Painting in the Present Tense

After more than half a century as a consequential figure in American painting, Alex Katz continues to embrace the now

BY LILLY WEI
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

THANKS TO HIS BOLDLY MINIMAL, instantly recognizable figurative paintings, Alex Katz for decades has ranked among the most widely collected of American artists. In light of that fame, some may find it difficult to conceive of him as a radical, a pioneer. Yet when many of us put a face to that triumphal era in the 1960s, when New York had just taken center stage in the art world, we think of Katz.

“I was young, I had confidence,” recalls Katz of that time. “And I was ambitious. Once I got going.”

The youthful artist’s brash, can-do spirit was in perfect accord with the country’s rising cultural stock at midcentury, bolstered by postwar prosperity, new technologies, and increasing international clout. He forged a clear, incisive style that captured New World glamour and cool in the “present tense,” a concept that was and remains central to him, as do “brand-new” and “now.” Influenced by film and television, billboards and advertising, the close-up and the cropped, his pared-down, immediate, and unforgettable images changed the rules of the game. In his paintings, freestanding cursors, drawings, and prints, he altered the way the world saw Americans and Americans saw themselves.

During a visit this past spring to his home and studio in New York’s SoHo, Katz, now nearly 88, appeared ageless, himself in the present tense, elegantly trim in a deep navy pullover and immaculate white slacks. Among the early artistic settlers of the
neighborhood, Katz and his family moved into the commodious, amply windowed top floor of a classic downtown loft building in 1968. Before that, he had studios on Sixth Avenue and Fifth Avenue, near the Flatiron Building, living the illegal, hard-scrabble, bohemian life of most artists then, in danger of eviction, often without heat. Recalling his son Vincent's sleeping in a bed near where water had seeped in and turned to ice in the frigid space, Katz shakes his head; it was not romantic. The artist's own upbringing was working-class. Born in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, and raised in St. Albans, Queens, by Russian immigrant parents, he claims not to have had much innate talent, although he won a John Wanamaker prize for drawing when he was seven. He eventually went to Woodrow Wilson High School, a trade school that "gave you an 80 if you just sat in your seat." He attended academic classes in the morning and whatever he wanted in the afternoon. "Antique drawing" was one subject he chose. "Because there were a lot of rules and I had an analytical mind, my drawings were as good as anyone's after three years," he says. "I also took the time." Despite being a vocational school, Woodrow Wilson was a hub for music, dance, and fashion, and it was there that Katz learned the sophistication and currency of street style. "I knew I had an advantage over more privileged kids, but it took years for me to get that into the art world." He continued his studies at the tuition-free Cooper Union in New York and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

After completion of his formal studies, Katz went through a long period of experimentation before he settled on his singular approach. At Skowhegan, he had been introduced to life studies and plein air painting, which were revelations. To many young artists, Abstract Expressionism was the thrilling new style at the time, but Katz decided to "make a brand-new, realistic kind of painting. I was trying to make something that wasn't a solution, so I had to find another solution and another. I didn't have a thousand paintings in the '50s until my technique became good. My breakthrough was in 1959. I'd tell to paint six hours a day, six days a week, and it would take five or six years to find out where you are. That's it. I was flat out."

Even after his bold style started gaining attention, Katz continued to experiment. "I remember one night—this was 1964—when [the poet, writer, art critic, and friend] Frank O'Hara was in my studio. It was around four or five in the morning and he was very drunk. I told him that I was painting outdoors, making little paintings, wet on wet. Frank said, 'You shouldn't be doing that, you should be painting more paintings like The Red Smile; you're going to have
to hang next to a Matisse one day.” (The Red Smile, 1965, is now owned by the Whitney Museum of American Art and is currently featured in “America Is Hard to See,” the show launching the institution’s new Meatpacking District home.)

Today Katz remains enviably energetic, and his production these days actually surpasses that of earlier years. Working every day, he paints his typically large canvases quickly to instill a sense of immediacy, but makes copious preliminary sketches to work out the compositions. “I’ve always done a lot of work. I try to start by 10 A.M. and finish when I’m done, one thing leading to another.” He does not use assistants to paint, though they prepare canvases for him.

Lately Katz has been focusing on increasingly immersive landscapes. He says he “slid” into painting trees and continued making one after another. One such landscape in his studio features the palest of blues against a white ground—barely there, beautiful.

He is also making flowers, women in bathingsuits, nudes, and dancers. He points to an extended horizontal canvas propped between columns. It consists of dancers in leotards, variously posed, hieratic as Byzantine friezes, set against a rich, indented orange ground. Near it is a canvas bearing the image of a woman’s cropped, black-knobbed head against a background of flattened orange, a glowing color that reappears in several of the paintings in the studio. “This is brand-new,” he says of the dancers, describing how the more painterly orange behind and around them makes the painting atmospheric, charged, less solid.

Due to the complexity of his working process, every day is different in the studio. “If you paint a big painting...
Freshly painted works such as Nicoló, 2015, mingle in Katz’s large open studio with a select few long-time residents like Edwin and Rudy, from 1960. Pieces such as Summer, 1987, left, push landscape to the edge of abstraction.

like the dancers, you’re not going to do two of them a week,” the artist says. “I started it one day and finished it the next, so it’s in a day’s work, but I’m not going to do another one the next day.”

Katz’s productivity has been essential to keeping up with the perpetual demand, which like his output seems to be on the upswing. The Armory Show in March had so much of his work on view that it almost seemed an Alex Katz solo. An actual one-man show runs through April 2 at his London gallery, Timothy Taylor. And through June 13 Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, Katz’s New York gallery, features another solo, this one focused on recent landscape paintings.

Outside the narrow confines of galleries, Katz has long embraced crossovers and commercial projects, designing sets and costumes for choreographer Paul Taylor for years and a fashion shoot for Harper’s Bazaar in 1962. In that vein, the painter recently completed a project for Barney’s, designing its uptown Manhattan windows and a pop-up shop that launched mid-May to benefit the Art Production Fund. And his paintings and prints—originals and reproductions—will grace the public spaces and rooms of the Langham Place hotel in New York starting in September.

But what stands out about this season for Katz is the launch of two traveling museum shows, “This Is Now,” providing a retrospective of the artist’s treatment of landscape and environment, debuts at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta on June 23 and runs through September 6, before moving to the Guggenheim Bilbao. And from July 11 through October 18, Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine, will show “Brand-New and Terrific,” an exhibition of 65 rare paintings, cutouts, and collages from the 1950s. The show will be on view at the Cleveland Museum in the fall.
Colby has a trove of Katz's work, much of which was contributed by the artist himself, which is housed in a spacious dedicated wing donated in 1996 by one of his major collectors, Paul J. Schupf. In total the museum now has around 800 Katzes, including examples of every print in his oeuvre. The close relationship between the college and the artist has its roots in the 1950s, when Colby cofounder Willard Cummins offered the still-unknown Katz encouragement—and more practical assets. "I still have some of the furniture Willard gave me then," the painter said, smiling as he surveyed the loft. "That table, this couch, those chairs."

In fact, the Colby museum is currently presenting yet another Katz show, of sorts. "An Artist's Gift," on view through September 6, features a selection from the 450 works by other artists that have been gifted to the museum over the last decade by the Alex Katz Foundation. The foundation has also made donations to other museums, including the High. Many of the works it buys are by artists who have been out of school for a few years and find themselves navigating the period in which they need the most support, Katz believes. "It's simple and very direct. Vincent"—his son, a poet, critic, translator, and curator—"and I buy art and give it to museums; we've bought hundreds of works, including some by Sherrie Levine, Nabil Nahas, John Baldessari, Bjarne Melgaard, and Juan Gomez, my assistant. It's a good collection."

The High Museum show surveys Katz's evolving treatment of landscape over the course of 60 years through 60 works, though about a third are drawn from the past decade. "I wanted to organize an exhibition of Alex's landscapes because it is paradoxically one of the least known aspects of his career, even though it is at the root of his practice," says curator Michael Rooks. "Also, I think Alex is one of the best known and most influential artists of any generation, but he remains one of the least understood. He has worked against the grain since the 1950s and is at the height of his powers. His work is more relevant than ever." The landscapes typically begin as plein air sketches made over the summer in Maine and are ultimately realized as full-scale paintings back in New York in the fall.

While the High Museum show may deepen our understanding of his landscapes, Katz's portraits—of family, friends, artists, and, at times, people encountered by chance—will remain his incomparable signature works. Always painted from live models, they function as social documents as he paints the shifting crew, creating a new breed of people, known by first names only. He mentions Leron Jones, who was just "becoming Amiri Baraka" when he painted him. Then there are multitudes of Vincent; of his daughter-in-law, Vivien Bittencourt, a photographer; and above all, of his wife, Ada, whom he met at an opening in 1957 and married the following year. Portraying her endlessly in an ongoing, unprecedented study of a single subject over the course of nearly 60 years, he transformed her into an American icon. "I fool around with appearance; I think appearance is the most important thing," Katz says. "It's variable, not an absolute. I don't think there is anything more mysterious or true than appearance, and I want to get it into the present tense."