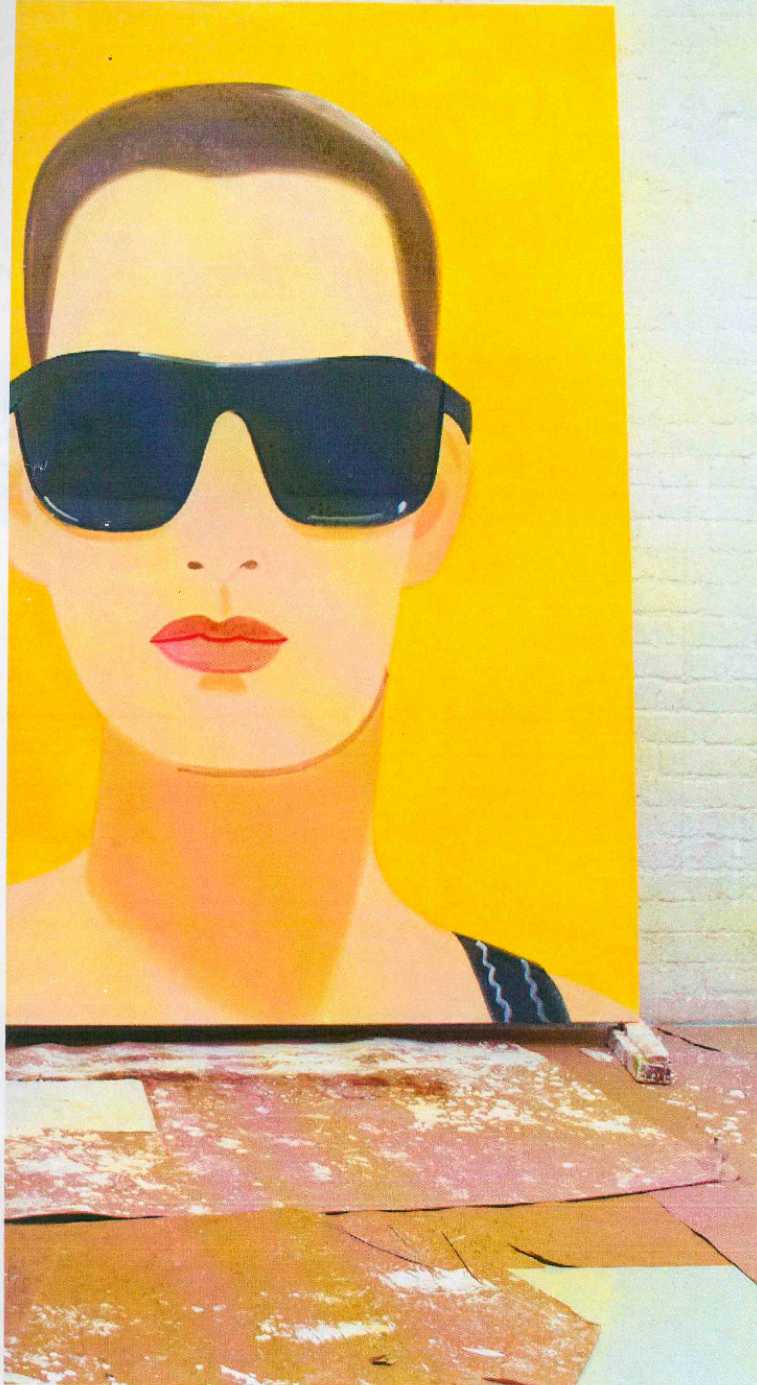


New York, New York, Phillips de Pury & Company, diciembre de 2009



Alex Katz photographed in his studio, New York, October 27, 2009



ALEX KATZ RADICAL REALIST

TEXT DAVID COHEN | PHOTOGRAPHY JASON SCHMIDT

ALEX KATZ, LIKE fellow New Yorker Woody Allen, encapsulates our perception of a city that, in turn, has shaped him as an artist. And just as there is two-way traffic between Katz and New York, so Katz's relationship with the New York School has been symbiotic. He has drawn on multiple aspects of high and popular culture as well as artists with strikingly different allegiances. Over time, he has become an avatar who cuts across generational and stylistic divides.

Katz is a realist within the traditional genres of landscape and portraiture. His approach, however, remains as radical as when, in the early 1960s, he achieved artworld acclaim with oversize, cool, flat, highly stylized portraits that caught the panache of the new decade. In another startling move, a figure could multiply within the same canvas, as in *The Black Dress* (1960) in which the artist's chic young wife Ada (his constant top model) is lined up six times in varying poses. The bold delineations and solid fields of saturated color in classic Katz seemed like a fusion of advertising billboards and Coptic funerary portraits, as one commentator wryly observed. From the outset, Katz was acutely conscious of sartorial style and social posture in depictions of a close-knit circle of sitters — Ada, his young son, Vincent, his bohemian, downtown circle. There was none of the gloomy introversion of expressionist portraiture in either the painter's delivery or the sitter's demeanor. Instead, there was a suave optimism, depersonalized yet confident, pure New York.

Katz was born in Brooklyn in 1927 and raised in Queens, never losing the distinctive accent of the outer boroughs. He studied at the Cooper Union and at the Skowhegan School in Maine where since the mid-1950s he has spent his summers. While Maine locales provide his landscape motifs, a number of significant topographical subjects were observed in New York in other seasons. There are stark winter trees from

Central Park, for instance, sandwiching the closely cropped, pallid, red-lipped pedestrian in her purple beret in *January III* (1992). His nocturnes do for New York what Whistler's did for London, capturing the oddly abstract sensation of auto and street lights on Sixth Avenue near his Soho loft as surely as Whistler did smog on the Thames. His acute urban sense of artifice in reality harvested an audaciously pared-down motif of office lights left blazing at night in *Varick* (1988). This twelve-foot wide canvas is seemingly all black save for the masterful stroke of white for the lit corner office. Despite its slickness, the image is imbued with Hopperesque poignancy. His latest show, at PaceWildenstein earlier this year, featured Munch-like moonscapes in Washington Square.

But for Katz, New York is a place for people rather than landmarks. His aesthetic has always been richly nourished by singularly cosmopolitan sources. As a young man, jazz and cinema were his touchstones. From Antonioni movies he got the idea that a drastically cropped face is more immediately present and compelling than a composed portrait—an insight confirmed by Japanese prints which he studied very closely as a student. He never lost his youthful fascination with 'glamorous people' (he once sold singer Lionel Hampton a hot dog at a black dance, he proudly recalls in his memoirs). He found Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Stan Getz to be 'cool, all-over, technically brilliant, and lyrical,' qualities that soon came to apply to his own painting. These smooth jazzmen were studiously anti-romantic: bebop was an upbeat, urbane refinement of the blues. In a similar way, Katz self-consciously distanced himself from the bombastic and mythic pretensions of the late followers of Abstract Expressionism who dominated the fifties scene.

THE SOFT PALETTE of his painting in the 1950s and the delicacy of his collages – his first works to gain peer recognition – were deliberately anti-macho. When someone at a party told him that they thought because of his name and style that he was a girl, he replied that he was pleased that his feminine side came through. At the same time that he was finding his distance from the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic, however, the young Katz was taken up by Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. Their energy, bravura and originality fuelled his own ambition. He was closer, in fact, to many abstract painters than to old-time realists, an anomaly he shared with Fairfield Porter, who was an early writer in support of Katz.

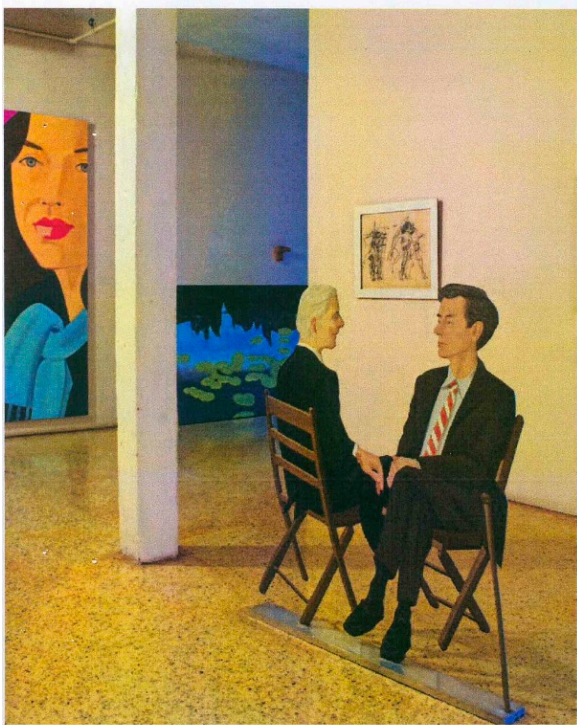
Almost more than painting, Katz found aesthetic affinities in current dance and poetry, which in the 1960s came to take the place that jazz had occupied in his formative years. Edwin Denby, the poet and dance writer and his friend Rudy Burckhardt were instrumental mentors. When Katz first met Denby, the young painter introduced the dance writer to the latest moves







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at the Palladium. In turn, Denby set Katz up with the experimental dancer Paul Taylor, for whom Katz would design many sets and costumes. Katz and Taylor hit it off with a common attitude towards style: Taylor responded enthusiastically to his theory about style being content and having no content. 'Paul said, 'Oh yes! Yes! That was the first thing I decided – to make art with no content, no expression, and most of all NO FORM.'

Whether he was influenced by the work of New York School poets like Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler and Kenneth Koch; jazzmen of the Fifties; dance people with whom he collaborated in the Sixties and Seventies; or the fashion world to which he has turned with increasing avidity, the twin attributes Katz has consistently discovered the twin attributes which define his own practice: detachment and technique. This has never amounted to remoteness or nonchalance: Katz's aesthetic was rooted in Fifties cool rather than Sixties cold, to follow Robert Storr's distinction. Sentiment and nostalgia have never been alien to his subject matter. But his values are studiously (and provocatively) concerned with stylistic surfaces rather than psychological depths.

HIS COOLNESS, HIS distance from Abstract Expressionism, and the billboard association, naturally had him confused for a while with Pop Art. When he completed his first serial screen painting, Andy Warhol is reputed to have said, 'Gee, they look like Alex Katz's.' Katz, meanwhile, keenly admired James Rosenquist's billboard aesthetic for its complexity, scale and finesse. But Katz was markedly indifferent to mass culture: he was concerned with the kind of style generated by interesting people, like the disparate circle of writers, artists and personalities populating *Cocktail Party* (1965), depicting a gathering in his Flatiron loft, not the banality imposed on the masses by ad men.

Much as Katz was a realist who took more energy from abstraction than realism – the critic Irving Sandler coined the term 'new perceptual realism' to describe Katz's and Philip Pearlstein's idiom and stress their avant-garde credentials – so artists who have looked to Katz as an example have been abstract or conceptual as well as realist. In the 1960s, he began to visit the School of Art at Yale, where he had a significant impact on the generation which included Robert Mangold, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Chuck Close, Janet Fish and Rackstraw Downes. Downes (a landscape painter who shows at Betty Cuninghame Gallery and who recently received a

MacArthur Foundation 'genius' award) was making abstract paintings when he was at Yale. To these artists, Katz presented the possibility of working with representation while being firmly rooted in very contemporary concerns with scale, perception and vernacular language. The sculptor Joel Shapiro also came under Katz's influence, as later did the painter Jennifer Bartlett. There is clearly an affinity between Shapiro's willingness to inject playful figuration within a reductive, purist idiom, and Katz's abstraction-within-representation.

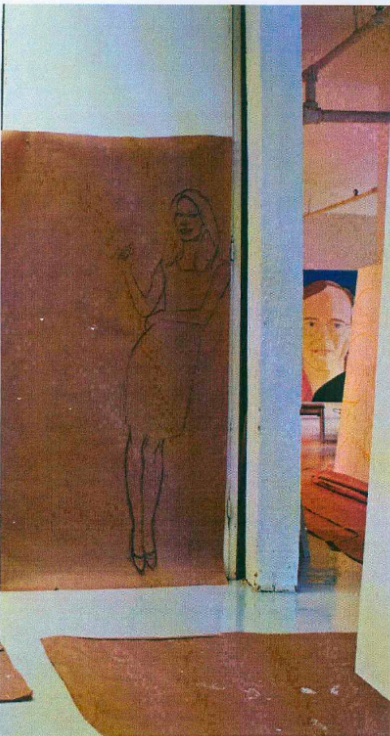
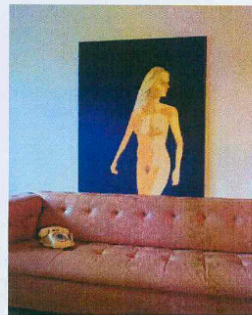
There is no question, however, that Katz has also been a touchstone for artists who wanted to work from observation through years when artworld dogmatists were proclaiming that realist painting, or any kind of painting, was dead. In a way, though, Katz has maintained a foot in two camps: like his peers Neil Welliver, Red Grooms and the quirky painterly realist Lois Dodd, with whom he was close from his Cooper Union days, he has doggedly pursued his subject interests regardless of whether they are in fashion or not.

At the same time he has also sought out, and been sought out by, successive generations of hip young artists in New York (and increasingly, internationally too). They are as likely to work in photography and video – pace the Swiss Beat Streuli – as painting.

Katz himself has a 'three year' theory – a variant of Warhol's fifteen minutes – in which an artist can be 'up to date,' after which he or she will be made to look old-fashioned. According to Katz, for instance, Picasso was put in the shade in 1913

by Léger and Gris. His own 'bounce' came in 1959–62, after which he saw himself as working against the grain. A rare exception to this harsh law of hipness was Matisse, who 'hit a double': as a Fauve, and then – in old age – with his cutouts. Katz is clearly talking about actual stylistic breakthroughs in the work rather than status or reputation. Otherwise, his own second inning would be measured at three decades rather than years, for since the 1980s he has come to enjoy the position of a mature artist in the company of young spirits.

It was in the Eighties when his own 'come-back' began. Artists of the pictures generation, like David Salle, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman, and neo-expressionists like Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl and Francesco Clemente, heralded Katz as almost a Picabia in their midst. Francis Picabia was the seeming joker of the pre-war Paris avant-garde. In the Eighties, he came to be regarded as highly relevant in terms of ironic attitude and subject matter. Katz, of course,



did not relate directly to either Picabia or to the artists of the 1980s in any painterly specific: the connection arose through the simple fact of his belligerent and stylish transgression of formal or conceptual norms. If there is a closer affinity, it exists most obviously in the work of Cindy Sherman: her cinematic self-regard arguably taps the multi-personality style-consciousness of Katz's self-portraits and the glazed, ethereal remoteness of his Ada paintings.

Into the Nineties, Katz's appeal persisted. Elizabeth Peyton's fey icons of celebrities and friends, while emotionally remote from Katz's coolness in their penchant for the doomed and the elegiac, do share Katz's declared and evident interest in nostalgia and sentiment. Peyton found her pictorial language through a fusion of David Hockney and Katz, tapping a melancholy often present in Katz's early faces of Vincent. That Peyton alighted on Katz is indicative less of his hipness than of his passé status – making him safe for rediscovery. Some younger artists in Katz's circle have made it into his paintings as sitters – Cecily Brown (whose father, the British critic David Sylvester, was a champion of Katz following his discovery by Charles Saatchi), Mariko Mori, Ena Swansea and Jessica Craig-Martin. Craig-Martin's photographs of Hamptons parties, while unKatzian in the extent to which they are judgmental and subjective, share the master's understated astuteness.

KATZ IS IMPORTANT to artists well beyond New York. Peter Doig, the Canadian-Scottish-Caribbean painter of emotionally charged symbolist landscapes, is an avowed fan. Merlin James, who shows small, quirky pictures steeped in a problematic nostalgia both for the old masters and for modernism at Sikkema Jenkins, is also a highly influential, polemical writer on art for whom Katz is almost the only vital, living link to the tradition that concerns him.

The reasons for Katz's allure differ between generations and milieus, but three factors are constant. The first is that he fuses disparate strands (historic, aesthetic) without offering a compromise: abstract and figurative, traditional and hip, nuanced and schematic. The second is that, despite his high standing among artists, his respectable market and frequent museum shows, he is not, like Jasper Johns, so institutionally vaunted that emerging artists are unable to relate to him. He is still in their orbit. And last but not least, is that he remains an artist staggeringly at the top of his game. Always within his own idiom, he is constantly moving into new territory. Unmistakable yet always changing? That sounds like New York. ■

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