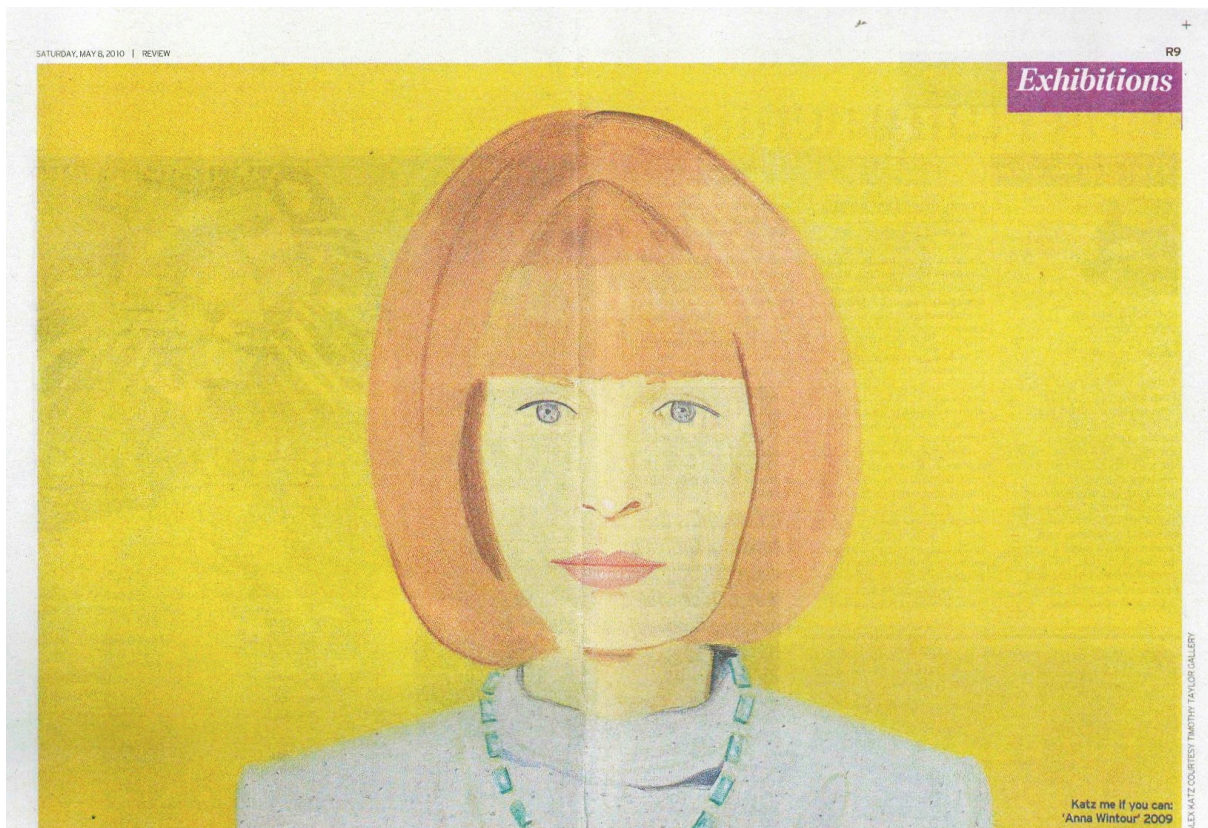


Review, 8 de mayo de 2010



WHAT LIES BENEATH?

His portraits betray an obsession with style and surface. So how did Alex Katz become one of the most influential painters alive, asks **Martin Gayford**

I've always been very interested in people's ideas of the here and now," says Alex Katz. "I want to paint in the present tense." Katz, the subject of a small new exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London, was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1927. Though not widely known on this side of the Atlantic, he is one of the most influential painters alive; his graphic, highly-coloured works have inspired a whole group of young art megastars such as Elizabeth Peyton, Julian Opie and Peter Doig.

In essence, what he has done is to find a convincingly contemporary way to capture in paint what the Japanese call *ukiyo*, or "the floating world" – the passing, social scene of smart urban life. Utamaro, the Japanese master of the woodblock print, is one of Katz's own eclectic reference points – along with Jackson Pollock, Sixties television advertisements and an Egyptian sculptor from the second millennium BC. 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, far-out musicians. High bohemia is basically what it is."

These figures, together with

Katz is to designer sunglasses what Claude Monet was to garden ponds

friends and family and the landscapes of Maine, where he spends the summer months, are Katz's subjects. A work in the National Portrait Gallery show, called *One Flight Up* (1968) consists of 31 portraits on aluminium, cut out and mounted together. The effect of looking at it is of stepping into a New York party (say, Holly Golightly's bash in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*). When Katz was painting it he felt, he says, "like a casting director" trying to work out who would

fit into the scene.

Among the throng are the painters Philip Pearlstein and Rodrigo Moynihan, poet John Ashbery and Katz's wife, Ada, a perennial subject for him.

When he was starting out in the Fifties, the New York art scene was dominated by the likes of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Alongside these giants of abstract expressionism Katz says he felt "totally isolated". But

stylised in a quirky, personal way.

If Pollock was one source, another was Thutmose – sculptor of the bust of Nefertiti – who Katz has described as "the No 1 artist I've ever seen".

The glacially elegant Queen Nefertiti would have been a shoo-in for a *Vogue* cover if the magazine had been running in 14BC.

Anna Wintour, editor-in-chief of American *Vogue*, is in some ways a 21st-century equivalent of Nefertiti. Katz has known her for years but hadn't thought of painting her until Sandy Nairne, director of the National Portrait Gallery suggested it.

"I thought it was a terrific idea," Katz says. "When I first met her about 20 years ago, she was just another attractive lady. Then, all of a sudden she was Anna Wintour. It was a difference. Now she's highly styled, very elegant."

In Katz's view, one senses, there is no higher praise.

While the abstract expressionists agonised about such matters as the tragic meaning of life, Katz obsessed about surface details – hairstyles, hats, sunglasses. He is to designer shades what Claude Monet was to garden ponds. Katz's pictures are fresh, flat, brightly-coloured and

© 'Alex Katz Portraits' is at the National Portrait Gallery, London WC2 (020 7306 0055) from next Saturday until September 21

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