

The Times, 5 de mayo de 2012

12 **saturday review**

Saturday May 5 2012 | THE TIMES

visual arts

'I threw at least a thousand

Alex Katz is a modern master whose cool, bold studies of American leisure prefigured Pop Art. But, on the eve of a major show, he tells **Tim Teeman that it hasn't always been plain sailing**

When he was young Alex Katz drew all over the staircase wall of the family home in Brooklyn with crayons. "It stayed there for ten years," the lean, handsome 84-year-old artist recalls, in his massive loft in New York's Soho: five thousand square feet, with areas dedicated to painting and home life and no scribbling on the plain, white walls. (He moved there in 1968, part of an artists' co-operative, when the area was far from its current chi-chi self.) His parents didn't mind his doodlings on the wall. "It seemed like a very loose home," he says. "They never said anything, no matter what I did. Another time I took some black paint and started to paint the baby blue stucco on the garage. I managed around seven or eight yards, then lost interest. Another time I tore up all their books."

"Their books?" I ask horrified.

"I just felt like tearing books up. I liked doing it. I don't know why. I was pretty wild. Didn't his parents go mad?" They said, "Well, don't do it again, Alex."

This aggressive, renegade spirit — his stories come burnished with raspy laughter and a craggy New York accent — might explain why Katz, an exhibition of whose work is about to open at Tate St Ives, went his own way while around him abstract expressionists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg were making their better-known names. Now his paintings sell at auction for about \$690,000 (\$424,000) and privately for more than \$1 million. His collectors include Charles Saatchi; his works appear in the collections of most major museums. Kate Moss and Anna Wintour have posed for him.

From the outset, painting was "one of those fugitive things" for Katz. We walk around the loft looking at his huge canvases showing roses and lilies and "double-ups", featuring a model's body on one side and face on the other. "I think it's realism, more or less," he says of his style. "I prefer doing figurative work to abstract, but not to look at. Some of the best paintings of the 20th century were abstract." Katz's studio is immaculately tidy. "I live here. I don't



want paint all over the furniture," he says. "I don't want to live in a pigpen."

Katz's parents were Russian immigrants. His father worked in a sweatshop for a couple of years, started a business of his own and within four years the family was living "in a big house on a residential street, the first-generation immigrants on the block". Katz grew up mispronouncing words: he'd learn them from the dictionary, not phonetically, "so everyone laughed at me". His father didn't want him to grow up to be a "hothouse genius", encouraging him to play outside. "In a way I was isolated between two cultures, my parents' and the street," he says. "My mother was vivacious, my father contained. He was gentle, but he was a he-man. He didn't believe in hitting kids, but he dived off bridges, could lift seven chairs with one leg. I'm pretty physical, but he was a physical freak."

It was a family of eccentric daredevils: his brother dived under water to locate sunken submarines and his mother once drove the wrong way up Seventh Avenue in New York, telling her passenger: "You don't like my driving? I'll show you driving."

Katz's father died when his son was 16: a

truck ploughed into his stationary car at a red light. "I might have been in so much shock I didn't know what was going on. My father thought he could do anything better than anyone. He had to prove himself. I have the same insecurity, the feeling that something's missing. It comes in waves."

He says that he gets depressed occasionally, but not "that much" and never enough to seek therapy. We are standing in front of a 9ft x 12ft canvas featuring an autumn bouquet. "When you go into a painting you sometimes feel, 'What the hell am I doing?' Look at this one. The sketches and drawings were okay, but when I got to this I didn't know what the hell it was. A week after I finished it, I thought, 'This is a terrific painting'. I trust my instincts. What ever happens in a painting is unconscious at a certain point."

He was an "average" student, he claims, though it sounds nothing like it: he had read a series of encyclopaedias by the time he was 12. The only paintings on the walls of the family home were Expressionist "and messy, which I didn't like; by the time I got to 20 I realised the guy was a pretty good painter".

At school, one boy impressed him by dropping sports in favour of art, telling the teachers at 17 that he was quitting: "You have nothing more to teach me." A year later he was an advertising agency art director "making big bucks". Inspired, Katz enrolled in art school and in a life drawing class redrew a female figure as an ape. His modernism-embracing teacher loved it,

'My wife is like Miss America. Walking in her bathing suit, she stopped traffic'

the kids who had been taught to draw hated it, "and to those who gathered" around him, Katz said: "This is called crudism. I'm the boss, now you all have to follow me."

What a fascinating mix of swagger and insecurity he seems. He did a painting a day and "threw at least a thousand into the fireplace they weren't any good". Katz was "patronised" by abstract expressionists such as Carl Andre, who once told him "he'd seen a nice little painting of mine". The others, he recalls, said: "Oh Alex is a very good painter. You can't fault his technique, just his ambition."

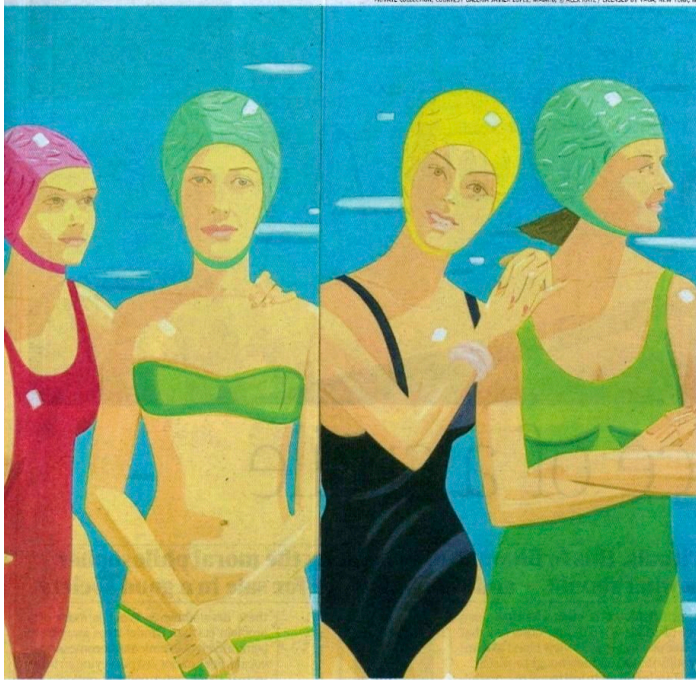
Katz shrugs and says he didn't care. His canvases became influenced by the cropping in frames of movies and advertisements. "When I got to 30 I started to feel better for myself. I had these very bright people telling me I was a good painter and I was up and away." Katz worked in a framing shop for income. "I got very famous but wasn't selling anything. It wasn't until I was 40 that I really started making a living. I wanted to be as good as Cézanne."

After five or six unsuccessful shows, he mounted his first successful exhibition, aged 32. His friend, the hellraising poet



'I can drink. But if I had lunch with Frank O'Hara I'd have to go home and sleep'

paintings into the fireplace'



PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY GALERIA JAVIER LÓPEZ, MANHATTAN; © ALEX KATZ / LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

Frank O'Hara, bought two paintings; John Ashbery also. He says there were lots of parties and drugs. "But I didn't do them. I can drink, but Frank O'Hara would start the day with bourbon and orange juice. If I had lunch with him I'd have to go home and sleep. He'd go home and have a cocktail party, with Martinis. Then he'd seriously drink after the theatre and I could not keep up. I play basketball, I'm athletic. It's not my thing."

Indeed, he can still "outshine most of the kids at the gym" doing pull-ups. He's in amazing shape, the product of a rigorous regimen of daily calisthenics, running three times a week, "and more than that in the summer" in Maine, where he has a second home and the beaches and vistas of which he has painted for many years.

He looks at the enormous canvases. "Some people are amazed I can do the physical part. That's easy; the mental part is harder." Though his paintings sell for large sums, he insists that means nothing to him. "You're considered a master painter, but it doesn't give you security." Financial security? "Oh I don't have to worry about money. I mean it doesn't give you the

security to paint great paintings. The price you're paying doesn't justify it as art."

Katz met his wife, Ada, in 1957 at an exhibition opening; they have been married for 52 years and he has painted her multiple times. She wasn't looking to get married and he had already had an "art school marriage" to his first wife, Jean. Ada

had three prerequisites for her partner: "The guy needed to be smart, attractive and hip." She has become "St Ada," he says: forsaking all for the family, raising their son, Vincent, as Katz worked "flat out". She talked Katz out of believing in God. "She's one of the sharpest ladies I've ever met; she read Auden in the early Fifties, Beckett before anyone else." Ada thought "the only intelligent thing to do" in the mid-1950s

was abstract paintings, but she understood that her husband's aesthetic lay elsewhere. He thinks there are three types of love: "Cerebral, sexual and love with your heart. When you love, you lose part of yourself. I could have left a long time ago. There were a lot of attractive girls around, so many opportunities, but Ada's special. She's like Miss America. In a bathing suit in Maine she stopped traffic the first time she walked

to the beach — literally, a guy in a truck started screaming."

Katz rejects the notion of an artistic legacy: "When I'm dead I don't give a shit. Some artists are very serious about their legacies: that old romantic thing of 'I've suffered in my life and these paintings mean they'll recognise me in the future.' F**k the future. When I'm dead, I'm gone. Why should I care about what I don't know? I'm gonna die pretty soon."

He has fulfilled most of his ambitions, though he is sure that he has not been accorded a big retrospective at the Met or Museum of Modern Art. "It's not going to happen, I'm not going to live that long."

He knows he has influenced younger artists, such as Julian Opie, Liam Gillick and Richard Prince, though their compliments "go in one ear and out the other". His

'When I'm dead I don't give a st. Why should I care about what I don't know?'**

pictures have been used as sources in advertisements, or in the design of movies, such as *The Big Chill*. But forget retirement: "I like painting and can't imagine not liking it, not working. I wouldn't know what to do with my time." And forget nostalgia: "I like the present tense, doing this." He's still in the game, he means. From chin-ups at the gym to giant canvases, don't count Katz out — he'll leave you gasping.

Alex Katz, Tate St Ives, May 19 to Sept 23; tate.org.uk/stives

ON THE BEACH
Katz's works *Eleuthera*, 1984, above, measuring 10ft x 22ft, and *Round Hill*, 1977, far left. Left, Katz photographed in his New York studio

