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Overcoming the Orthodoxy of Abstraction

A Review of 'Alex Katz,' at the Nassau County Museum of Art

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER AUG. 29, 2013

The standard narrative in 20th-century art history is that painters had to struggle against tradition and conservative institutions to forge a new language of abstraction. But then abstraction itself became an orthodoxy, and those who wanted to paint nature or the human figure found themselves swimming against the tide of earlier revolutions. The career of Alex Katz, who successfully made this transition, is one example. A selection of about 45 of his works from the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art is on view at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor.

A lifelong New Yorker, Mr. Katz, 86, was born to Russian immigrants and attended Cooper Union in the 1940s and the Skowhegan School in Maine. In a video accompanying the show, he describes how New York in the '50s was rich with poetry, jazz and Afro-Cuban music. But in art, there was a "holy trinity" of "content, form and subject" in which abstract form became the subject of the work. Working against that model, Mr. Katz made style, or the "manner" in which a painting was created, the most important thing.

Nonetheless, the earliest works in the exhibition show Mr. Katz circling around abstraction. "Untitled" (1950) is a spare composition of brush and black ink on paper that looks like a Jackson Pollock drawing — except that the lines resolve themselves into loose outlines of houses and trees. Similarly, "Untitled" (1951) is a dense, all-over composition that recalls the work of Lee Krasner or Adolph Gottlieb. Here, though, the lines and shapes snap into silhouettes of human figures in a restaurant, grouped around red tabletops, suggesting a kind of deconstructed Edward Hopper painting.

"Swamp Maple II" (1970), among the works by Alex Katz. Credit Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, All Rights Reserved, Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, NY

"Day Lily II" (1969).

Mr. Katz was also interested in portraiture — not a popular genre for New York painters in the '50s. One of the earliest portraits here is of "Richard Bellamy" (1960), a pioneering art dealer whose Green Gallery showed Pop and Minimalist art. The portrait of Mr. Bellamy puts the figure at the center of the canvas, surrounded by a uniform field of tan or beige. The flat application of color is a hallmark of Mr. Katz's paintings, but also recalls the portraits of Édouard Manet, who referred to his unmodulated color as "patches."

And then there is Ada, Mr. Katz's wife, the subject of over 250 works. Mr. Katz once said in an interview in the Brooklyn Rail that she had been "like Dora Maar to Picasso" for him. The Ada portraits are an apt way to gauge Mr. Katz's developing style. There is the flat application of color, particularly in "The Red Smile" (1963), in which a field of red occupies half the canvas and Ada the other half. There is the muted emotion in his figures, which one can see in several Ada portraits, and in portraits of his son, Vincent. The revelation here might be that Mr. Katz and Ada actually look similar; a cutout self-portrait of Mr. Katz painted on aluminum, "Alex" (1968), which stands before "The Red Smile," seems to support research suggesting that we seek out mates who are, in many ways, mirror images of ourselves.

One of many portraits of his wife, Ada.

This is a strong exhibition that employs a little-practiced but excellent model: a major museum lending works that might not get shown in its own galleries to a smaller regional museum. One result is an opportunity to see earlier and lesser-known works like "Edwin, Blue Series" (1959), a portrait using the collage techniques that the artist explored extensively in the '50s; diminutive landscapes like "Blueberry Field #1" (1959), which reveal Mr. Katz's commitment to plein-air, or painting outdoors; or "Study for Wet Evening" (1986), which Dana Miller, a curator at the Whitney, surmises in the catalog was most likely painted at night with available light.

The show is also installed rather well — not chronologically, but making links between different techniques and practices Mr. Katz adopted to develop his signature style. For instance, the early "Untitled" (1950) work on paper, which straddles the divide between abstraction and representation, looks a bit like Asian calligraphy, which was very popular in New York in the 1950s. But it is hung next to a lithograph, "Swamp Maple II" (1970), which also reveals Mr. Katz's debt to Japanese woodblock prints, with their flat color and compositions, like this one, in which a single tree bisects the picture.

The author Ann Beattie once wrote that Mr. Katz's work showed "people failing to connect" in a world of "alienation, sadness and conflict," and Mr. Katz is quoted in the catalog as saying that "sentimentality always seemed like one of the vices of the art world." His subjects — typically white, professional-looking women and men in suits — have also been compared to the characters in John Cheever short stories; in the catalog, Karl E. Willers, the director of the Nassau County Museum, calls Mr. Katz's style

"Eli" (1963). Credit Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, All Rights Reserved, Alex Katz/Licensed by VAGA, New York

"suave, sophisticated, polished, refined, cultured, stylish."

This is basically true. But in the same way, Mr. Katz borrowed from the 18th-century Japanese printmaker Kitagawa Utamaro, whose work was significant in one way to his contemporary Japanese audience and in another to French painters enamored with his graphic images. Mr. Katz's own style has had a varied legacy. It has become ubiquitous in advertising and graphic design, but also generative for younger artists like Brian Alfred or Kota Ezawa. One might even mention Roni Horn, whose serial photographic portraits echo Mr. Katz's "Ada" portraits in their subtle repetitions of the same individual. In Ms. Horn's work, there is more of a conceptual bent.

And yet, for all his New York literalism, Mr. Katz can be rather Zen. "You can't put your foot into the same river twice," he is quoted as saying in a wall text about the "Ada" paintings — but it might be true for his art in general; despite its recognizable style, his approach remains dynamic. "The river has changed. It's a state of being alive to say that you're different, that everything's different, and trying to find the differences."

"Alex Katz: Selections From the Whitney Museum of American Art," Nassau County Museum of Art, 1 Museum Drive, Roslyn Harbor, through Oct. 13. Information: (516)-484-9337 or nassaumuseum.org.