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## Alex Katz, Tate St Ives, review

A new show of beach scenes by American artist Alex Katz is lovely on the surface - but does anything lie beneath?

★★★★★



Alex Katz - Eleuthera (1984) Photo: Alex Katz

By Mark Hudson

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I've never been able to work out whether the art of Alex Katz is deceptively facile or simply facile.

The 85 year old painter is a huge figure in his native America, but his big, illustrative images of well-heeled New Englanders at play haven't had an equivalent impact here. These apparently bland, yet undeniably stylish images seem quintessentially American in both their subject matter and appeal. In the absence of a decent-sized exhibition in this country, it's been difficult to tell if Katz's paintings maintain an ironic distance from their subject matter or are simply showing Americans an aspirational world they would like to inhabit – a sort of fine-art version of preppy leisure wear.

Concentrating on Katz's beach scenes, as is appropriate in this glorious seaside gallery, Tate St Ives's exhibition - subtitled 'Give Me Tomorrow' - is a welcome opportunity to see if there's more to this enigmatic artist than meets the eye.

The early paintings, from the 1950s and early 60s take us into a kind of Madmen-on-vacation world, of stylish New Yorkers relaxing in discreetly up-market beach resorts – specifically Lincolnville, Maine where Katz has spent every summer since 1954. Katz's soigne wife, Ada, with her Jackie Kennedy hairstyle, is a recurring presence. 'The Black Dress', from 1960, shows her in a variety of poses. And if the treatment appears flat, slick and off-hand, that is really the point.

Like his Pop Art contemporaries Warhol and Rauschenberg, Katz reacted against the portentousness of Abstract Expressionism, then the prevailing current in American art. Where the likes of Pollock and Rothko saw the gestural brushmark as the pathway to the artist's soul, Katz seems to go out of his way to make his brushmarks as inexpressive as possible.

His work is a kind of inverse image of Pop Art. Where the Pop painters gave ready-made images a painterly touch – think of Jasper Johns’s American flag paintings – Katz takes scenes from real life, freshly observed, and gives them the third-hand look of commercial illustrations, but on a scale that announces them as ‘art’.

At its best the ambiguity of these images is compelling. ‘Round Hill’, from 1977, showing a group of the artist’s family and friends lounging on a beach, looks like it’s been copied from some random instamatic snap. Yet the whole thing is carefully, almost classically composed, the large scale lending the painting a monumental feel that offsets the apparent glibness.

‘Eleuthera’, from 1984, is at first sight even more perplexing: four canvasses of women in swimming costumes and caps, looking out at us with serene, but blank expressions like a set of 1930s fashion illustrations blown up to huge size. It’s fun, the colours are clean and fresh, and it looks fabulous on the exhibition’s posters. But you assume there must be more to it than that. As with much of Katz’s work there’s a tension between meaning and meaninglessness, between abstraction and representation. He seems intrigued by how little detail he needs to add to the areas of broad flat colour to give them form and meaning.

In more recent paintings he seems to be testing himself and the viewer in seeing how casually, even badly he can paint and get away with it. ‘Beige Wave’ is one of a series of paintings that reduce natural phenomena to simple formulae reminiscent of Japanese kimono prints. At first the painting appears simply crude with its casual slashing marks, though, as with many of his works the use of tone and colour is more artful than first meets the eye. The huge ‘Late Summer Flowers’, on the other hand, simply looks like a fragment of a kimono design cackhandedly and pointlessly enlarged.

Yet for all his arch play with painterly concepts, it’s clear Katz wants his works to be seen as more than that: as emotionally rounded representations of reality.

The recent, ‘4:30 PM’, a large-scale view of white boats on a deep blue sea, with some slightly clunky clouds hanging overhead, sets out, in all apparent artlessness, to ‘capture a moment’. Shrunk to a quarter the size, it could pass for the kind of ‘seaside modernist’ tat that clutters St Ives’s more touristy galleries. Yet there’s no denying Katz’s ability to infuse an image with light using the most minimal means, as he does here in the band of glowing yellow sky.

It’s almost a relief to move on to Katz’s selection from the Tate collection and encounter works with just the kind of blood-and-guts drive and energy he doesn’t do himself: such as Franz Kline’s huge calligraphic ‘Meryon’ and Chaim Soutine’s tormented expressionist landscapes. These you feel are the kind of big emotional statements he admires, but is temperamentally unsuited to delivering. Yet if his effete cool can be maddening, his pathological detachment – the sense of of him watching you watching him – Katz’s paintings offer undeniable pleasures. If you don’t simply accept and like them for the way they look – as many undoubtedly will – they certainly give you plenty to think about.

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