Alex Katz on Faces, Flowers, and Saying No to AbEx “He-Man” Painting
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Alex Katz’s paintings might be the most attractive exercises in soldering abstraction and representation that the last century has seen. Once bold experiments in an era divided into camps of Realism and Abstract Expressionism, the Brooklyn-born artist’s hybrid compositions are now widely canonized. His “big face portraits”, as they are affectionately called, shoehorned the sumptuousness of Rubens, the energy of Pollock, and the cinematic drama of Godard. It sounds like chaos, but Katz’s swathes of color, smooth planes, and wide eyes wash over you with both coolness and intimacy. Whether painted at the beginning of his career some six decades ago or today, his paintings emanate the newness of art born of daring ideas, bolstered by a long engagement with his subjects—friends, landscapes, and flowers.

This month, following a retrospective of landscapes at the High Museum and a show of new work at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, Katz installs an exhibition centered on his earliest paintings: “Brand-New and Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s” at the Colby College Museum of Art. Before the doors open on July 11th, Artsy spoke with Katz about his aspirations, manifold influences, and penchant for a taking a dip after a long day of painting (he splits his time between a lakeside studio in Maine, and one in Manhattan, on West Broadway in Soho). When I called Katz at his Maine home last week, his wife and muse Ada answered the phone. Alex came on the line moments later amid static crackling like we were back in the era when he first put brush to canvas.
Artsy: You titled your current show of work from the 1950s “Brand-New and Terrific.” I read that that was something of a mantra for you back then. When you started making paintings, what were your motivations?

Alex Katz: I wanted to make something that looked new, and I wanted to make a contemporary realistic painting. I was drawing from a lot of popular culture for the images I was using, too. The elements of the paintings were extremely complex in that I was trying to make something new and, at the same time, something in the tradition of European painting. That’s what “terrific” means—up to the standards of European painting. All in all, [what I was doing] was difficult for people to grasp.

Artsy: And at the time, in the ’50s, you were studying at both Cooper Union and Skowhegan, two institutions with very different approaches, in very different places (New York City and rural Maine, respectively).

AK: Cooper Union was one of the few modern art schools in the United States, and different teachers taught different aspects. The design portion ended up being about Cubism and the advertising portion was based in Bauhaus. Skowhegan, on the other hand, was a provincial art school. At the time in America, if you wanted to go into the big-time art world, you had the choice of being either a provincial regional painter or a provincial modern artist. That’s the way it was until Pollock came along.
Artsy: At Skowhegan, outside of modernism-obsessed, abstraction-obsessed New York, were you able to experiment with different methods?

AK: They gave me a very bad time with my modern art, but they had a truck, and they would take it around Maine and paint landscapes, so I thought I'd give it a try. I had never tried landscapes before. When I started to paint outdoors, it was a really big kick—a fantastic sensation. The paintings weren't that good, but the way I was painting was, so I thought, "Well, it will take me some time to figure out how to do it." The paintings I made at Cooper Union were very fashionable modern art, and I didn't think the realistic paintings were any better than the more modern art paintings at the time—but painting realistically was more interesting to me.

That led me to the whole question of: "what's realism?" A teacher would say, "this is realism," but to me it just looked like a normal painting. It had nothing to do with my reality. [At Skowhegan], realism was something made from great paint and a half-inch brush—but that approach didn't correspond to the sensations that I was seeing. Then I picked up on Pollock and allover painting, and it got me out of Cubism.
Artsy: You started balancing realism with modernism, all-over abstraction with representation. How did you negotiate these different approaches, which were distinctly separate fields at the time? No one was fusing them the way you were.

AK: The problem I had with negotiating [these approaches] had to do with abstract grammar. The grammar of the paintings was abstract, and the images were representational. But people couldn’t see that it was realistic, and my idea was to make something that people could see as being realistic. Now time has passed, the audience has changed, and my paintings aren’t as weird as they once were. In the ’50s, they looked unfinished to people who liked realistic painting and minor to the people who liked abstract paintings. In the ’60s, people started seeing them in the tradition of European painting, so the audience expanded.

Artsy: How was your first solo show received? It was at Roko Gallery, uptown on Madison Avenue, in 1954.

AK: You know, I think I sold four paintings to artists and Frank O’Hara gave me a review that I thought was kind of nice. Fairfield Porter saw the show, too, and started getting interested in what I was doing. Later he called me up, out of the blue. There were always some people who liked my work in the painting world—to some people, it wasn’t all that weird.
Artsy: I remember reading that you were once asked to describe “what you were doing in painting” in 1-2 sentences. You said you gave 15 different answers, and they all meant the same thing.

AK: They all meant nothing! [Laughs] I was in the under-35 show at the Whitney and they asked me to send an artist statement—a response to “What do you do?” I wrote my answer down and showed it to Edwin Derby. He said, “Oh...this is what you do.” That’s when I realized it wasn’t any good, so I did it over again—about 5 times! I was trying to explain something you can’t explain.

Artsy: Would you respond the same way now? It’s probably the most difficult—and most frequent—question that artists are asked.

AK: I don’t think I could give an adequate answer now. I was once in a group show of self-portraits at a school on 21st Street, and they asked us to answer the question, “What is your intent?” I remembered something that one of my teachers once said: “What you try to do is crystallize basic plastic organic unity,” so I wrote that. About six other artists also heard [what the teacher had said] and copied it too—so I guess we were all doing the same thing!
Artsy: When did you begin making your more overtly figurative work? The work that, to many people, felt very unique.

AK: My work seemed to coalesce in the late ’50s, around ’58. I was really cooking then—I enlarged my sizes and I focused on specific features with very abstract backgrounds. With the portraits, and the big faces in particular, a lot of the imagery came from film, TV, and billboards. And the sizes were big. By the early ’60s, I’d gotten up to about 6-by-6 feet, and by the late ’60s I was up to 10-by-20 feet. I made a trip to Europe when I was around 35 and, as I was leaving the States, Franz Kline told me, “If you think our pictures are big, wait until you see theirs.” He was right—I was really bowled over by them. Rubens! The amount of energy they could get off of a surface was unreal.

At the time, I had a lot of antagonism towards the macho AE [Abstract Expressionist] guys—the guys who were like our fathers, in a way [laughs]. I wanted to really knock them off their feet, particularly because my paintings were more lyrical, with delicate subject matter. Flowers, girls, and landscapes. It wasn’t macho stuff, or he-man painting. I’m not macho, and I’m not a he-man. My father was a he-man, my brother was a he-man, and these guys seemed very affected. They were trying to be he-men and they had no idea what he-men were [laughs].

Artsy: What attracted you to your delicate subject matter—your human subjects, in particular?

AK: It’s pretty much intuitive. A million years ago, a friend and I rode our bikes 20 miles from home. We painted watercolors and brought them back to my father. My father said to the other guy, who wanted to be a commercial artist, “You’re going to be great.” (And he was, he ended up being very successful.) To me he said, “You have to be a fine artist” [laughs]. Then he killed it by saying, “Why don’t you paint your own backyard?” That really stayed with me all my life. If you want to do something new, don’t do what other people do.
Artsy: In addition to responding to the painters of your time, and those who came before you, you also have an affinity for poetry.

AK: I’ve always liked poetry, and I found that the poets of the ’50s were on the same wavelength as I was. We were both taking ordinary experiences—your own backyard—and putting them into sophisticated forms. A lot of people didn’t get that idea at all, but the poets seemed to get it. For me, literary painting had to do with thinking about what a literary mind sees in a painting. It had to do with imagery. [Thinking like this] started with a Polish writer that Frank O’Hara was nuts about. I thought of [the writer’s] work like a cubist painting. I didn’t go nuts over it, but my mother went nuts over it—she’s literary. I tried to get into Frank’s and my mother’s minds, and I figured out that the Polish writer was like a romance picture. So I made modern paintings in the ’50s like “Impala,” the blonde in the convertible, and Ada in the rain, with the umbrella—all “romance pictures.”

Artsy: What is it like for you, looking back at some of these early paintings now?

AK: When I hung the paintings at Colby yesterday, I had just come from a show of my big landscapes in Atlanta—it’s the best show I’ve ever had. There, the paintings are very large and they’re installed in great big rooms. In comparison, the paintings at Colby looked very small to me, but they looked fresh. People always discounted the work I made before ’58, but I always thought that there was something there, and I still do.
Artsy: I loved looking at your 1955 *Goldenrod* painting after seeing some of your more recent flower paintings and landscapes at Gavin Brown.

AK: That one held up. My paintings in the mid-'50s were all pretty much landscapes—they were my way of getting away from Picasso and Matisse. Then I used Pollock to spread [the composition] out. I went from liking paintings with planes, like Poussin, to liking paintings with gesture, like Pollock. By '53–4 I started making collages, which were more concrete and all about color weights, rather than about gesture. So the '50s were defined by experimenting, freeing myself from the modern art school, and trying to make something more realistic. In the '80s, after I had the show at the Whitney, I decided to go back into landscape and make large environmental paintings, because I hadn’t tried that yet.
Artsy: You must paint many of your landscapes in Maine, where you usually spend your summers.

AK: When we started to make money, I asked my wife, “Hey, you want to live like the Gatsbys?” She said, “Build yourself a new studio.” So I built a studio on a lake [in Maine]. It has 20 feet of windows on either side, so it’s like being outdoors, where I can paint and work. And I go swimming whenever I feel like it.

—Alexxa Gotthardt


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