

## Style and Appearance: Alex Katz at the NYS Museum♦

In the 1950s, Alex Katz was one of the artists who rejected the abstract and intensely emotional aspects of New York School painting and returned the human figure to American art. The era was dominated by Abstract Expressionism, a style asserting that a painting depict itself while being a record of the artist's inner life and experience. In such a climate it was courageous of Katz to choose to portray people and impart nothing of his subjects' emotions or psyche.

Before Katz, Willem de Kooning's paintings of women had made the human form acceptable in contemporary American painting. However, the women in de Kooning's paintings did not represent individuals but were the vehicles for the artist's violent internal struggle. Katz, in an effort to make something new, developed a style based on the depiction of actual people and things while setting aside emotion. "My intention," he said, "was to make something fresh and post-abstract."

*Alex Katz: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art*, the current installment of the "Bank of America Great Art Series" at the New York State Museum in Albany, is a measure of the artist's success in creating such an art. Comprised of 32 works including paintings, collages, cutouts, drawings, and prints spanning 46 years, this exhibit provides a select overview of this influential painter's work. Katz, Brooklyn-born in 1927 and raised in Queens, is a well established artist who sought to compete with the best known and regarded members of the New York School, such as de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Mark Rothko. He stated that he wanted to create paintings that would 'knock them off the wall.'

Katz was immersed in the New York art scene and was familiar with Fairfield Porter's work, an older artist whose figure and landscape paintings embody a deep knowledge of the realist and painterly traditions of American and European art. Katz declared that "Matisse is my hero," but those familiar with early 20th century painting can see that the French influence came by way of Milton Avery, the American modernist whose broad, cool expanses of color are directly reflected in *Lincolnton Beach* from 1956 and *Blueberry Field #1* from 1959. This influence was in step with the formalist pronouncements of the most influential critic of the time - Clement Greenberg. Cardinal among Greenberg's tenets was integrity of the picture plane -- that is, making evident the inherent flatness of the canvas. Greenberg championed the expansive 'drip' paintings of Jackson Pollock. Katz wanted his paintings to hold their own with the mural size canvases of the Abstract Expressionists, hence he enlarged the scale of his work. In such paintings as *The Red Smile* and *Eli*, both from 1963, his mature style is easy to see - broad areas of flat color impersonally defining larger-than-life images. This remained his dominant aesthetic, visible in the tour-de-force *Red Coat* of 1982.

The immediate impact of these works is undeniable, however it is often in the pieces of modest scale that there is an enduring effect. His 1960 *Richard Bellamy*, the first Katz piece acquired by the Whitney, is one of the show's best. At 40x36 inches, its scale is intimate, and so is its effect

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♦ A version of this piece appeared in the July 2007 issue of *Chronogram* (Delmar, NY) as "Cool Katz," p.84.

on the viewer. This portrait of the legendary art dealer conveys an awkward poise and conviviality. The figure is seated just off center, leaning ever so slightly to the right with his legs crossed. Isolated in a brushy field there is a certain engaging and very human vulnerability to this figure. The humanness of the Bellamy portrait would mostly disappear from Katz's work in the following decades.

Katz was interested in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian painter Piero della Francesca who was a mathematician as well as artist and the French Neo-Classicist Jacques-Louis David whose crisp static pictures were intended to be unambiguous. Like them Katz emphasizes composition and form in his paintings. Like Fairfield Porter, he chooses mostly ordinary subjects such as friends and family. In contrast to Edward Hopper, perhaps America's most influential 20<sup>th</sup> century figure painter, Katz empties his paintings of emotional tension.

The neutrality of Katz's style carries over into the personality of his subjects as well. The people in Katz's paintings are nearly always unblemished, slender and white with a crisp, clean appearance, and are usually involved in some leisure activity. They convey a certain ease if not affluence. However, they appear to be more object than subject. The cool detachment of Katz's paintings initially seemed allied with Pop Art, but the connection doesn't hold. Unlike Warhol, and Lichtenstein, Katz's art was neither appropriated from the mass media nor intentionally ironic. Actually, Katz's paintings were progenitors of New Realism - a trend based in the careful observation of the object and its representation on canvas in a crisp uninflected manner. In the 1970s, Photo-Realist paintings such as the billboard size deadpan frontal portraits by Chuck Close, who was a student of Katz's at Yale, were among the offspring of Katz's large assured works.

The show includes three examples of Katz's cut-outs, a form he is often credited as inventing. *Ada, Ada* from 1959 consists of two nearly identical slightly over 3 foot tall free-standing figures. The approximately life-sized self-portrait *Alex* of 1968 is painted on both sides, providing front and back views (as does *Ada, Ada*). *Alex* and *Ada, Ada*, are not so much sculptures as they are double-sided shaped paintings. At nearly life-size *Alex* is the more effective here, creating an unsettling presence despite its flatness.

Katz's most common subject has been his wife Ada, who he met in 1957. He has made her the focus of more than 250 portraits, 9 of which are in the New York State Museum. The early works, such as *Ada (Oval)* from 1959, and the later *Black Scarf* (1996) seem to be *about* her, while the intervening Ada-inspired works seem to be *of* her. It is the early work (before he drained the human content from his images) and recent works (wherein he seems to be allowing that humanity back) that convey more than an image quickly read. In *Black Scarf* we come face to face with a woman of thought and apprehension.

Katz has been forthright, stating, "Style and appearance are the things I'm more concerned about than what something means." These concerns elicit the interest of viewers while stirring neither emotion nor imagination.

*Alex Katz: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art* continues at the NYS Museum, through August 19.