

PAINTING

## Alex Katz: Black Paintings review – 'A miraculous artist'

★★★★☆

Katz's magazine-illustrator method seems doomed to fail, yet this sublime exhibition of portraiture exposes the simple truths he paints

By JONATHAN JONES

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Ada and Vivien, 2014 Photograph: Courtesy Timothy Taylor Gallery

The veteran American artist Alex Katz was inspecting the hang of his new paintings while I looked at them, but I could not ask him any questions. I was dumbstruck. The only thing I could have said to him at that moment would have been a stuttered, “How come you paint so well?”

How can simple pictures of faces be so unexpected, exciting and fascinating? Katz has been painting portraits for a long time now – he's 87 and began his career in the age of Jackson Pollock – and his latest works do not shatter his established style. Their main novelty is that all the figures are set against black. Many of the pictures have a wide CinemaScope format so the people in them stand out as colourful shapes against a nightscape of glossy darkness. Nicole in a red coat looks like she's walking at midnight in Central Park. Vincent in a white shirt has his back turned to



Alex Katz's Black Paintings exhibition is hung at Timothy Taylor Gallery, London. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex

the artist, as if lost in black thoughts. All these people, identified by first names only, stand quietly and softly in a delicate nocturnal mood. Tender is the night.

It really is a mystery how Katz paints so very well, for he uses methods that seem doomed to fail. He summarises details of faces and hair in the stylish visual shorthand of an illustrator for *Vanity Fair* or the *New Yorker*. In the 1950s, Andy Warhol drew cute illustrations for adverts and magazines. Warhol dropped this charming style to become an avant-garde artist, but Katz has kept right on since the 50s. Alex Katz's Black Paintings exhibition is hung at Timothy Taylor Gallery, London. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex perfecting a manner rooted in magazine cartoons. Yet he is utterly serious.

Confidence is everything. Katz has a sublime conviction that his portraits are the truth. The exhibition includes a small room of painted sketches of the people whose luminous images hang so grandly in the main gallery. His initial paintings are fresh, direct, honest observations of the sitters. The difference between them and a finished Katz painting is instructive. As he translates his observations into big pictures he simplifies, purifies and abstracts. A nose becomes a pink shadow, eyebrows thin brown lines, wisps of hair yellow waves.

In the exhibition catalogue an interviewer asks Katz about the abstract artist Kazimir Malevich. Because of the black, you see – Malevich painted the Black Square in 1915. This is why I am glad I did not try to ask Alex Katz a question. The abstracted faces of his friends have more to do with ancient Egyptian portraits or Byzantine icons than they do with modernism. Katz seems to be looking for a truth hidden within appearances. He reveals the essence of a person in a few strong colours and lines. Like the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, he is searching for the real forms that we usually see only as shadows on a cave wall. He is after a truth deeper than the passing moment.

And almost every time, it is there to see. Katz does not turn people into stylish clichés. On the contrary he exposes their inner truth. That is what makes these paintings so powerful: they achieve the highest goals of portraiture in a gloriously American language. Alex Katz is a miraculous artist. That is what I wish I'd told him.

Alex Katz: Black Paintings is the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, from 28 February to 2 April.