

Collectors Agenda, noviembre de 2015

Interview

Alex Katz

»In fashion it's like in art – things don't get better.«



Few people in the art world appreciated the works of American portrait painter Alex Katz in the early 1960s, a time when abstract expressionism was more in fashion. His large-scale, realistic paintings were regarded as too simplistic. Today, Katz is considered one of the pioneers of Pop Art. Our friend Laura Posdziech from Vertical met Alex and Ada Katz in Spain, where they were attending an event for Katz's solo exhibition, *Red Hat*, at Galería Javier López. They talked about the early days of Katz's career.

You are best known for your intriguingly simple portraits. How do you work? Do your models sit in front of you for hours?

They only sit for the sketch, the first thing. And then I work on my own. I enlarge the sketch, transfer it with little holes and brown pigments, and then draw it with a brush and correct it again and again.

So it's a direct copy that's then filled in with your imagination...

Yes, my process passes through different stages - from conscious to unconscious. When I make a drawing, that's kind of conscious. When I paint, it's unconscious. It just happens. So I don't think about it. I just do it. It's the same as riding a bicycle: once you know how to do it, you know it.

Do you tell your sitters how to position themselves?

No, they even move while sitting for me. Because if you hold the present still, you will end up with a still life. And I don't want to paint a still life. I want to paint a portrait. And I developed my own technique, so they can talk and move while I paint. Actually, all the things that I bring together in one painting are collected from different moments. I could be painting their eyes even as they look around.

Do you have a close relationship with your sitters?

Not to all of them. It's also not too important for my work. I don't want to reveal the people themselves, but rather what they appear to be and what they stand for, what they communicate about the moment. I am trying to get a time period straight.

That's definitely something you manage to do. Your paintings indeed convey the zeitgeist of the time they were painted at. That's very interesting, especially for historians. But you once said that painters are the audience you appreciate the most.

Yes, because you see different things in my paintings when you are a painter yourself. I mean the technical things. Paintings generally have five audiences. And they all see something very different. The painter sees it the way it's painted; a dealer sees something he can sell; a museum person sees something he or she can preserve and put in a museum; a writer sees something he can write about and an innocent person sees a picture.

Are you aware of all these different viewers while painting? And do you try to please them all?

Oh no, I try to focus on my painting to capture what is in front of me. I don't think that any artist can control five audiences.

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But people today are perhaps more aware of presenting themselves as marketing tools.

Yes, but these people usually put their emphasis on collectors. There have always been people whose primary motivation is getting people to buy.

What was your primary motivation?

I didn't think too much about it, I just painted. Maybe I would have painted differently had I thought in this direction. But I didn't. Consequently, I first didn't function very well commercially. I had five shows and they were failures, at least commercial failures. When I began painting, it was the time of abstract expressionism. And I was painting realistic paintings. They looked different and new. I was separate from all the traditional realist painters. They thought my paintings were unfinished and not very notable. And I was separate from the abstract expressionist who considered me as somewhat minor.

Because it's the simplicity that you first see when looking at your paintings?

Yes, a lot of people thought I was just stupid. My paintings were simple, so they were regarded as simple-minded.

Your portraits mostly show women. What fascinates you about women?

It's an idea of beauty. An abstract idea of beauty. Most people have some beauty in them. Not necessarily a perfect one, but there is beauty.

Inner beauty?

No, just the face - the physiognomy. It's pleasing and I think I have always liked it. I was already drawing faces when I tried to learn how to draw. I traveled on the subway and drew the passengers sitting around me.

When was that?

When I went to Cooper Union. It's a very hard school to get into and my background was not good. But I got in. I think mostly because of my intellect. I personally found I couldn't draw at all. I could do a still life painting but I couldn't do live drawing. After twenty minutes in front of a white piece of paper, I maybe just managed to draw two lines. So I started to learn it. Whenever I wasn't talking to someone, I was drawing. I did that for two years, drawing on the subways. I looked at all the faces and they all seemed beautiful somehow. Different kinds of beauty.

Aside from the sitter's physiognomy and attitude, the clothes they are wearing can also speak volumes. In what way are you interested in fashion?

I have always been interested in fashion. One reason is that what's in fashion represents the present, and that's what the paintings are. And I have always been fascinated by fashion - the wave of things. It's like art in the sense that things don't get better. There is no progress. They say there is progress, but that's wrong thinking. And that's the same with modern art. Modern art is based on the premise that there is progress in art. But in fact, art just changes and fashion just changes. There is no progress in fashion - the hem goes up, the hem goes down. The hair is long, then we have enough of long hair, then women need to wear it short.

So your sitters probably wear just what they want. Or do you style them?

No, they just wear what they wear. And that's so interesting. People find themselves through clothes. And in America, social definitions are created through clothes and haircuts more so than money.

You even collaborated with some fashion magazines.

Yes, and I even modeled. I did four, five advertisements. I did one for Barney's, for example. And another one for a watch brand.

Have you ever used photos as a foundation for your portraits?

Sometimes. But then again, I get people to pose like you would for a photograph. One year, for example, I decided to photograph people on the beach.

So in the end, you had a photo and a painting - two media depicting the same scene.

There are things that the camera can do and I can't. And there are things I can do and the camera can't. Basically, what you consider as realistic is defined by the culture you live in. And the culture we are living in is photographic - photos, camera, TVs - that dominates our vision. A photograph is always a little past tense, it's always a little behind. A painting can be present tense, respectively, more on point. With my paintings, I go between what you see and what you know.

Interview: Laura Posdziech, Wertical

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While Katz is best known for minimalist, figurative portraits, Katz has also painted buildings and landscapes. Having spent his summers in Lincolnville, Maine since he was a child, the town often appears in his work. Born in 1927, Katz continues to paint and present exhibitions in galleries and museums around the world. Aside from his art, his wife, Ada is another constant in his life. She is the muse who has not left his side since the couple met at an exhibition in New York in 1957.