

London Grip, octubre de 2012

Alex Katz. Give Me Tomorrow. Turner Contemporary.

Turner Contemporary has a knack for intelligently organising its exhibitions. The Alex Katz retrospective is prefixed by works chosen by the artist that have either influenced or affected him in some way. So visitors are initially treated to works from Sikert to Hockney. They act as a warm up and make the visitor rather well disposed towards Katz.

The artist has been painting from at least the 1950s, so the exhibition incorporates works from his various periods. Significantly Katz is equally accomplished at painting landscapes, still-life, sea-scapes and people. Consequently, the exhibition is organised by subject matter starting with the natural world. What struck me was the artist's choice of colours. In many pictures such as the gorgeous 'Green Reflections' the particular greens used seem entirely new as if the artist had created them for his own means. This was again seen in the still life 'Late Summer Flowers' where the particular shade of orange seems entirely original.

Many of these landscapes are on a scale every bit as grand as the old masters. The picture '4.30 pm' covers a wall. These works are consciously devoid of human or indeed animal life. Of course most landscapes are but even 'Romantic' scenes hint at human existence and Monet's lily ponds are full of busy colour. Katz in contrast presents expanses of sea or land that are simply empty. What transpires is a feeling of stillness and silence and an invitation to simply live in the moment. Audience reactions towards these compositions will very much depend on their personalities. Some will be quite fearful I think at the lack of distraction in the pictures that force the viewer to be similarly still. The scenes may I think create a sense of loneliness in some whereas others will accept the artist's invitation to live in the moment.

Katz' skill lies not just in the grand scale, one wall is dedicated to a row of smaller paintings. These purport to be plans for larger works. However unlike many artists who simply make sketches, they are complete pictures in themselves. In many ways I preferred these more intimate works, largely because the bigger land and sea-scapes have an agenda that precludes a narrative. Whereas the more compact pictures such as 'Young Trees' and 'Night Branch', use depth and detailing that allows the observer to create a story.

It is in this section of the gallery that humans begin to become the subject matter. This was for me something of a relief. The silence and loneliness of the landscapes began to effect my mood, I felt as if I had been on a long walk alone and therefore welcomed the sight of people.



Eleuthera

For me two pictures were outstanding. The extraordinary 'Eleuthera' covers the entire back wall. The composition is that of a line up of young woman in bathing hats and suits. The picture is in no way salacious despite the woman wearing bikinis and swimsuits. I think it's the old fashioned hats so reminiscent of 50s and 60s holidays that avoid a sexual subtext. Painted in 1984 the work still has a vintage feel. At the time Katz aimed to paint works like hoardings and this picture certainly has the feel of an old fashioned advertisement.



Black Hat

The picture of 'Black Hat' (Bettina) is gloriously glamorous. The woman in a large floppy black hat and dark glasses with a perfect mouth was painted as recently as 2010. It is like a vogue cover which I think is why it attracted me. These two paintings lean towards pop art in their strident use of colour and iconic poses.



Round Hill

The other paintings in this section consist of beach gatherings in what seems like an endless summer in Maine. These are peopled by the artist's family and friends. It soon becomes clear that Ada Katz' wife was his muse, appearing in solo portraits and group pictures. These portraits are simply sketched and in a way as empty as the landscapes. This is deliberate as it forces the viewer to disregard our inclination to create a back story and simply live in the moment much like the subject his or herself.

What becomes evident in the 'Maine' pictures is the glorious use of light. This is infused in all the works but reaches its peak in these pieces. Here the artist's skills in landscape and portraiture merge. These are elegant scenes with beautiful people at peace on the beach. They give the appearance of wealth. Consequently the groups much like Gainsborough characters seem to have little to do with the average viewer's world. Yet what struck me was the prevailing silence again. I received no sense of communication between the group as they basked, read or simply looked into the distance. Each individual seemed self contained and as quiet as the sea-scape itself.

Perhaps the most unusual work is the cut out paintings in the middle of the room. They are part installation part picture, each depicting people in a canoe paddling furiously. Significantly each boat is driven by a young woman. I felt this reinforced the feeling of strong woman throughout this section. It was refreshing to see females who are not simply sexualised. Ada is always fully clothed, the bathing girls wear their costumes with grace and confidence and throughout the beach scenes bikini clad woman calmly read rather than cavort.

This exhibition has something for every taste from exquisite flowers, grand sea and landscapes, smaller works full of stories and woman paddling their own canoes. All suffused with glorious light and original colour.

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