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One cool Katz at Tate St Ives

TATE St Ives is to be congratulated for mounting a five star exhibition of a major living American artist, featuring the often large scale paintings of a post – or is it pre-pop artist. He came to the world's attention through the billboard-like pictures of people's faces, works that re-invigorated figurative painting through the new image-making strategies of advertising and the commercial media.

by Peter Davies

This notable and unusual exhibition fills the entire curatorial summer slot and links Cornish coastal culture – sunbathers, surfers, swimmers and plein airists etc – with the equivalent situation on the eastern seaboard of the United States.

After the follies and obscurantist absurdities of recent conceptual and sensational art and of other Arnolfinis bought by Martin Clark from Bristol, the Katz show is precisely the kind that Tate should be doing. Clark's essay is, for good measure, excellent and touches on profound points concerning our perceptions of past, present and future.

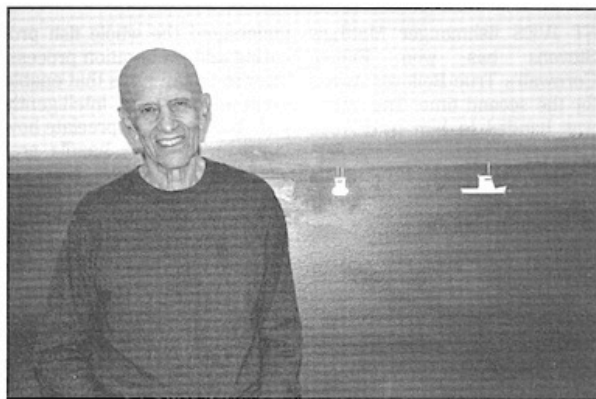
Clark writes how 'people don't recognize the present until it is the past. It is too close, too chaotic, too immediate, too banal'.

Katz's art may be all of these things and more but achieves a timelessness not only in the mundane sense that the painted image is permanent but in terms of rescuing a snapshot moment and interpreting it through the atmospheric and psychological sieve of the artist's imagination. Better than us Europeans, with our abiding allegiances to the past, Americans have a more natural feeling for the infinity of the present.

BILLBOARD

Twentieth century American art, to be sure, has since the Armoury show in 1913 developed its own modern tradition of which photo-realism, billboard art, pop art and new image painting are later manifestations. But there is a rampant newness and cult of individuality in much American painting which does not, however, prevent Katz from enjoying an iconographic and atmospheric link to the art of Hopper.

Katz's use of large scale formats makes chromatic and formal reduction obligatory. The lessons of minimalism and hard edged abstraction, though such movements belonged to the realm of abstract rather than figurative art, were heeded so that a decorative largesse and immedi-



ALEX Katz at Tate St Ives.

acy and clarity of statement could hold sway.

In some Katz pictures here an almost kitschy take is made on abstract art, as for instance when his elegant wife Ada's portrait is couched within a lozenge purple diamond adapted from the hard edge art of Noland, Kelly or Newman. Equally, large empty landscape expanses in *Green Reflections* and *Beige Ocean* (1999), while taking Monet's late water lily manner towards patterned abstraction, makes a play on the late modernist ethos of minimalism with its Zen-like credo less is more.

Katz depicts his own world in direct and intimate and candid terms. Despite the detached flatness and impersonality of his paint handling with its almost soft focus ease and sensuality, Katz's images are of family and friends. And, where his 1969 *Self Portrait with Sunglasses* is concerned, depicts himself as a Joe Cool dude in reflective shades. Ada recurs and other family members feature in 1975's *Isleboro Ferry Slip* with their up-to-the-picture-surface cinematic physiognomies. Art meets cinema meets holiday snap.

FAUX NAÏF CHARM

Katz's early work, while sharing the reduced formats of the large later oeuvre, has a faux naïf charm and awkwardness that again proves palatable for a Cornish audience. This early work owes something to Katz's much loved compatriot Milton Avery and to the later British painters Peter Kinley and Danny Markey, artists who entertained simplicity, folk eccentricity and directness of vision on the grand stage of the mainstream pictorial tradition.



ELEUTHERA 1984 by Alex Katz oil on linen, 305 x 670 cm Private Collection, Courtesy Galería Javier López, Madrid. Art © Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

