fire,” he says, as we look at a pair of his recent landscapes: two deep brown paintings with dynamic blue brushstrokes that are the final images in his “Black Brook” series, which includes various increasingly abstract takes on the titular stream in Maine. (Katz began the series in 1988 with “Ada in Front of Black Brook,” in which he depicts the back of Ada’s head as she contemplates the mud-colored water.) A couple of days later, while discussing a series of new works in progress, he says, “I’m very insecure. What the hey, it’s just an idea. I’m painting the best that I can, but I don’t know if it makes any sense.” Some of his bluster is for the sake of humor, I gather, but by all accounts he is also genuinely competitive: “I think I’m better than anyone,” he tells me at one point. His sprightliness and artistic libido are almost comically impressive in a man of his age, perhaps owing to his regimen of morning calisthenics that, he says, includes a regular series of pull-ups. “It’s crazy how sharp he is, how fit he is,” Brown says. “I mean, the paintings he’s making, they’re big paintings for a 95-year-old.”

KATZ HAS ALWAYS thought big. In 1950, the year after he graduated from art school — and after Life magazine ran its famous spread of Jackson Pollock and his colossal drip abstractions — he decided that he wanted to create “a new type of painting,” partly as a reaction to the ubiquity and dominance of Abstract Expressionism. He was convinced there had to be a way to achieve “a contemporary representational painting,” as he has put it. “This is the highest thing an artist can do,” he told the British art critic and curator David Sylvester in 1997, “to make something that’s real for his time, where



A few sources of inspiration atop a tool cabinet in the artist's studio. Alec Soth

he lives.” His solution came in the form of what he called “specific portraits” of figures set against flat, monochromatic backgrounds, shown at New York City’s Tanager Gallery in 1959. These early portraits are moving, affectingly human portrayals of a young Ada, then a cancer researcher at Memorial Sloan Kettering, and of his friends. Among them are “Ada in Black Sweater” (1957), showing a poised, red-lipped Ada, one forearm resting gracefully atop the other; “Irving and Lucy” (1958), depicting the art critic and historian Irving Sandler, his arm snugly around his wife, Lucy Freeman Sandler, a renowned medieval scholar; and “Ada With White Dress” (1958), picturing Katz’s new wife — the couple married that year — standing before a bright green background.

These compositions — influenced, Katz has noted, by Matisse and Picasso, as well as by Goya, Velázquez, Munch and Courbet (the latter two also used flat backgrounds) — achieved what he was striving for: figures that were at once particular and universal, actual people who, by their minimalistic rendering and contextless settings, become archetypes. With their smudgy lines and soft colors, the paintings have the contours of realism while also dabbling in abstraction. “The vocabulary or grammar is all out of abstract painting — that’s what makes my painting different from all the other figurative painters,” Katz explains. But his innovation was not without

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was not without controversy. Although liked by many artists (Willem de Kooning, who attended the show, told him that he “shouldn’t let people knock me out of my position,” Katz has said), the indeterminate paintings were polarizing and would, in step with the rest of his oeuvre, make Katz a kind of art world loner, difficult to classify.

During the decade or so following the show at Tanager Gallery, Katz’s portraits, usually of close-cropped faces, grew larger and more heroic in size and scale, brighter in color, more detailed and shadowed, though they continued to tread the line between elemental and precise — executed, as one critic wrote, with a kind of “casual accuracy.” Among my favorites from this period are “The Red Smile” (1963), in which Ada is painted sharply in profile against a scarlet background that matches her lipstick, a royal blue headband in her hair, and “Ada and Vincent” (1967), a gentler portrait, in which mother stands behind the pair’s young son, Vincent, close enough that she could kiss the top of his head. A work with a similar composition, “Vincent and Sunny” (1967), of Vincent nuzzling his dog, hangs in the foyer in Katz’s apartment, and his painterly evocation of the boy’s hair and the animal’s fur is so finely rendered, I wanted to touch it. Finally, there is “Blue Umbrella 1” (1972), in which Ada — whom the writer and professor Ingrid Rowland has called “glamour personified” — is wearing a printed head scarf, holding a periwinkle umbrella and staring dreamily into the middle distance. (It sold at auction in 2019 for \$4.2 million.) These works make clear that Katz shared certain thematic concerns with the Pop Art movement, namely an interest in billboards, movies and advertising, while not truly being of it. One can also see the influence of the Edo-period Japanese woodblock artist Kitagawa Utamaro, best known for his elegant, intimate portraits of beautiful women, or *bijin-ga*. Katz had seen Utamaro’s prints in the Queens living room of a friend whose husband had brought them back from a trip to Japan, and liked their “high-style bohemian subject matter” (the women Utamaro portrayed were often celebrated courtesans and other members of the *demimonde*).

Katz’s own haute bohemian subject matter is one of the pleasures of looking at his work: A viewer will recognize various members of the artistic milieu in which he circulated. He was friends with a



One of the artist's early group portraits, "The Cocktail Party" (1965). Photo by James Prinz, Chicago © 2022 Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

number of poets, among them O'Hara, James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery. He had a close mentor-friendship with the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby, whom he saw nearly every day for a decade. (“Edwin was like my graduate school,” Katz has said.) And he enjoyed a long working relationship with the choreographer Paul Taylor, painting his dancers and making wacky stage sets and costumes for Taylor’s company. Taylor, Denby and O’Hara all appear in Katz’s portraits; likewise the poets Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman and Ted Berrigan; the filmmaker and photographer Rudy Burckhardt; and the dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones. In his loft, in fact, there is a cutout — one of the flat sculptures Katz began making in 1959 — of a dignified Denby and Burckhardt (“Edwin and Rudy,” 1968) sitting in chairs facing each other, as though in conversation. By the mid-60s, Katz had begun executing his group portraits, among them “The Cocktail Party” (1965), “Lawn Party” (1965) and “Evening” (1972). These tight, complicated compositions of fashionably dressed people in their natural habitats (in a high-rise at night with lit-up buildings visible out the windows; at a summer gathering on the verdant lawn of Katz’s bright yellow house, its siding covered with meticulously painted shadows of leaves) established him as a channeler of the zeitgeist and a chronicler of the avant-garde art scene.

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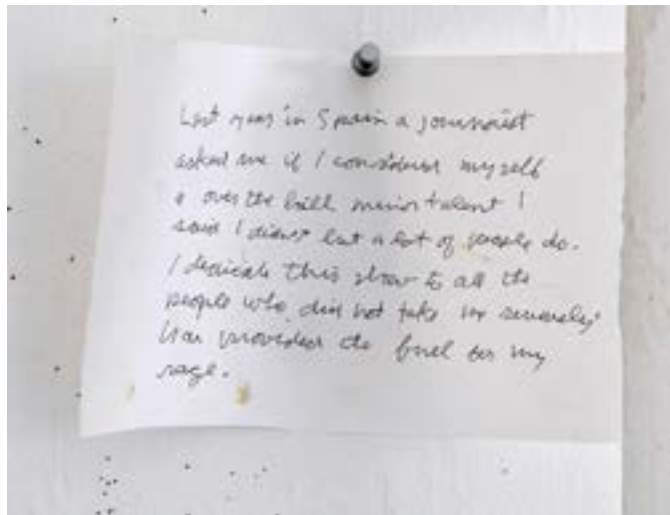
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During this time, he was also making landscapes, from the dainty collages to his increasingly large abstractions, and traveling to Maine each summer. These two locales — one urban, one rural — would form the antipodes of his work. “It’s an unusual dichotomy,” says Armstrong. “He’s probably the pre-eminent chronicler of downtown New York, but he is also a country boy, as those unbelievable pictures from Maine show.” In his memoir, Katz recounts that when he was a teenager, his father told him: “You know, Alex, you shouldn’t go looking for scenes. You should paint your own backyard.” Katz eventually took the advice. And in the wake of Abstract Expressionism, painting what was in front of him — his family, his friends, parties, beach scenes — was radical.

BUT HIS ARTISTIC preoccupations also made it easy for critics to dismiss him as the “high-level society painter” that the Los Angeles Times art critic William Wilson, writing in a pan of Katz’s 1986 retrospective, cautioned the artist might become (akin to Guy Pène du Bois, the American painter of Manhattan’s upper class in the 1920s). Katz, many felt, was depicting a pretty, affluent, white world where no one is ever suffering — “that of the cover of the New Yorker magazine,” Wilson wrote, “understated and privileged.” The critic Peter Schjeldahl once described Katz’s subjects as “an ostensibly uptownish, upper-middle-classy pageant of the suave, sexy and adorable” whose “effect is deemed as obnoxious as a club’s velvet rope.” Or, as Jafa puts it in his catalog essay: “Most people would think about Alex’s work within this incredibly narrow WASP register.” But Jafa argues that Katz is, in fact, working in a tradition of “Jewish artists rendering whiteness,” as has long been true of Hollywood filmmakers. And the nattily dressed people of Katz’s paintings weren’t necessarily rich — at the time, that’s how artists attired themselves. For years, Katz himself was working as a framer two or three days a week (and occasionally as a house painter) to support himself while living in a series of illegal, unheated cold-water lofts.

Still, over time misconceptions calcified. Brown tells me that Katz was once “iconic to anybody who was interested in art,” but “got somewhat pigeonholed, or had some preconceptions locked around him that don’t really apply.” One reason for this may be that Katz’s work is difficult to categorize — “singular” is the word critics and curators often use to describe it — hovering, as it does, between



A pinned note in Katz’s studio. Alec Soth

realism and abstraction. He has never aligned himself with any art school or tradition, and his concerns are essentially technical and formalist (how to render an instance of perception in paint) rather than narrative or expressionist. “If I had to make a career out of ideas, I don’t think that I could do anything very well,” he said in 1989 in a published dialogue with the artist Francesco Clemente. “To me, ideas are subject matter and not that important ... style is important. Style and appearance.” Yet an interest in something as ephemeral and evanescent as style is not today seen as the concern of a serious artist.

His paintings neglect to propound a narrative, a concept or a political message, embodying an approach that’s also not very popular right now, when artwork is often reduced to a “message-delivery system,” as the poet and essayist Alice Gribbin has written, rather than viewed as the site of a mysterious aesthetic encounter between artist and audience. To proponents of this utilitarian view, his work can seem a tad old-fashioned, to use a term from Katz’s lexicon. But for the painters who have come after him, who have themselves tried to

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break free of the persistent tethers of narrative, psychology or politics — and Katz’s influence can be seen in the work of many contemporary painters, from Elizabeth Peyton’s portraits of idealized celebrities to the elevated pop culture symbolism of Sam McKinniss — his total devotion to his craft has been a revelation. “He’s exemplary in all kinds of ways,” says David Salle, who has known Katz for more than 40 years. “One is just simply staying the course. That in itself is inspiring — I don’t think that’s too corny a word. ... He’s certainly an example of someone who defined his sensibility and was true to himself early on and never wavered from it, only got deeper into it.”

The public also tends to judge art that seems effortless as less complicated or worthy. “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,” the critic John Russell wrote in 1986 on the occasion of Katz’s last retrospective, adding, “When it comes to the art that conceals art, Katz is right in there with those two great exemplars.” Katz says that he completes one of his large-format canvases quickly, usually in a morning, painting with a wet on wet technique (also known as *alla prima*), in which wet paint, generally oil, is applied before previous layers of paint are dry. But such feats of controlled improvisation require a fair amount of preparation. He paints sketches in oil and draws studies in pencil, usually observed from life (though sometimes, these days, he takes photographs with his iPhone), and then, for the large paintings, employs a version of the Renaissance cartoon technique, which involves enlarging the image on paper and transferring an outline of it to canvas via pouncing — making tiny perforations and pushing powdered pigment through them.

On the third and last day that I visit his studio, he has just finished a 7-by-10-foot painting of the ocean at Coney Island — it is vast and absorbing, glossy black with white droplets of paint, and it reminds me of looking out a car window in the rain. He tells me it took him two hours to complete. Jazz plays in the background, and it occurs to me that he’s not unlike the jazz musicians he admired in his youth (“I wanted to paint like Stan Getz,” he tells me), rehearsing and preparing to extemporize in the moment. We stand back to observe the gleaming canvas. “It’s about motion, weight and transparency,” he



“Lake Light” (1992), a landscape of Maine, where Katz has been spending his summers painting since 1949. © 2022 Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, courtesy of the collection of the Art and Nature Foundation, Bad Heilbrunn, Germany

says. He goes to his workbench and begins rooting around, pulling out several photographs he took on the beach in Coney Island on a cold February day. They are images of the surf coming in, bubbled and white like spit, to which he has taken a black marker and drawn a small rectangle on the specific sliver he rendered in the giant painting before us. The photo looks unremarkable to me, but his eye discerned a patch of surf, a snapshot, a passing wrinkle of time, that stood out to him.

Brown tells me that he thinks all of Katz’s paintings are about “light in time,” as he puts it: “The material of time is light, and so he’s painting light, whether it be on a flower, a landscape or a human face.” Katz has often said that he aspires to paint “in the present tense,” meaning not only that he paints with some speed, attempting to capture a transient moment, but also that the immediacy of his approach will translate to a similar feeling in the painting. “These are very fleeting,

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fast things,” he has said of his landscapes. “It’s a 15-minute interval you’re looking at.”

Time is an implicit theme of the Guggenheim show. As I sit with Katherine Brinson in a conference room, flipping through the plates of the works to be hung on the spiral walls of the museum’s rotunda, she points out how the exhibition underscores the “unfolding of the arc of time” even more so than with a typical retrospective: “Of course, you’ll see that in the way he develops stylistically, over the arc of the career, but you also literally see the sitters age.” There is Ada, a young brunette woman in a cobalt blue dress; and there she is 60 years later in the warm glow of evening, her face gently lined, her dark hair streaked gray.

Katz, though, seems to live in an eternal present tense, just as he is a regular on the gallery circuit, buying artworks, usually from independent dealers on behalf of his namesake foundation, which then donates them to museums: lifting all parts of the art ecosystem. The foundation’s mission is “to support the work of emerging and underrecognized artists,” his son, Vincent, says. “Alex spent a long time thinking about it, until he came up with this formula,” he adds. “Instead of giving grants, which can be frittered away, it’s very functional: The artist gets the money, and the work goes to an institution.” I think about how Katz has lived, almost single-mindedly dedicated to art, to his practice, to the craft of painting, and what lessons that might impart in our age of scatteredness and distraction: about devotion, discipline, the investment of time it takes not only to make art but to do anything worthwhile, the almost Buddhist concentration. I ask Katz about his legacy: Does he think about the future? He chuckles at the question. “I try not to,” he says. “I try to stay alive today.”

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