

Ran Dian, 4 julio 2020

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## Alex Katz interview

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By Chris Moore

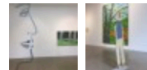
Now in his 9<sup>th</sup> decade, Alex Katz is one of the greatest living artists. Yet Katz remains in a category of his own. His crisp visual analysis and painting style, honed over the last 70 years and informed by Pop and Abstraction Expressionism, reflect a singular approach to the examination of people—New Yorkers, especially—caught in a moment of time and light. We spoke with Katz by telephone about influences, recent shows and the key model for his entire oeuvre, his wife and muse of 60 years, Ada.

**Chris Moore:** I want to start, first of all, asking you about light in your paintings; the role that light plays whether in the portraits or the landscapes.

**Alex Katz:** Well, the light is what pulls everything together. It starts off with an idea of the subject matter, and then I work out the light and the light is what holds it all together. The color is used for the light, the light is the consistent thing in all the work. The light is quite specific.

**CM:** It creates a certain time too, because light is tied to a certain time of the day.

**AK:** Well yes, light has to do with time. It's a *quick* light and it has to do with getting into the immediate present. It's similar to the way some music affects people: light is in the present. There's been things on it in writing where people wanted to get into the 'immediate present'. I think Gertrude Stein wrote about that: get rid of the narrative, because the narrative takes place in time.



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Ada and Alex Katz in Maine, 1990  
亚历克斯·卡茨与妻子艾达在缅因州, 1990

**CM:** Looking at your paintings over the past 50 years, you can always say that these have taken place after the Second World War but other than that, they're out of time. If you just look at them as images, it's impossible to say, were they made last year or were they made 40 years ago.

**AK:** Well, that's nice. I have no idea about that, you know, how people perceive the work.

**CM:** Well I guess it also comes from how you use light in painting, because there is this consistence, this sense of a moment in a day, as opposed to a progression over a period of time.

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**AK:** Yeah, that's right. Impressionist paintings are over a period of time. They're not specific at all in terms of light. With me, it's a lot of light, but it's analysed light. This is really particular and in a lot of paintings, I do different types of light. I do incandescent light, fluorescent light, night light, twilight, daylight, morning, afternoon, and each one is very specific to the time.

**CM:** This also comes out from how you make the painting. You start off with a sketch done in paint on board.

**AK:** It's difficult trying to do it all at once. A sketch is mostly for the light. Then I make drawings that try to work out the forms.

**CM:** This is really interesting because traditionally drawing would come before painting but in your case, drawing is a tool *used* in painting.

**AK:** Yes, drawing comes secondary, because if I start thinking about the drawing instead of the painting, I'm never going to get the light right.

**CM:** Ha! No, of course not, because then you're worried about the form! So, form follows light, form follows the immediacy, the moment.

**AK:** Absolutely. You just use it to make some sense out of it.

**CM:** That's really interesting, and I think it's also part of the reason why you don't fit into any categories. Some people have tried to say, well, he fits in a little bit with Pop artists, but I don't see that. It's like you're painting on your own.

**AK:** Well, they're like big fashion trends in everything and they sort of hook together. And for an artist to be viable, he has to be part of a fashion trend, a big trend. Like a trend after World War Two was to break forms apart. And that's like Bebop [Jazz music], Faulkner, Jackson Pollock, they were breaking down linear forms and went across everything. I think when work has been made in the big sense of changing fashion, that gives the work style, and I think style hasn't changed too much. If something has a lot of style, it always has a lot of style and you can say, is timeless, in a way.

**CM:** Exactly. And would this also relate to the stylisation of Japanese art? I read somewhere that you were also influenced by the Japanese artist Kitagawa Utamaro (1753-1806).

**AK:** Utamaro was a *real* influence because he was doing the same bohemian world I lived in and there weren't any Americans doing that 'high bohemian'. There was a kind of 'low bohemian' that I didn't find attractive at all. I saw his work, and I said, "Wow! That's like people I know!"

**CM:** Well this is the whole milieu of the poets and the Beat Generation, wasn't it?

**AK:** The poets were, I think, more connected to the time period than I was in the late 50s, into the 60s. The poets were where I was. There was a reaction against the rhetoric of some of the Abstract Expressionist, very high minded, generalised things, like religion, god, truth. And the poets and myself were involved in everyday things in a sophisticated way.

**CM:** In a way also that eschews, let's say, philosophical pretention.

**AK:** Exactly. In the work of the Abstract Expressionists, there was a big influence of French Existentialism. It made sense in Paris, it didn't seem to make any sense to my life. Or to the poets!

**CM:** [laughing] It didn't need to!

**AK:** We didn't need it.

**CM:** The French had Existentialism, America had Jazz.

**AK:** That's right, that's right! Exactly, exactly! I was much more in love with Jazz than I was with Existentialism.

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Alex Katz exhibition at Timothy Taylor  
亚历克斯·卡茨在伦敦蒂莫西·泰勒的个展

**CM:** I saw the show you had at Timothy Taylor in London recently. I was really taken by the whole show but particularly by two aspects. The first was the use of two-dimensional sculptures: the small version of a woman looking [at the exhibition] but of course from both sides it's from the back [the view], and the mirrored, highly-polished steel profile that just hangs in space. We can return to that but the other one was all the drawings you did of people in the subway. That was completely fascinating to me because I didn't know about this work. And again, it's about the immediacy of how people live, people's existence at a certain moment in this sort of strange space. How did that all start?

**AK:** Well, it was like learning how to draw. Cooper Union is a hard school to get into and hard school to stay in. The drawing I had done previously was from casts of antique sculpture, where you would take a week to make a drawing. I got to Cooper and just couldn't do anything in 20 minutes. So, I got a lot of pads and just started drawing around the clock. If I wasn't eating, I was drawing. And I did it for about two years. The idea was just to draw what was in front of you. I wasn't interested in meaning, I was interested in putting down what I was seeing. I guess that was the start of literary subject matter being eliminated.

**CM:** Because there's no narrative in the subway: people are going from A to B.

**AK:** No narrative. I hated writing about that *depressing* realism, you know: show how the poor people are! Put it this way: you know what it goes with? It goes with like 'gypsy' music! It goes into Western narratives of hopes gone, and it goes on and on, and people love it—they cry, they feel good. I find it not quite disgusting but very boring.

**CM:** There's not emotion in your paintings, in that sense. Any emotion is interior to the subject.

**AK:** Yes, it's not 'express yourself'.

**CM:** It's catching the particular moment.

**AK:** It's an idea of high art too. The thing I got from de Kooning and Kline was painting a large impersonal painting. Being able to do things that size. When I look at Giotto, he's great, he can have personal feelings done in a big impersonal style. It's quite fantastic.

## Large-scale

**CM:** When did you start doing the large-scale paintings?

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**AK:** Well I got up to 6ft-square in the early 60s. That was very large. Up until then the largest I'd done was 4x6ft. That was a fairly good-sized painting for those times; the spaces were smaller. The exhibition spaces and where the paintings went [collector homes] was smaller, too. The Abstract Expressionists went back to large sized paintings. I saw a room that collector Ben Heller had and around the room was floor-to-ceiling Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, you know?

**CM:** Good god!

**AK:** Yeah! And I thought it was the most elegant things I'd ever seen and I said, let's go for it! And no one had done large-scale figurative painting, you know? For the early paintings I had no precedent; they were really rough, but I knew what I wanted to do: I wanted to make a large-scale figurative painting that would hold up to the Abstract Expressionist paintings. That was all through the 60s.

**CM:** This is also when you started using the traditional cartoon method of transferring drawings to canvas.

**AK:** Yeah, because I could paint 6x6ft direct but when I went to 6x12ft or 6x10ft, something like that, I no longer could do it that way. So, then I started to make preliminary sketches, then larger sketches and put it on the canvas. And I wanted the paintings to be clean, so I didn't do the drawings directly on the canvas, but I thought of doing it on paper and transferring it.

So, from totally direct paintings to this very indirect way I use now, just evolved because of what I wanted. Particularly when I want to do something with a lot of figures like "Twelve Hours" (1984), those big dance paintings ("Private Domain" 1969) and group scenes ("Rose Room" 1981), I just didn't want to work on a canvas that's full of charcoal.

**CM:** No, because it will get into the paint.

**AK:** It affects the colors, and I paint very thin.

**CM:** And the light...

**AK:** I use the grounds; the grounds give me light.

**CM:** What sort of a base do you use? Is it a traditional gesso?

**AK:** We use three coats of gesso and two coats of oil.

**CM:** That's where you get the luminosity from!

**AK:** Yes, the luminosity is made physically because store-bought canvas is usually just maybe two coats of white with umber in it. It's a different color. It hasn't got any of the light that the grounds I choose have.

## Portraits and Landscapes

**CM:** What is the relationship between the portraiture and landscapes. I was looking at the current show you have at Peter Blum with three paintings. That's a very specific 'theatrical' staging.

*The exhibition comprises just three large works: a portrait flanked by two landscapes.*

**AK:** Picasso and Matisse painted descriptively and volumetrically. There's almost a line around every form and it's all solid. And I wanted to go out more like Pollock or Bonnard. You know? Spread it out! And the landscapes seemed like a vehicle to do that. I didn't think about it; I always did both.

*Doing figurative work in the 50s Katz was working virtually alone. The London school, with painters such as Francis Bacon, had very little impact on the New York scene.*

**AK:** In the 50s it seemed more interesting for a while to do the figures, the figures in the flat grounds. It seemed more scary but you make it work, right? Then, I always did some landscapes but in the 90s I started to think about the environmental landscapes; the landscapes in a picture as being really an environment that wraps around you. The two paintings at Peter Blum—landscapes—are that, and the other one belongs to the big faces, which was later, a more developed painting than the landscapes.

**CM:** There are no lines in nature. Color just flows in from one area to another.

**AK:** Well you really want to get into your unconscious. When painting direct, the unconscious paints the picture, pretty much. That was the one thing from the Abstract Expressionist thing I really took too.

**CM:** This comes back into the whole idea of immediacy again.

**AK:** Yes, immediacy coming from the unconscious. I think most of our being is unconscious. You just look at something: you like it, you don't like it. It's totally unconscious.



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**CM:** So, there's no lines, we're removing consciousness, and we're removing narrative. These actually are all related ideas?

**AK:** Yes, it's all about removing narrative. Most of our being is unconscious, the subconscious you like things, you don't like things. Basically, when you're painting direct and fresh, it's not an idea, you just say, *does it look good?*

**CM:** What was the role of the sculptures? Obviously, you're a painter, first and foremost.

**AK:** The stuff that I've done—the cut outs—it was sort of a freak. It happened by accident... The idea of sculpture, to me, was to eliminate mass and volume and make the sculpture into light, and still have presence. That's what the cut outs did. There's no mass to the cut outs, and very little volume. It's all about the light, but it has substance, and it has its presence, and that was it.

**CM:** It's also scale, because there some very big and, in the Timothy Taylor show, two very small.

**AK:** That had to do with destroying the idea of life-size. Life-size belongs with truth. It's from another time period.

**CM:** Because the search for truth again is part of this issue of narrative. It gets in the way.

**AK:** No, there is no narrative. You're dealing with perception. Like, *where is somebody?* That determines the size.

## On Photography

**CM:** Does that have any relationship with photography or not? Either your own or in general?

**AK:** Well, artists picked up on it early, like Munch's photos and Manet's photos and it became taboo because it's very restrictive. If it's used in a literal way, it's very restrictive. I used photos in the early 50s. The static image came out of photos. Brady, the Civil War photographer, was an influence on those early flat paintings because of the multiple impressions. When he shot something, it was an image on top of an image on top of an image, because of the slow exposure. They interested me.

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The thing the photo does not have is color and light. It's always recessive. It's not in the present tense. Photos are just about always in the *past tense*. Taking the photograph and painting it in the early works, like I would paint a landscape, brought it into the present tense. Then in the 70s or 80s, if I saw a photo I liked, I would get people to pose like it and do it from life.

Now I've been using an iPhone for photos and I can bring the image into the present tense. So, photos have always been a factor for me. Very few painters paint direct from life anymore. The photo has dominated the vision of people in the Western world. Most people think a photograph is realistic.

**CM:** Which it's not!

**AK:** It's only a fraction of what you see. Photos changed the way people see the world. People see the world now through photos. They used to see it through bad painting.

**CM:** [laughing] Well, yes!

**AK:** Well, it's true!

**CM:** *It is true!* It's *exactly* true!

**AK:** People think what they see is true, is real. Well, it's not. It's dictated by your culture. Culture tells you the way you see things. People don't see anything clearly outside of their culture. Example; as Gombrich says: Impressionist art is realistic and African art is symbolic. And I say, to whom? To an African, an Impressionist painting is not realistic. *His sculpture* is realistic. It's a clear example of a culture determining how you see things. If you try to be aggressive in terms of seeing things, people don't like it. And that's the problem I have with my paintings: they're really aggressive in terms of seeing. It disturbs people because A it is figurative, and B. it's different.

**CM:** People don't want to see what they're looking at, they want to see what they expect.

**AK:** They think it's real because they're seeing it.

**Ada**

**CM:** One final question: I wanted to ask you about Ada, your wife. You've been together for a very long time.

**AK:** I actually just wrote a book about her. She's kind of amazing looking. The whole family is extraordinary looking. She's amazing looking, because she could be Dora Maar. Picasso would've gone nuts over her! When I saw Dora Maar—the paintings, I said, *god this girl's beautiful!* Then when I saw the photograph, I said, *oh he cheated on the shoulders*.

Ada fitted to the European beauty of Dora Maar but she could also be the *American* beauty. She had the full lips, the short nose.

She went to a lot of movies, when she was young, and all her gestures come out of the movies. So, it was like painting a dancer. She never makes a bad gesture. You know, I really lucked-out: I got this great model, who you could shift this way and that way and always made a great gesture. She was brought up in the clothes environment. So, Ada was a great dresser all her life. Her mother made her fantastic clothes. You know, most girls in New York don't learn how to dress until their late 20s. Ada was well dressed when she was 6 years old. Ada has clothes now that her mother made that are 60 years old and she's puts them on and they're just like *today*. All in all, she was just an amazing piece of work!

**CM:** When you paint her, are you painting your model or are you painting Ada?

**AK:** She's cast in different roles. Very few of the paintings look like her. People always recognise her but a lot of the paintings don't look like her, because it's usually some idea of something that I'm painting, that's she's the vehicle for.