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Alex Katz: Give Me Tomorrow, Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK

By Jackie Wullschlager

Works by America's pre-eminent painter resonate in the light of this seaside resort town



Alex Katz's 'Isleboro Ferry Slip' (1975)

Superbly installed in bright, sea-facing galleries, *Alex Katz* at Tate St Ives was the summer's most optimistic, pleasure-charged exhibition. Today, the show moves to another marine setting; greyer, windswept Margate, where Turner Contemporary's cleaner, simpler spaces, and the east coast light resonate differently – though as richly – with Katz's lucid, condensed, hard-edged, defiantly flat depictions of beautiful people and beautiful places.

These – from the blazing orange “Ives Field” (1956) to the fashionable beachside party, redolent of Manet, in “Round Hill” (1977), to the magnificently simplified, alluring “Black Hat (Bettina)” (2010) – have been Katz's life-long subjects, but, as with all great painters, his real theme is time. “4.30pm” (2007) is a five-metre seascape with spare marks and a reduced palette – three bands of colour, a few white block-like boats – where Katz fixes the eternity of an instant of late afternoon light in Maine. “Isleboro Ferry Slip” (1975) depicts Katz's teenage son Vincent on a Maine jetty, with that same crystalline light on a deep blue sea. The dreamy adolescent, reminiscent of Tadzio in Visconti's *Death in Venice*, suggests a meditation on beauty, youth and time passing but preserved in paint. “It's the instantaneous light. If you get it right, then you get it in the total present tense . . . that's eternity,” says Katz.

As a figurative artist in a New York art scene dominated by abstraction, Katz was long overlooked; now, at 85, he is America's pre-eminent painter. It is interesting to compare this show with a handful of other current exhibitions focused on his most distinguished contemporaries – Cy Twombly's late works in *Turner Monet Twombly* at Tate Liverpool, Lucian Freud's in *Carracci Freud* at Ordovas, London, and Frank Auerbach's exhibition at Marlborough Contemporary, which opens on Friday. The Americans more clearly assimilated abstraction into their figurative and narrative language, but, in contrast to the increasing emphasis on conceptualism in painting, all this generation surely share Katz's belief that “painting must try to get to the most mysterious thing, which is appearance”.

Until January 13, www.turnercontemporary.org
