Object Matter and Environment

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STORY BY SARAH E. FENSOM
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In a release, Michael Rockis, Weiland Family curator of modern and contemporary art at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, was quoted as saying, "Today, at the age of 87, [Alex] Katz seems as young as any emerging artist. He paints with guesiness and a personal resolve that has driven his practice for six decades, but which has become increasingly accelerated in recent years, reflecting a uniquely American boldness and steadfastness of purpose." When discussing Katz, who has two major museum exhibitions opening this season—at the High and also at the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Me.—it seems difficult to avoid the subject of age. This is not necessarily because it is unfathomable that an artist could be so active as an octogenarian but more because of the "boldness and steadfastness" Rockis mentions. Katz is one of the last surviving emissaries of the postwar avant-garde, having known and shown with many of the most memorable and forgettable artists of the second half of the 20th century. The artist, who has been the subject of over 200 solo exhibitions and some 500 group shows since 1951, has been present in the art world and the visual culture of America for a very long time.

On more than one occasion Katz has described the goal of his work as being linked to the notion of "quick things passing." In fact, the critic Carter Ratcliff, a frequent contributor to this magazine, published an essay of this title in 2012, for a catalogue accompanying a show he curated at Colby College. Though certainly not an apt description of Katz's career, the phrase refers to the capturing of fleeting moments, as in 10:20 AM, a 2008 painting that depicts the

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Previous spread: Alex Katz, Good Afternoon, 1974, oil on canvas, 72 x 96 inches. This page, from top:
Winter Landscape, 2007, oil on linen, 120 x 240 inches; Reflection, 2008, oil on linen, 108 x 316 inches.
midmornng light hanging among a group of trees. Another great American landscapist, Charles Burchfield, strove in his later work to depict multiple times, weather conditions, or seasons on one canvas. The result was a cacophony of boldly painted organic details that alligned together in the same painting as if they were listing the capricious mood swings of nature. Katz, in comparison, freezes a singular moment, which suspends time while also being highly suggestive of its movement. It is the artistic equivalent of capturing a firefly in a glass jar.

The show at the High Museum, titled “Alex Katz, This is Now” (June 21–September 6) takes in the whole span of Katz’s career with 40 works created between 1954 and 2013. In particular, Katz’s treatment of landscape will be prominently featured, showing how environment evolves from the setting for his human figures to the central focus of his canvases. The exhibition places special emphasis on his recent landscapes, painted since the 1980s, putting 15 on view together for the first time. The series, which Katz calls “environment paintings,” are made on a colossal scale. To look at these paintings is to be engulfed by them. The images depicted are often cropped and lack a horizon line or specific point of spatial reference. Katz strips away extraneous detail, focusing on the essence of form. His powerful brushstrokes capture the play of light and time on his subject matter, attempting to depict the cognitive moment when visual information and the viewer’s experience of it are in harmony.

Landscapes, which Katz cited as “a reason to devote
my life to painting," have been a part of the artist's practice since 1949, when he first painted en plein air while studying at the Skowhegan School for Painting and Sculpture in Maine. Katz, who studied first at the Cooper Union in the late '40s, attended Skowhegan in both 1949 and 1950. Colby's exhibition, "Brand-New & Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s" (July 11–October 18), is as much about the artist's relationship to Maine as it is about a specific period in his career. The artist became enamored with Maine's landscape, and there found a place to paint, both subjectively and objectively. In 1954 or '55 he bought a house with fellow artist Lois Dodd (with whom he studied at both Cooper Union and Skowhegan), her then-husband, the sculptor Bill King, and Katz's then-wife Jean Cohen. Henceforth, he returned every summer. "When Maine enters the picture, it becomes this place of new possibility for him," says exhibition curator Diana Tuite. "He discovers the light here; he's painting directly outside, and he's working through some of the issues of the New York school."

Katz's relationship with Colby College is linked to the college's relationship with Skowhegan, where throughout his career Katz has returned to teach. Colby College Museum of Art, which is home to the Skowhegan lecture archives, opened its doors in 1959, the year that bookends "Brand-New & Terrific." In 2013, the museum expanded, adding the 8,000-square-foot Paul J. Schaap Wing for the Works of Alex Katz. The museum, which boasts 850 works by Katz, is now a major hub for scholarship and the exhibition of Katz's work, as well as a platform for Katz's foundation, which opened about 10 years ago. Colby is one of the institutions that
is in the enviable position of receiving Katz's highly curated selections of works by other artists. Tuite, who works closely with Katz and his son Vincent and is the inaugural Katz Curator, a position endowed by the artist, says, "Alex has an incredible eye." Tuite says there is variety in Katz's choice of artists: "It may be the works of Alex's peers, people he responds to or he knew, or younger artists he wants to support. He buys from a position of his own taste, but also for Colby."

At Colby, it seemed like an apt time for Katz's work from the '50s to be put on view. This is in part because of the "moment" that painting seems to be having in the art world, and also because Katz himself was interested in revisiting the work. "Alex felt for a long time that he didn't fully understand what he was doing at the time," says Tuite. The show features 65 works, some from the museum's collection but many on loan from the artist's studio, private collections, and major institutions. "The work falls into a number of phases," says Tuite, "even over just a 10-year period." In the early '50s, when Katz begins to experiment with figuration, he used found photographs for subject matter. Paintings such as *Group Portrait II* (circa 1950) turn strangers into faceless sitters in pared-down compositions. "He often has no relationship to the subject, which is important," says Tuite, "He then begins to come around to wanting to paint some of the people in his world, and
around the mid-'50s you see fellow artists like Lois Dodd and Ann Arnold in his work."

In 1954, inspired in part by the cutout paper constructions of Henri Matisse, Katz began to make collages with pieces of watercolored paper. *Wildflowers in a Vase* (circa 1954–55), a delicate collage, seems so aligned with Katz's painting style that from far away it might not read as cut-out paper. It is fitting then that in his essay "Katz Paints A Rock" in the exhibition catalogue for "This is Now" [the High's show features Katz's collages], the artist David Salle writes, "[Katz's] mature paintings are also collages of a sort—obviously not the disparate material mash-ups of Surrealism, or Pop but simple, legible shapes massed together: the Matisse cut-out version of collage." As Salle notes, themes from Katz's early work constantly become recycled and refined throughout the years.

After 1957, when Katz was painting portraits more often, he began to feature his wife Ada in his work. In *Ada* (1959) we see his wife in a blue sweater smiling before a green background. By 1959, Katz was experimenting with repetition, featuring the same figure multiple times in one composition. *Ada Ada* (1959) and *Portrait of Rob*
ert Rauschenberg (1959) show figures—Ada with arms crossed in a blue housecoat and Rauschenberg sitting casually in a chair in front of a window—twice in so-called “reduplicative portraits.”

“It’s so painterly, yet so conceptually rigorous,” says Tuite of this work. “You see him synthesizing the work of a lot of his contemporaries—de Kooning, Color Field, abstract expressionism. We think of him as someone in his own category, but more than ever we see him in the context of being what representational painting was in the ’50s.” Both exhibitions, either by focusing specifically on the ’50s or showing an evolution of work from the ’50s to now, give an in-depth look at how Katz developed his style. Challenging the non-objective, abstract painting of the New York school in the 1950s, Katz created works that concentrated on a central subject—what Ab-Ex painter Barnett Newman called “object matter”—isolated against a monochromatic background or landscape.

Katz used Pollock’s framework and applied it to representational painting, while also adapting Color Field as a void-like environmental space, thus creating a confluence of representation and abstraction.

Though Katz has continually experimented throughout his career, one of the joys of seeing a range of his work is the feeling of being surrounded by a “bold and steadfast” style. “Form is the raw material, and style is both the bel lows and the forge that will harden it into something like a carapace,” writes Salle, “A man who knows how to operate both becomes his own omnivorous painting machine—feed into it whatever you fancy, the machine will turn anything into a Katz. It’s his machine, after all.”