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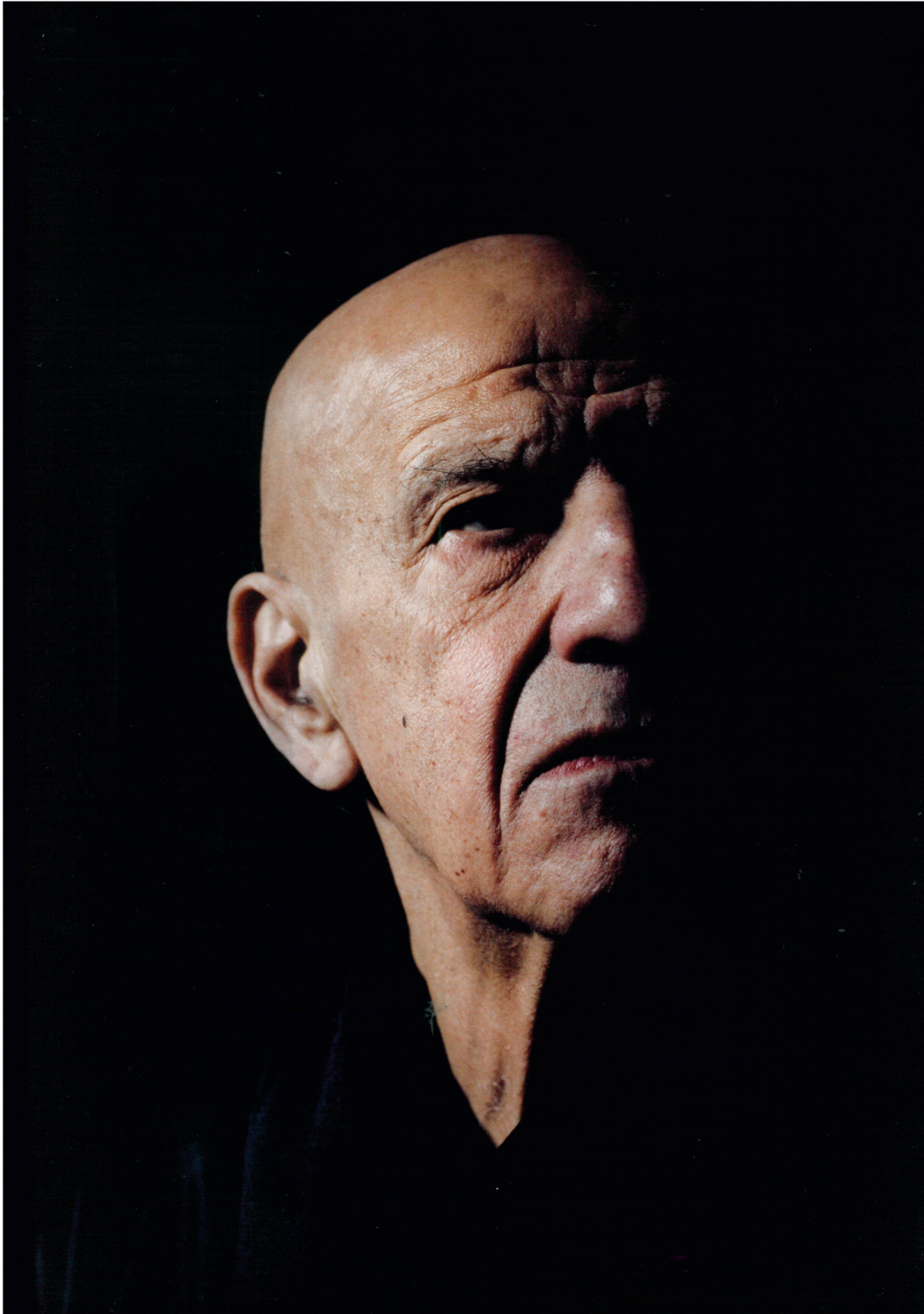
FEATURE:



TAKING TIME OUT BETWEEN SHOWS IN FLORIDA, PARIS AND NEW YORK, ONE OF AMERICA'S GREATEST LIVING PAINTERS MUSÉS ABOUT THE NATURE OF GREATNESS, WHY ART IS JUST LIKE FASHION, WHAT'S WRONG WITH ART HISTORIANS AND HOW HE'S GOING TO RAM HIS WORK DOWN CERTAIN MUSEUM DIRECTORS' THROATS

words MARK RAPPOLT
photography MARIA ZIEGELBOCK

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FEATURE: ALEX KATZ

IT FEELS VAGUELY LIKE A SCENE FROM *APOCALYPSE NOW* (1979).

Albeit updated and, if you really want to get into details, inverted: instead of going up a river, I'm being driven 200 miles up a Florida highway, semi-comatose (nursing a mild Art Basel Miami hangover), past a jungle of landfills (each with its own flock of birds swirling in a predatory manner overhead) and service stations, before taking the final cruise through the rather more beautiful surroundings of the 'planned community' (a members' club styled as a traditional village) of Windsor, in Vero Beach, towards the heart of darkness (that's no mere conceit – halfway through the interview that follows, someone came along to turn on the lights), in the passenger seat of a gleaming white golf buggy. And there he is, Katz. Not in a straw hut, but on a clubhouse veranda overlooking 7,060 yards of golf course.

Windsor was founded in 1989 by W. Galen Weston and Hilary Weston, and is something of an experiment in community urbanism (with a wonderfully bizarre Leon Krier-designed meeting house-cum-chapel), built on a largely pedestrian model (although the golf buggies seem to have taken over from the legs) comprising around 300 lots (mainly the second homes of affluent retirees). He may be eighty-one, but Katz is not here to retire: following in the footsteps of artists such as Peter Doig and Ed Ruscha, he has a solo show (timed to coincide with Art Basel Miami Beach) in the Windsor gallery (which was set up by the Westons's daughter, Alannah, in 2002). The show is called *Seeing, Drawing, Making*, so you'll understand that



while shuffling through the gallery to meet the artist I feel as though this whole interview is going to be somewhat ridiculous. Some sort of admission that I couldn't grasp any of the seeing, drawing and making that I've just seen in the show. It's only natural, then, that one of the first questions I blurt out concerns whether or not the show and its title reflects his working practice. "I don't know, I never thought about it really at the time", he shoots back. *Phew*. "But yes, I guess so." *Bugger*.

Although his first solo show happened way back in 1954, at the Roko Gallery in New York, it's only during the last two decades that Katz has been generally accepted as a truly great painter, and recognised as a major influence on younger generations of painters today. I wonder how he accounts for that?

"It has to do with fashion". Again his reply is quick. "People say it's manipulated by dealers, it's manipulated by this, it's that, but it's not true. It's just something that's bigger than everybody."

Even Alex Katz?

"Oh yes, I'm subject to fashion absolutely, although sometimes you do go aggressively against the conventional aspects of fashion, you know. It's like women wear pants that go three quarters down their heel, then all of a sudden one woman will say, 'I just don't want to look like those other ladies', and she cuts it off and wears it at eight inches above the ground. Then someone see it and says, 'That looks pretty sharp', and then all of a sudden the pants that hang down to your heel look kind of corny. So there might be one woman who would say, 'I'm not going to wear the pants down the heel' out of spite. It's maybe a little more complicated, but painting's the same."

"In art, you have a bubble at the top of the fashion thing, and very few artists are in the bubble once in a lifetime. The real good ones, like Picasso, were once – in 1912, 1911, he was top of the world in terms of fashion, but after that he was behind, and he was sort of faking it all the time. He got to be a better painter, technically, and when he got to be fifty he really was out of sight. But by then he was nothing to do with fashion. He was living some idea of a genius from the nineteenth century. And then Matisse hit it twice. So beyond the bubble, there are like 200 painters painting behind him, so most of what you're looking at is behind the curve in terms of fashion. They may be good, they may be interesting, but they haven't got the energy of the stuff as someone at the top of the bubble. I think Miró in the 1920s was just like, wow. The guy was King Kong, and there was nothing close."

So who would he say is King Kong at the moment?

"I think Jeff Koons is just off it, you know; I thought he was on the bubble", he says thoughtfully. "I'm close", he continues, unprompted, "and I've been in the bubble, I guess, in the early 1990s, and I was in the bubble twice in the late 1950s into the 60s. But I think Koons has been there awhile."

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Q: "Do you worry how your work will be treated once you die?"
A: "Not really, and I don't give a shit, because when I'm dead they can go fuck themselves."



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This April, Katz is going to pick up the Medal Award from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Koons is a previous recipient, so Katz is not alone in his self-assessment. Nevertheless, there's an inescapable sense of competitiveness in Katz's description of the artworld, so I ask him whether it was that or something else that made him want to get into art.

"I think I started out wanting to make people feel better. I think you have to pass some things around", he says with a strangely convincing sense of charity. "So that was like one point, and the other point was I wanted the sensation of showing other people what I see", he adds, returning to (quite wonderful) type.

Is that where he gets his kicks as a painter?

"Yes, you really want to, because you really only see through the eyes of your culture, and reality's a variable, it's not a constant. People think it is, they think what they see with their eyes is real, and it isn't. The reality of things changes every 20 years. I have this watercolour of Washington Square Park that was realistic to me when I was a kid, but now it's a TV set. You see it through the TV camera, you don't see it through that watercolour. That's just a very bad piece of art now. So a lot of times you look at something and you really can't see, you're trying to see it, so you do it over and over again until you penetrate it and get out of what you were seeing before."

Does he see painting, then, as being in competition with television and the camera?

"Yes. I'm competing with the camera for your attention. I can do colour much better than the camera, so my colour is much more convincing. The camera makes very nice flat images, but I can do motion better than a camera. Some things the camera can do better, and other things I can. The camera can get great images – you look at Weegee's photos and it's like, *whoa*, you know? How can you make a painting that has that kind of blast to it? There are images that just go out and control people. When I say Weegee, you have a picture in your mind of the wow of those photos. And those are the photos that I like, because it's not arty, just wow."

Is he very conscious of the general changes in visual culture around him, despite the fact that he's become one of the most successful artists of his generation, an artist who is very much able to work within his own idiom?

"Yes, yes, I love it", he replies excitedly. "I like fashion – I'm going to have a show about fashion [at Thaddaeus Ropac] in Paris in January. I like it because it's a no-no for serious artists", he continues in something that, by the end of this conversation, is going to become a familiar (and rather likeable) love for aggressive anticonventionalism. "I just like it. It's an open area, and those open areas are scary and kind



of wonderful. It's people's dreams and fantasies, and it's basically just totally empty – it's great. I was in England at dinner and was asked why I thought Mark Rothko's late pictures weren't appreciated. I said, 'Well, they've got too much content', he says, laughing. "You know, the content got in the way of the paintings, and I've always disliked heavy, heavy stuff – you get it in crucifixions and stuff like that."

Is he a figurative rather than an abstract painter (of 'light' subjects, I think, but don't say – it still seems rude, even if the artist has just rather directly implied it) because that makes it easier to deal with the problem of content? Because, particularly with his bold, flattened style, it allows him to make the content so obvious, it's almost not there?

"I think the abstract painting without content, for me, somehow isn't as interesting as abstract painting with content, in a way – Richter's paintings aren't as interesting as Rothko's, you know, and I like it. When I was younger, I liked more empty paintings; as I got older, I really appreciated the content. But take Mondrian – the content of Mondrian is Mondrian, and the rest is like baloney: it means something to him, it doesn't mean anything to me."

I remain uncertain as to whether he has answered the question I actually asked or the question he thought I should have asked, but decide to follow the crumb trail (or perhaps series of full loaves) that he has left me (yes, OK, because it's easier – that hangover hasn't quite gone away...): I wonder how he stops the 'Mondrian effect' happening in his own work. He has an instantly recognisable style, what unfriendly people might even call a brand, and you could argue that it's almost as hard to look at an Alex Katz painting without thinking mainly about Alex Katz.

"I have the most trouble with art historians, because they have usually got their art history 20 years behind where I am, and it's harder for them to get"

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"Well, look at it this way", he replies thoughtfully. "I like the idea of working with symbols – it allows a work to mean different things to different people. If you deal with signs, on the other hand, it means the same thing to everyone. Blue sky and green grass are signs, and a lot of Pop artists uses signs, but that's another thing. Then it's more complicated by people's experiences, so you have, like, five different audiences you're dealing with. So the first audience is the person off the street: he comes in and doesn't have a real deep background in painting, so he just sees an image superficially and likes it or not, and that's one audience. Now a dealer comes in and he sees another painting, and then a museum person comes in, he sees another painting, and then a critic comes in and he sees another painting, and then painters come in and they see another painting. So people are perceiving paintings very differently, and you're trying to deal with all these various audiences in one way or another, and I think I care most about the appearance. I have the most trouble with art historians, because the art historians have usually got their art history 20 years behind where I am, and it's harder for them to get."

It's inevitable, though, that his work has and will become the preserve of art historians. Does he worry, I wonder, about how art history will treat him? How people will talk about his work once he is dead?

"Not really", he replies. "And I don't give a shit, because when I'm dead, they can go fuck themselves", he continues, laughing. "I know that's a bad story – you'll ask, 'Don't you care what people say?' But it's like, no, I don't, I'm in it for now."

Oh, God, he's dispensed with my services entirely and started interviewing himself. I quickly put it to him that perhaps what he really likes about painting has something to do with the pleasure he gets from being able to dictate a viewpoint to and manipulate his audience. In short, that it's a power thing. "Yes", he replies in a manner that's disconcertingly matter-of-fact. "I like the thing of dominating people's minds. That's the central thing, and there's like a lyric quality in my painting. My painting of a picnic bench [*Table*, 1984] could be a piece of poetry very easily, right? And a lyric quality on this big scale is something people have problems with – theoretical people have problems with the idea." Feeling confident that the last thing I've come across as is a 'theoretical person' – while having to suppress a few lingering doubts as to whether or not this is, in fact, a good thing – I begin to feel that this interview is really getting somewhere. Somewhere close to the heart of Alex Katz.

What makes him carry on painting?

"What else have you got to do?" he replies glibly. If you're Alex Katz, it's an obvious answer, but after all this mind-domination business, I feel like I need to push him harder, or maybe I just want to have the last word (the next day he tells me about how his father used to dive off bridges, and on reflection, I feel that doing this interview has been akin to watching him do the same). "I don't know – you might suddenly discover a passion for fishing or..." I begin to say in a fit of pique before he cuts me off. "No. I really like painting", he says firmly. "And I love the thing of seeing what it will look like, you know, and I also feel I'm as good as other painters my age, and I don't have that recognition. I have a big general audience but I don't have that recognition with the institutions in the city, and so that's part of it too: I want to shove it down their throats." Crikey – he really does love the thing of dominating people's minds; as I leave I have to stop myself saying goodbye to Colonel Kurtz. :

New work by Alex Katz is on show at PaceWildenstein (West 22nd Street), New York, from 8 May to 6 June. Seeing, Drawing, Making travels to the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, next winter. A catalogue, published by Windsor Press, is also available. See Listings for further details

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Varick 2, 2008, oil on canvas, 285 x 183 cm. Photo: Kerry Ryan McFate. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York.
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Carmen, 2008 (installation view, Alex Katz: *Fashion and Studies*, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris, 2009). Photo: Charles Duprat. Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris & Salzburg

Pamela 3, 1983, graphite and charcoal on pounced brown paper, 113 x 121 cm. © the artist

Sunset 1, 2008, oil on linen, 274 x 213 cm. Photo: G.R. Christmas. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York.
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Blue and Red Sunset, 2004, oil on canvas, 244 x 305 cm. Photo: Kerry Ryan McFate. Courtesy PaceWildenstein, New York. © the artist/licensed by VAGA, New York

Eleuthera, 1999, silkscreen, 68 x 122 cm, edition of 75. © the artist