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Alex Katz

Give Me Tomorrow

at Tate St Ives

by Sara Rodrigues



Through the curved glass windows of Tate St Ives you can see the famous Cornwall beaches where young and vigorous surfers ride the fresh, turquoise ocean. Seascapes, sunglasses, hats, friends and family holidays also feature prominently on Alex Katz's canvases, which hang coolly inside the museum walls. Painted at his sunny retreat in Lincolnville, Maine from the 50s onwards, these scenes at first seem superficial in their appearance, portraying Katz's world of high bohemia and aestheticised lifestyle.

Katz brilliantly merged the depth of figurative painting with the vibrant surfaces of Pollock's and De Kooning's emerging Abstract Expressionism. Taking the medium's directness, he defied tradition, stripping representation down to its bare minimum. Flat and devoid of much content, the images presented to us are highly coloured and stylised. Serving not only as a stepping-stone to Pop Art and Andy Warhol, Katz's influence on design continues today in graphic billboards and designers' adverts.

previous page, 'Black Hat (Bettina)' (2010)
© Alex Katz/Licensed by YAGA, New York, NY
Image courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris - Salzburg



'Eleuthera' (1984)
 © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY
 Private Collection, Courtesy Galeria Javier Lopez, Madrid

Preoccupied with 'painting in the present tense', Katz sees painting as surface and surface as fashion – a mark in the moment. Katz's wife Ada figures in his paintings, adopting various roles, such as that of a summer catalogue model in 'Beach' (1985). "There's no progress in art," Katz reasons, "There's merely change. And that's like fashion. I want to make something new, and it has to do with change. It's more like a dress designer than a 19th-century idea of an artist. I'm restless."

Remaining truthful to his style throughout his career, while still evolving, Katz's philosophy sits well with today's contemporary art scene where a young generation of artists try desperately to keep the pace of modern life, media and trends. Appropriating not only from film and commercial photography, Katz also touches on artistic concerns over identikit series, defying photography through painting. In 'The Black Dress', Ada's figure is repeated throughout the painting, but far from a political or sexual statement, what Katz thrives on is the possibility to catch time. The last room of the exhibition features his most recent work, large blossoming paintings of fresh flat flowers, but like his other paintings, they too don't look like they will die any time soon.



'The Black Dress' (1960)
© Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA,
New York, NY
Image courtesy of Bayerische
Staatsgemäldesammlungen Museum
Brandhorst München, Udo and
Annette Brandhorst

Katz has always been relevant, leaving a 10-year relationship with the blue chip Pace Gallery to join enterprise, a young New York institution with a penchant for bright, young things run by Gavin Brown. "Ask pretty much any figurative artist and they'll owe quite a bit to Alex. And some of the abstract ones too. I can't think of a more influential artist in figurative art today," art historian Irving Sandler explains.

At the age of 85, Katz remains an indisputable painter of modern life, preoccupied with representing the world but also with preserving time, beauty and youth. Style is his content and perpetuates his need to stay in the present, but while fashion is destined to fall in and out of imagination, Katz's art inhabits generations. After all, the most mysterious thing is appearance.

Alex Katz: Give Me Tomorrow runs until September 23rd at Tate St Ives and from October 6th at Turner Contemporary in Margate.



'Ocean View' (1992)
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Galleries of Scotland