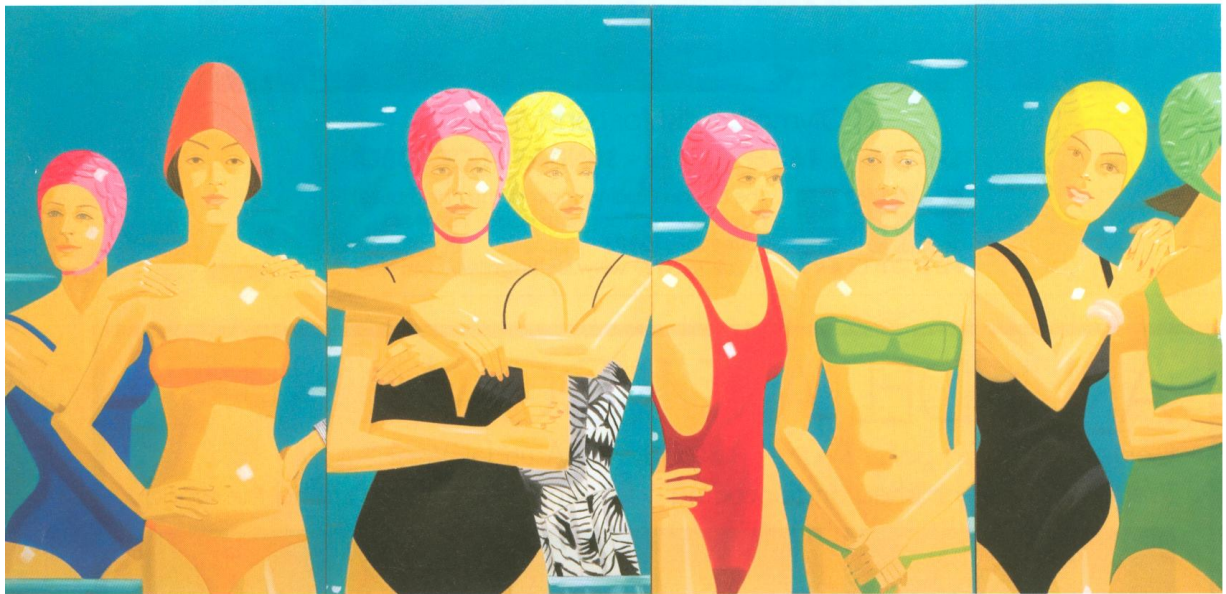


Art of England, septiembre de 2012

ALEX KATZ: GIVE ME TOMORROW



Alex Katz's exhibition at Tate St Ives brings together work spanning his 60-year career. **Estelle Lovatt** indulges in some come-hither Platonic eroticism and hip party-people watching, courtesy of Katz's magic, high bohemian chic

With bucket-loads of narcissistic brilliance and the look of self-possessed, cock-sure sexual prowess, if paintings could masturbate then Alex Katz's would be at it all day. Yet paradoxically, Katz's subject matter is entirely platonic – pictures of a life where where no sex is involved.

Just as in the most extreme of religions, abstinence from sex is about enforcing your own personal values and strengths. It's about non-physical, spiritual, friendly enjoyment

and ambition, outside of marital relations. That's why Katz's people look relaxed, off work – although Katz's people don't look like they work much at all! Each Katz canvas is the 'Jackie O' of the art gallery, the Mary of the Renaissance. In Katz's world there is no higher praise.

Katz doesn't paint Picassoesque erotic art of the Hogarthian moral subject matter, where a Koons frolicking couple lie exhausted, or indifferent. Katz paints people who belly-laugh more than the Laughing Cavalier,

aren't as pained as Van Gogh with bandaged ear and smile more than the Mona Lisa. His people really smile, as if breathing life in from the paint fumes to canvases that would otherwise only be an abstract research, with a symmetrical panache that belongs to Katz. His connoted colour harmony is comparable to Bonnard and Dufy, from pale violet through red-orange, bright-yellow to candyfloss pink or Wedgewood blue to pistachio green. Katz's whole come-hither look has a Neo-Plasticist's idiomatic expression to it. Brightly-coloured



and stylistic, Katz is highly stylised in a quirky, elegant way. Diagrammatically graphical, expression lies in calligraphic expressions of flat colour fields of paint.

Katz, famous for painting flat-looking paintings of flat-looking figures, suggests the relative 'flatness' of real people and their identities. Think Anna Wintour, editor-in-chief of American Vogue, in designer sun glasses. Katz's astonishingly good portraits of astonishingly good-looking people vie for your attention and hold you with the promise of

a shamelessly good time, much in the same way that aspirational advertising does. Think about it, are you buying that lipstick because you like its colour or because you believe if you wear it you'll get lucky on a date with the one you fancy?

He starts with drawing. First Katz makes preparatory sketches, then projects a charcoal sketch onto the canvas using a pouncing tool to trace around, exactly as Leonardo did with his 'cartoon'. After such care, Katz then paints in the outlines – quite fast, at times in a single

opposite:
Alex Katz. **Eleuthera** 1984. Oil on linen. 305 x 670.5 cm. Private Collection, Courtesy Galeria Javier López, Madrid. Art © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

above:
Alex Katz. **Red Blouse (Big Ada)** 1961. Oil on Linen. 193 x 208 cm. Private collection. Art © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: Galleria Monica De Cardenas Milano and Zuoz

sitting. Oil sketches capture the sensation from the unconscious. They are done largely from life now – he had been using other people's photographs in the 1950s, for



above:
Alex Katz. **The Black Dress** 1960. Oil paint on canvas.
183.5 x 214.5 cm. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen
Museum Brandhorst München
Udo and Annette Brandhorst. © Alex Katz/Licensed by
VAGA, New York, NY

nostalgic purposes. He stopped using these in the late 1950s and if he uses them at all now, it is to get people to pose in ways based on the photographs. It's the whole idea of something realistic achieved. His canvas looks like it's been painted by a sign writer. Bold and simplistic, heightened in colours, the artworks – like the people they show – delight us. They may even unsettle us just a little bit, but their intention is never to provoke,

shock or enrage. Influenced as much by style, fashion and music as he is by art history, Katz remains a very classical painter. Working with classical themes of portraiture, landscape, figure studies, marine scenes and flowers, many of Katz's artworks capture the everyday American Dream of easy living, leisure and recreation. Some elegant, most confident. You unsympathetic viewers would say the results look like 'colour by numbers'. The more patient will notice that Katz's techniques are outstanding, akin to reproduced commercial art, just as Katz's people are akin to an American grandiloquent style of Hollywood movie screens or advertisements.

Large paintings, some 12 feet wide by seven

feet high, or even larger, are created in a single session. Six or seven hours – that's one day. Katz likes to 'supersize'. Katz's people are attractive; mixed with a soupcon of poetry and jazz, they dance across the canvas with style and significance. Think whilst Jack Vettriano is all about brogues and braces Alex Katz is about teeth and tans; ok, so that they're artificial matters not. They look good. They look great actually, if I'm honest. Let's be honest, that's the magic of 'brand Katz'. All fashion and music, Katz is chic. All panache, just a little awkward in parts. But on the whole he is inspirational.

Born in 1927 in Brooklyn, New York, Katz's career spans six decades. He began



his own painting developed in reaction to their work, and he is acknowledged as a hugely influential precursor to the Pop Art movement with which he became associated throughout the 1960s. Working in the tradition of European and American artists like Manet, Matisse, and Hopper, Katz has created an unmistakable language. Not a Pop artist, Katz is more of a pop star. And he paints the hip party people who do a 'Munch-dance of life', across a classical frieze-like panel. Botticelli-like females and Mitt Romney-esque men feature. The father of physically attractive folk, where style and character meet both the present and the fleeting moment. Everything looks stylised. Simplified. And yet none of it looks trivial.

It's no real surprise that Katz paints in the 'flat'. When Katz first started making art he began by making paper-thin sculptures that stood on the floor like people. Except even they weren't quite sculpture but 'flat' paintings, in the round, that you walk around. Such 'flat' people, easy to meet but hard to know well, may be odd, or film stars. They look almost flat; like people on posters in four-colour printing, or old cigarette adverts. Almost cartoons, but not quite. His head-only portraits within clean outlines and big colours are the base of his style that is purely flat; a doctrinarian sort of abstraction from a supremacist's asymmetrical colour field to a field of colour. Today you can sense Katz's influence in many artists, from

above:

Alex Katz. *Islesboro Ferry Slip* 1975. 198 x 213.4 cm. Art © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Julian Opie to Richard Prince, Elizabeth Peyton and Liam Gillick.

Perfectly true to the present and the past, Katz employs a very definite style that belongs to his obsession with a particular style of portraiture and physical surface, all appealing. Perhaps this is why many Americans don't really take to Lucian 'flapjack brown' Freud's wrinkly flabby flesh; too ... much. And hanging like the Gardens of Babylon. The way that we fit our acquaintances into types, along with the pseudo-acquaintance we have with



celebrities in that we know about them, but don't 'know' them for real, Katz is as much in the same false reality that lies somewhere inbetween where Facebook and Twitter meets Anime and Magna.

That which captures what the Japanese call ukiyo, or 'the floating world' – the passing social scene of smart urban life – is what Katz is trying to capture too. Utamaro, the Japanese master of the woodblock print, is one of Katz's eclectic reference points, along with Jackson Pollock, 1960s television adverts and Egyptian sculpture from the second millennium BC. As Utamaro painted the beautiful women and

social whirl of 18th-century Tokyo, Katz has done something similar for 20th and 21st-century New York. "I don't want to paint someone else's world, I want to paint my world," he says. It's a realm he describes as "a fugitive world, made up of painters and poets and musicians, people who sold dope, modern dancers and far-out musicians. High bohemia is basically what it is."

It's a pleasure to look at the people in Katz's paintings; they show a restrained kind of pleasure themselves. They don't often look back at you, instead they look aloof, sometimes through sunglasses, dressed for

summer. We can try to enjoy their company, imagine ourselves moving carefully in with the fashion model types. Katz's bright uniform planes make up their faces and bodies. The illusion of depth almost abstract, Katz's paintings are defined by their flatness of colour and form; their economy of line and their cool but nevertheless seductive emotional detachment. His technique is complex as he reduces his visual language to a graphic broad area of flat colour that describes form, feel, time, weight, light and space. Floating somewhere amid Franz Kline and Rothko, 'brand Katz' is all about tapping



into art history and weaving it in to his contemporary canvas. Traditional methods of composition – very Classical in gesture and taste – ensue and ensure all that is great in western art, from Italian Renaissance to advertising billboards; from Michelangelo to Warhol; Rembrandt to Van Gogh; Watteau to De Kooning; Holbein to Chuck Close.

As for the places, they are often outdoors and comfortable; holiday spots, with seashores, piers and pine trees. They might be in New England or New York. From an East Coast class that bridges two American generations, Katz is the void between American Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. His work, with its remarkable slightness, simplicity and bold use of colour, looks back to an older, more restrained tradition through surprisingly traditional formats. Proficient at drawing, Katz is influenced by the design edge and originality of the Bauhaus.

From Europe to New York, they are most definitely American because they are supersized. Surprising, considering they're done in one day. Physically demanding, yes. The paints are all mixed, the drawing (cartoon) is on the canvas, all the brushes are out. Like a conductor waiting to lift his baton, Katz paints. Over and over, that's ok – don't forget that even Monet repeated himself. Continuously replicating his Water lilies, reiterating the importance of their reflection, both in his eyes and on the level surface of his pond. Which, when I find an artist revisiting themes and motifs, is most gratifying and substantially filling to the eye. Leaving out a lot of description so as not to bore.

For his exhibition at Tate St Ives Katz brings together over 30 canvases, plus collages and cut-outs, that span the full breadth of his career from the 1950s to now. From Lincolnville, Maine, to St Ives, Cornwall. St Ives concentrates on land and seascapes,

opposite:
Alex Katz. **Round Hill** 1977. Oil on Linen. 180.3 x 243.8 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Partial and Promised Gift of Barry and Julie Smooke. Art © Alex Katz/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Digital Image © 2012 Museum Associates / LACMA

above:
Alex Katz. **Black Hat (Bettina)** 2010. Oil on linen. 152.4 x 213.4 cm. Private Collection, London. © Alex Katz/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Image courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris – Salzburg

outdoor portraits and pictures of Maine. Katz gives a modernist's attention to details in his brushstrokes and layers of paint to the flatness of paint. So yes, it's an edge alright, a cutting-edge above the rest. Cut to please the eye, like a Tommy Hilfiger or Polo Ralph Lauren advert, the LTB (little black dress) never had more meaning. ■

Alex Katz: *Give Me Tomorrow* is on at Tate St Ives until 23 September. For more information visit www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-st-ives