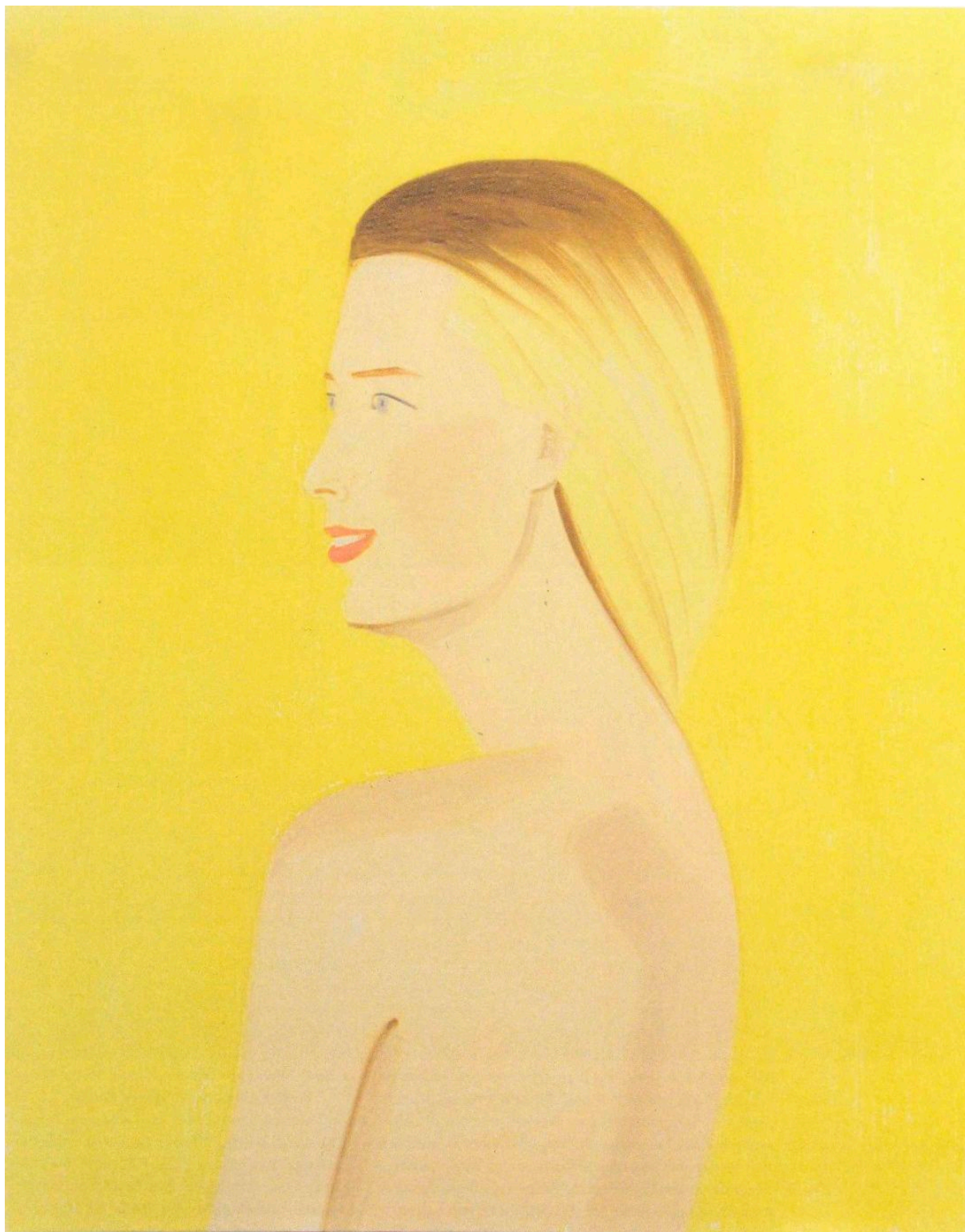


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# Cool School

*Interview with Alex Katz*  
Flash Art International no. 159, 1991

by JERRY SALTZ

**Jerry Saltz:** *In the last shows I've seen of yours there were landscapes and nocturnes and paintings where the figure was completely gone and several nudes. What have you been doing recently?*

**Alex Katz:** I've been working on all of the above and some faces too. I feel under no pressure to paint a series of consistent paintings. I was doing some figurative work. Previous to that I had done mostly figures and I'd do a landscape maybe every summer. I was working with the idea of landscape — of doing a landscape that was “non-scenery.” I'm involved with the idea of making details or sections of things into whole paintings and in a way of seeing a landscape in an altered way. I was wondering: could you make a painting with so little in it and still have it seem like a concrete landscape?

**JS:** *It seems to me your style doesn't change significantly but you do go through a lot of different subjects and return to subjects. What role does subject matter play?*

**AK:** The subject matter is like a turn-on. I've been working on a series the last two summers of a black brook. I've gone to this brook and made three or four paintings of the same place. It's part of that idea of non-scenery painting. But instead of it being a nocturne, it's actually in the daylight with a lot of physical things. I walked along this brook and there was one spot that seemed magical. I stopped in that spot and I've been painting there for two years. Then it becomes, like, how many variations, different kinds of paintings, can you make before it all gets boring? And last summer, the last one I did was really boring.

**JS:** *Boring?*

**AK:** I have to move on to something else. I can't make anything out of it that is interesting.

**JS:** *There's a whole group of people who claim there is an elaborate psychological subtext to your work. How do you feel about that?*

**AK:** The top of it is surface and the bottom just goes on and on. There are all kinds of things in the picture lurking around in the bottom, and a lot of it I don't

understand. When Ann Beattie wrote that book she explained things I didn't know were going on. She was right, but I wasn't even aware that they were there. But I do take responsibility for their being there. I don't think a painter has to be aware of these things necessarily — if you can get fully engaged in painting. I think you reveal aspects of your personality, your experiences, or things that you don't have to be responsible for or even know about. It just happens... if you're engaged. I think the symbols are part of the motif.

**JS:** *In what sense?*

**AK:** I look for symbols that can have multiple meanings. I find them intriguing and interesting. Although all of my paintings are rather straightforward and simple, they're definitely literary. If you come to it from a literary side you can have a lot of engagement with the symbols.

**JS:** *A lot of people have talked about their theatrical aspects.*

**AK:** Yes, they are theatrical and dramatic, and I think they are literary because they deal with symbols that you can talk about in terms of reading paintings. I don't think of my paintings as narrative, in that there is a story line — but I do think there is a symbol line. It's a beautiful woman, it's a particular woman, so you already have two things going right off the bat. I don't think that any of the images are local... they're explicit.

**JS:** *Do you think they're universal?*

**AK:** Yes, I think they're universal. That's the idea, to make universal symbols, and I think you can do it with something particular. In the early 20th century, they said universal things had to be generalized — but I don't think so at all. I think they can be quite particular and still have universal appeal.

**JS:** *There is a kind of effortlessness to your work. Is that something you work really hard at? Is that something you think about?*

**AK:** Yes. I think it's personality and everything else. My idea of art was formed very early. I like Stan

*Opposite:*  
**Alex Katz, Nude, 2011.**  
Oil on linen, 127 x 102 cm.  
Courtesy Monica De  
Cardenas, Milano/Zuoz



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**Alex Katz**, installation view at Gavin Brown Enterprise, 2012. Courtesy Gavin Brown Enterprise, New York.

*Opposite:*  
*Nicole*, 2012. Oil on linen, 127 x 101 cm. Signed on verso. Courtesy Gavin Brown Enterprise, New York

*Sunset*, 1987. Oil on linen, 2013, 320 x 244 cm. ProLitteris, Zürich

Getz and Matisse because they both had these virtuoso performances that were effortless. They did these very fantastic things, and I said, "Gee, it would be great to be able to take off that way." That kind of personality is a little remote in a sense.

**JS:** *Your personality?*

**AK:** I don't tell you too much. It relates to the Japanese temperament as well. In other words, it's very stylized and distanced and I feel comfortable with it. And I feel very uncomfortable with abstract expressionism. The idea that everything is on the surface. I didn't feel I fit in. There is a big difference between German expressionism and New York expressionism. New York expressionism was like Tintoretto. It's open painting, but it's very removed. It finally gets rococo. Like Tiepolo's open painting — but it's really very removed and mannered compared to Munch.

**JS:** *You've used the word "style." What do you mean by style?*

**AK:** Style is like a self-conscious manner or subconscious manner, a way of painting. I think the opposite of natural painting. I don't think my painting is very natural. I think it's fluid. It can look effortless and I want it to be fluid — but I don't think of it as natural.

**JS:** *Do you think that style is just another word for quality, the way you use it?*

**AK:** No, it's an idea of a type of painting. When I was growing up in the '50s, they said there was subject matter, form and content — and it just sounded pat and dreary. They said there was no room for style here. That was out. And I said I'd as soon have style be the content. I was sick and tired of this heavy content number that everyone was throwing. The content was anywhere from existentialism to formalism. All of that was content. It didn't interest me, personally. I didn't think very much of it artistically either.

**JS:** *And yet paradoxically, very early on, you started painting figuratively, and that would certainly seem to be "contentful."*

**AK:** I felt that you could make a painting lyrical and big. That was the idea. It's like Stan Getz. It's very lyrical and very cold. He started the cool style of music. He has a cool, clean detachment. The style is very detached.

**JS:** *And what about Matisse?*

**AK:** Same thing. I saw a Matisse show when I was just getting out of art school. I learned something about painting and I almost fainted.



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**JS:** *Why?*

**AK:** Well, he could do everything so easy. Everything was perfect. And he was doing so many things at once. I couldn't believe a human being could paint a painting that good. And that became like Stan Getz. And with any painting you have things you like about them and things you don't.

**JS:** *Yes, I find that even in the greatest opera, for example, I don't like every aria. I don't like every painting by Goya.*

**AK:** That's right. Goya made a lot of cute paintings, and he made some fantastic things. I don't like everything about great paintings or painters. I can like the painting but then I can dislike some of the painter's social ideas. And then I can dislike some of the forms. There are always things that ultimately I might dislike. I find even in my own work I can do a painting I think is terrific and then have reservations about it a week later and then do something else.

**JS:** *What is it that tells you you've done something that you don't like, that it might not be any good?*

**AK:** Well, there are two things. One thing is when it makes you vaguely sick. You've been here before, but never in such a pedestrian manner. And you go through paintings where you have an idea and you say, "Oh, the first one is okay, I'll try another one." You try a variation, you get to about the eighth one and it's not getting any better, it's just getting different. Then all the energy you put into it is like sweat. Look at this disgusting amount of sweat that's just pedestrian — and you feel kind of nauseous and that's one place to stop. The other is when it's out of control and a little peculiar.

**JS:** *What do you mean?*

**AK:** I'll extend myself into an area I haven't got enough technique to control, and things lose their balance. They get kind of weird looking and I'll usually let it go and see what happens.

**JS:** *You once told me that painters share a sense of desperation. You said you jump out of a window, stylewise, and put it together before you hit the ground.*

**AK:** With painters who are involved in style, in any sense, you have that bond. They all went through a period when they were desperate. The majority of people painting are not desperate people. They never take that chance. The chance of making a complete botch of it.

**JS:** *Do you think they get into working in a rut or a style?*

**AK:** Artists are often most alive when they're immature. Right out of art school, that's when most painters are alive. They're connected to the world in a lively way, and usually most painters do their liveliest work at that point. And their liveliest work is in the mode.

**JS:** *In the mode?*

**AK:** It's lively but they haven't really taken that chance yet — they haven't jumped.





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**Alex Katz,**  
*Marine 2*, 1999. Oil  
 on linen, 122 x 183 cm.  
 Collection of the artist  
 Photo: Paul Takeuchi



**JS:** Out the window?

**AK:** Yes, out the window.

**JS:** And this is the only way to bring work beyond this “lively” point?

**AK:** Is to go out the window, yes. To go into free fall. Get a little out of what all your lively friends are doing. Artists can mature, but painters generally take ten or fifteen years of painting to start to really put it together.

**JS:** Painting is slower to mature than other arts?

**AK:** Yes, it's a little slower. It may take fifteen years to put it together, and usually people have one burst of creative energy and then they spend the rest of their lives painting the same painting. Painting masterpieces. They make it better. I felt with myself that I just wanted to move on and out. If I fall down, I fall down. That was part of it — but part of what I'm doing is technique. Just the actual painting. I have a bigger technique than I did in the '70s. I can do things easier. A little easier. It's like I have a little more prudence. A little more intelligence.

**JS:** Sometimes when I'm thinking about your work I find I walk around and the whole world starts to look like an Alex Katz painting.

**AK:** My painting is about dominating your idea of what a painting should be — but also what the world looks like. I'd rather have the visionary part of it be stronger than the formal invention. You've seen one of my paintings and you see people who look like it. That's what I want. I prefer that to formal invention. It raises the question and gets to be, like, “What is a painting?”

**JS:** I've found that often the people you paint that I know, I don't recognize them. But after you paint them, they start to look like the painting — rather than the painting looking like the person.

**AK:** That's exactly what I'm trying to do. I think with people's vision, they're dominated. How things look and the appearance of things is a variable that most people take for granted as a constant. And you think of it as a constant because you don't question it. Most people look at the world passively. An artist looks at the world passively too for a lot of the time, and at this point your vision of things is dominated — like your taste is dominated. Paintings show you what makes things look good, where movies and TV show you about a lot of external appearances. I find that the whole idea of being able to really see something in the way that I think that painting does, and dominate someone's head for a while, is really a challenge.

**JS:** Well, it's a real mystery to me. You've painted some of my closest friends and even they start to look like the paintings. I'm reminded, too, of those early paintings you did based on people riding the subway.

**AK:** I used to live in Queens and go to Cooper Union. I'd ride on the subways. In a city like New York, if you're riding the trains you look at people, and you can see people from ten different parts of the world on one bench. Then you start to look at the faces and you say, “Hey, that guy there is considered extremely beautiful where he comes from — and in New York he's considered nothing.” And you wonder what the person who's wearing that face thinks of himself now. You see faces, Italian faces where it took 1,000 years to make the

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mouth, and the head is off a statue and the person is considered a real so-so looking person in New York and maybe to himself. Those things are fascinating. Anyway, when I paint a face, that's when I really look at it and get involved with what I'm looking at, and usually it proceeds from there, like an instinct about the person or about the person I'm casting in a role or whatever.

**JS:** *What kind of instinct?*

**AK:** Sometimes I just get a buzz off the face, and if I get a buzz I say, "I want to paint it." A lot of times I want a certain type of person for a certain type of painting.

**JS:** *In the early '80s you were drawn to several artists who were then emerging, like Clemente and Salle. What was it about those artists at that time? They made big paintings, their surfaces were cool, they were very retinal, like you?*

**AK:** I think with both of them — they just buzzed. No question about it. I saw Clemente's show and I couldn't believe it. It had so much brilliance and innovation. I thought it was really sensational. When I met him I said I thought he was the best painter since de Chirico to come out of Italy. I found a lot of similarity in the imagery. Work he was doing then was like some of the stuff I'd done twenty years ago, with the single figures on the ground. Mine were very external, where he had such openness and invention. It was really quite dazzling. I saw a drawing... it just had so much pizzazz to it.

**JS:** *What do you think painting's state is right now? Do you think it's holding the stage? Is it falling back? Is there less to do in painting these days?*

**AK:** The art scene has gotten bigger. The New York scene has been a little duller the last years. I think that painting per se has receded a bit. The early '80s were a very hot time for painting, the latter part of the '80s haven't been. There hasn't been any painting that's had enough energy to displace the early '80s painting or to grow on it. Stylewise things get a little duller every year.

**JS:** *Do you think this is because painting is harder to do or that people are just not interested in ideas that painting does best?*

**AK:** I think it has to do with who's interested in doing what. What are the bright, aggressive minds doing? I think most of the brighter people, in the last five years, were not in painting.

**JS:** *You once said that part of the reason you make paintings is for other painters. What did you mean by this?*

**AK:** I made a painting of a beautiful lady, Alba — Clemente's wife. There are some people who are going to like that painting because it is a beautiful lady. Clemente saw the painting and said, "Wow — did you ever paint that hair."

**JS:** *The hair?*

**AK:** It was one of those really slick pieces of painting where I did a whole head of hair with nothing.

Just one thing on the edge and no brush strokes. It was basically flat paint — a slight inflection. When I was painting it I wondered if I could get away with this. And I'd forgotten about it. Then this painter comes in and it was the fanciest piece of painting in the painting. So that made the painting special. Now some other person would like it for its color or scale, and another person is going to like it because it may represent society at a certain time. Some other person will like it because it's a modern figurative painting. But a painter is going to like it because of the technique, and that's a part of what I'm involved in — technique for its own sake.

**JS:** *You've said that painters should take from other painters.*

**AK:** Definitely. Fairfield Porter said, "Painters who borrow get caught. And painters who steal are real good." To steal you have to be really mature.

**JS:** *Art seems to be getting more and more politicized. If this is true, what does that mean to painting?*

**AK:** When I went to school it was all politicized. I was about the only person in the art school who was apolitical. So I've been through the political scene with art, and it's a legitimate avenue for expression for some artists. It's not a legitimate expression for me. I find it basically uninteresting. To a person imbued with a political reality, my work would have very little relevance.

**JS:** *You once told me that working from life with no system is a waste of time. You said if you have no system, it doesn't relate to art. What did you mean by that?*

**AK:** It has to be an art system. A system to make it art. People think academic or conventional systems are a way of reproducing life, but that's just a weak system at work. You can't do it without a system. Without it you have no coherence. People usually start with a pedestrian system — like, "it's realistic" or "it doesn't look like what you're looking at" and "it doesn't look like art." You have to invent a system. With beginners I think they're much better off copying someone else's system and then go to life. You start with art first and you learn how an artist makes a system. You take that system and apply it. What system you use is irrelevant. The possibility of making a painting and stripping away a lot of content is the whole idea of dealing with an empirical painting of a sort, or dealing with representational painting. The point of painting empirically and representationally is now legitimized possibly for the first time. Representational painting per se was legitimized by Andy Warhol and Pop art. Now doing it empirically is legitimized, too. My paintings are legitimate as modern now. They weren't twenty years ago.

**JS:** *That's right, they would have been considered "otherwise."*

**AK:** "Otherwise," yes.