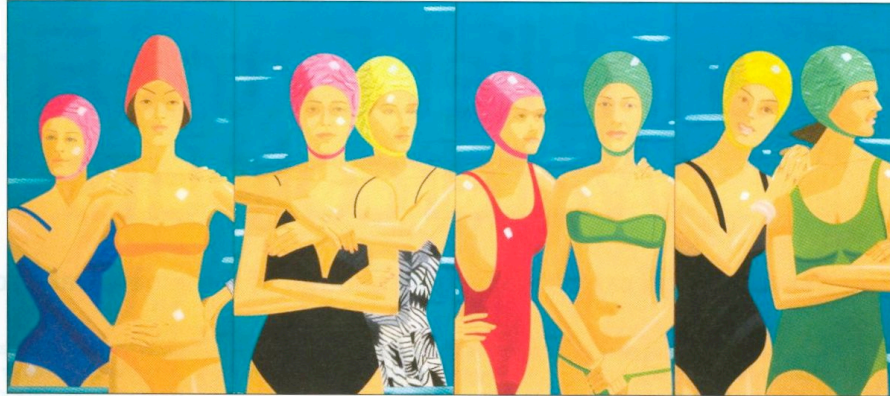


The Artist, verano de 2012

MASTERWORKS

Alex Katz (b 1927) **Eleuthera 1984**, oil on linen, 120×264in (305×670.5cm). Private Collection, Courtesy Galería Javier López, Madrid.
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Alex Katz: Eleuthera 1984

by Oliver Lange

Perhaps because he has always worked independently of the major American art movements of the 20th century, Alex Katz is not as well known as some of his contemporaries. Yet he has been a significant figure in modern painting since the early 1960s and continues to be one of the most important, influential and respected living American artists. In wanting to 'paint in the present tense', he has concentrated on bold, flat, highly-coloured works, and these have attracted interest and acclaim throughout the world and inspired many young artists, including Julian Opie and Peter Doig.

Panels

Eleuthera is typical of Katz's work: it is large, beautifully designed, economical in line and form, and uses essentially flat, heightened colour. His work seems simple and in many ways akin to Pop Art, but equally it is visually very powerful, quirky and seductive.

Eleuthera consists of four linen panels, each measuring 120×66in (305×167.5cm). Katz always works wet-on-wet, so each panel had to be completed in a single session. Large panels like these often take over 12 hours of uninterrupted work. In this way he is able to blend one tone into the next and the process ensures that the brushwork is fresh and immediate, that the image has vitality and energy and filled with what Katz calls 'fast light'.

Working from the model, he starts with small gestural drawings in pen and pencil, after which he makes some oil sketches to help resolve the image to his satisfaction:

'an image that works but isn't too beautiful'. More pencil drawings follow, now quite precise and with a consideration of tonal values and other essential information.

Next, Katz transfers the image on to a sheet of brown paper the same size as the canvas panel, sometimes using an overhead projector. The contour drawing thus made forms the basis for the cartoon for the final painting. It is vital that he gets all the outlines and shapes exactly right, so this stage takes most of the time. Referring to all the available information in the earlier oil sketches and drawings, he perfects the cartoon, working in charcoal on paper.

With the full-scale drawing finalised, he uses a rowel (spiked revolving disc) to create a series of perforations along the outlines. Then the cartoon is placed over the canvas and a pouncing technique is used to retrace the outlines onto the surface below. Each line is dusted with powdered chalk, which seeps through the perforations to leave a faint trace of the image on the canvas. The final part of the preparation is to mix all the colours and then everything is ready for the non-stop painting stage.

While the overall impression of a large Katz painting is of very flat areas of colour, seen close up the brushwork is more obvious and you begin to notice little accents of colour. However, painting technique is not his prime concern, rather his work is about the style. It is the style that holds everything together. Katz began painting in the 1950s and during the first decade of his career he admits to destroying a thousand paintings in the

struggle to find his style.

Initially he developed a technique of painting which he called 'cut-outs' – paintings on cut-out panels of wood and aluminium, a sort of hybrid of painting and sculpture. From the early 1960s, influenced by billboard advertising, films and television, he started painting large-scale portraits, including many of his wife, Ada, and then groups of figures in which he portrays the social scene of smart urban life in New York – images of dancers, poets, painters, critics and fashion models. He has always been a prolific painter whose work is distinctive, important and influential. TA

You can see Eleuthera 1984 at Alex Katz: Give me Tomorrow, an exhibition at Tate St Ives for which Alex Katz has selected over 30 canvases, plus collages and cut-outs, that span his career from the 1950s to the present. There is a special emphasis on Katz's seascapes and beach scenes, as well as images of family holidays and friends painted at his own seaside retreat of Lincolnville, Maine, where he continues to spend his summers. Additionally, in a separate one-room display, Katz has made a personal selection of works from the Tate Collection.

Alex Katz: Give me Tomorrow is a collaboration with Turner Contemporary, Margate, where it will tour in October 2012.

The exhibition is open daily until September 23, from 10am to 5.20pm, last admission 5pm.

Admission: £6.50; £3.90 concessions; under 18s free. For further information telephone 01736 796226; www.tate.org.uk/stives.