

*The World of Interiors*, junio de 2012Alex Katz **TATE ST IVES** Porthmeor Beach, St Ives

Alex Katz's New York studio is a lordly haven above SoHo's antheap. He has watched successive generations of artists come to the neighbourhood, hit or miss, and then flake out for quieter parts, while he has stayed the distance: a native New Yorker, nurtured, tutored and acclaimed there. Nevertheless, he'll willingly admit that his endurance is only thanks to regular decompression on the fields and beaches of Maine. And his painting affirms this, following the seasonal migrations of Manhattan's smart set from their crowded salons to windy country picnics and afternoons sprawled on the sand.

This summer, Tate St Ives is presenting a survey of those Maine subjects, dating right back to the beginning of Katz's career in the 1950s. It's a tribute for his 85th birthday – and a thoughtful one, given the gallery's beachside location. By throwing light on his genesis as a painter, it should correct the dismissive view that is sometimes held of him as Pop art's simpleton, a mere traditionalist with a twist. We forget that Abstract Expressionism reigned when Katz was coming up. Cubist-Surrealist miserablism, soul portrayal, was the house style of his first art school in New York, and it wasn't until he tried another college, in Maine, that he found his métier. Ventilated by lungfuls of air and wide green acreage, he saw that the broad, expressive manner of the period's Colour Field painters (Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still) could be lent a

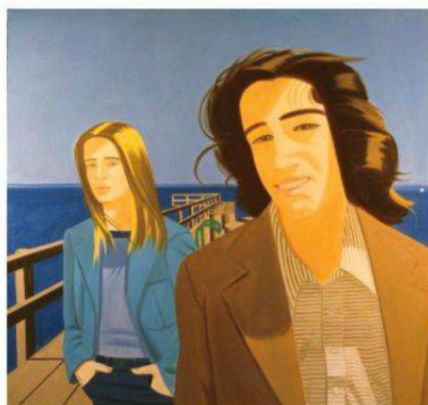
lighter air – and their abstract mode a jolting dash of figuration – when turned to face the landscape.

We tend to love Katz more for his personalities than for what he shows of their locales, and yet figures arrived late in his painting, introduced less as characters than as emblems, flat signposts for humanity rather than the real thing. This, most likely, was what critics first responded to. But Katz has enjoyed fresh waves of appreciation, a wider public coming when he relaxed his manner and showed he had a gift as a cocktail-set fabulist, an artist cosy among the sophisticates, but willing to undress their pretension.

All the while Katz was winning over another difficult public among younger painters. They loved the way his style reconciled Pop's cartoon flatness with the depth demanded by figuration, and

how it produced engagingly stretched-out sketches of human personality – you can see Katz's fingerprints on the work of Brian Calvin, Elizabeth Peyton and many others. It would be dishonest to claim that Katz was some outlying genius when he first emerged, since Jane Freilicher and Philip Pearlstein were among his circle, and Milton Avery was an undoubted influence; but while those artists now seem too intimate or domestic or plain old hat, somehow Katz just goes on looking like your favourite, your coolest, uncle.

ALEX KATZ runs 19 May-23 Sept, Mon-Sun 10-5.20 ■ MORGAN FALCONER is a critic and art historian based in New York

Top: *Ocean View*, oil on board, 1992. Above: *Islesboro Ferry Slip*, oil on canvas, 1976