Colby College Museum of Art presents first survey of early works by Alex Katz

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Alex Katz, American (b. 1927), Bather, 1959, oil on linen, 48 x 72 in. (121.92 x 182.88 cm). Paul J. Schupf LL.D. ’06, Hamilton, N.Y. Lifetime Trust, Gregory O. Koerner Trustee. Art © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

WATERVILLE, ME.- The early work of artist Alex Katz (b. 1927) is the subject of a major new exhibition at the Colby College Museum of Art, on view from July 11 through October 18, 2015. Brand-New & Terrific: Alex Katz in the 1950s explores the first decade of the artist’s career, a period characterized by fierce experimentation and innovation from which Katz’s signature style emerged. The exhibition is the first museum survey to focus on the artist’s output from this formative decade.

Curated by Diana Tuite, Katz Curator at the Colby Museum, Brand-New & Terrific draws from the Colby Museum’s deep collection of artworks by Alex Katz and will include many rarely seen loans from the artist and other public and private collections.

“The Colby Museum is privileged to serve as a center for the exhibition and study of Alex Katz’s art,” said Sharon Corwin, Colby College Museum of Art director and chief curator. "Katz has such strong
roots in Maine, where he started spending his summers in 1949, so we are proud to be able to present
the first exhibition dedicated to his early work, much of which was made nearby.”

Installed chronologically in the museum’s 8,000-square-foot Paul J. Schupf Wing for the Works of Alex
Katz, Brand-New & Terrific includes more than 60 paintings, collages, and cutouts that trace Katz’s
technical and stylistic evolution over the course of the decade.

“We've borrowed the title from Alex Katz’s 1961 manifesto 'Brand-New & Terrific,' which affirmed his
intentions to find the contemporary in the traditional form of painting," stated exhibition curator Diana
Tuite. “What is especially significant about this work is how much it enriches our understanding of the
fluid and adaptive exchanges taking place in the 1950s between New York School painters and artists
like Katz who were working within a more figurative tradition.”

Born and raised in New York, Katz studied at the Cooper Union in the late 1940s and then attended
Maine’s Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1949 and 1950. There, the artist first began to
paint from life and found the subjects that he would depict for years to come—the Maine landscape,
his circle of friends, and domestic interiors. Within the same period Katz also turned to found
photographs as a source for paintings, such as Group Portrait 2 (c. 1950). With faceless sitters and
backgrounds reduced to bands of color, he found the essence of composition by paring it down to its
most fundamental elements.

By 1954, inspired in part by the cut paper constructions of Henri Matisse, Katz began to make collages
from pieces of watercolored paper. Intimate in scale and delicate in construction, these works were
often created at the kitchen table of the Lincolnville, Maine, farmhouse where he still spends his
summers. Collages such as Wildflowers in Vase (c. 1954-55), a small bouquet of bright flowers,
explore the economy of line and form and the proportionality of color.

These early works helped to lay the foundation for Katz's mature style—the vibrant palette, use of
repetition, and the graphic placement of a figure against a solid ground—that emerged toward the end
of the decade. In spite of their small size, paintings like Blueberry Field (1955) and Goldenrod (1955)
rehearse the immersive experience of nature for which Katz has become so well-known. Katz’s
portraits, often full-length depictions of friends and, after 1957, his wife Ada, primarily appear before
chromatic backgrounds. In Ada (1959), Katz’s wife is rendered in blue against a brilliant green
backdrop. Another example of work from this period is Irving and Lucy (1958), a portrait of art historian
Irving Sandler and his wife set into a vigorously painted but neutral colored ground.

In 1959 Katz began to experiment with repetitions of the same figure within a single composition.
These so-called “reduplicative portraits” include Ada Ada (1959), a painting with two images of his wife
in a blue housecoat with arms crossed, and the equally conceptually sophisticated Double Portrait of
Robert Rauschenberg (1959), in which the artist appears twice, almost mirrored across the center of
the canvas. Multiplied but not identical, these figures inspire close examination, raising questions
about copies and originals, reproduction, and representation. Also created in 1959, Katz’s first cutouts are freestanding or wall-mounted figures liberated from any ground whatsoever.