

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

the guardian

ART

Alex Katz: Quick Light review – a bright burst of life in freeze-frame

Serpentine Gallery, London

His huge colourful canvases may look painfully simple, but the pain is in knowing no one but Katz could create work this lucid, direct and moving



'These paintings beg a story, but Katz isn't giving us one' ... Vivien, 2015, by Alex Katz. Photograph: Tristan Fewings/Getty/Serpentine Gallery

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Emma in a black swimsuit, painted six times against the yellow ground, her arms going here and there, her feet splayed as if she is a dancer posing on a beach. Vivien, also painted six times, not quite sure what to do with her hands, her sandals firmly planted on a ground that's more orange

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Red House 3 (2013) by Alex Katz. Photograph: Readsreads.info/
Serpentine Gallery

in hue. Grey shirt, black slacks, sunglasses, a white summer hat, holiday casualwear.

These serial images were made in paint, not for the camera, though they look like a set of snapshots. Between them hangs a portrait of the artist's wife, Ada. Since 1959, he has painted her more than 200 times, as her hair changes and fashions change and the years go on and on – a slow-mo burst of freeze-frame images running together into a life.

Alex Katz has always painted people and places, landscapes, cityscapes and light. Taking us from the mid-1990s to the present, there is a lot of variety in this Serpentine show. Portraits and gatherings, cocktail parties and

meetings, people alone and in situations we will never understand, like that moment you turn on a TV and people are talking in some drama, and then you flip the channel or turn the damn thing off, so you'll never know what was going on. Something is always going on.

Even though Katz returns again and again to things he knows so well – his place up in Maine, the city, his family and friends – the light is always changing, even as he paints it. Katz's quickness isn't the same as glibness, or having a trick way of describing things, the way an illustrator has (though if you look at Gainsborough, the way he painted trees and foliage was always the same).

Katz's paintings look painfully simple: painful because you know you couldn't do it, and if you tried it would look cheap and the whole thing would fall apart. The easier he makes it look, the harder he is to emulate. This is one of the exciting things about Katz, not that I go to paintings for a high-wire act. The quicker his paintings seem to be, the longer you want to spend with them. Katz paints with the speed of a thought or a glimpse, but it is all artifice. Katz is sneaky. He works to make it look easy. No one wants to see how hard it is; you don't get marks for effort.

Instantly recognisable, Katz's paintings are sometimes mistaken for pop art, but only because he has always painted the modern world in a modern way, with a kind of casual accuracy – just as his friend, the poet Frank O'Hara, would describe a New York lunch break or a yearning for intimacy while sharing a bottle of Coke.



White Impatiens 2 (2012) by Alex Katz. Photograph: Readsreads.info/
Serpentine Gallery

Katz's world is largely white and affluent, east coast and sophisticated, in the same way Katz is, though he is more of a dandy, even at 88, than most people ever manage. The artist has style and so does his art, but I don't mean any of that as a put-down. He doesn't paint battles and he doesn't paint suffering, his own or anyone else's. He once told me he thought the work of Leon Golub was "kind of adolescent", but we need both kinds of artist, them and a whole lot more, to make sense of the world through their different sensibilities.

The wet-into-wet licks and touches here, the long turn of the brush that makes a bare winter branch or flickering blades of grass or a canopy of leaves, are scuffed with a dryish drag that seems to take as much paint off as it puts on. I watch Katz's paintings as much as I look at them, or maybe he just makes me aware of my own looking and the way things act alone and in consort to make a picture.

The exhibition is full of contrasts, the quick-limbed touch of the paintings and the quick light of the show's title, there one moment and bending into something else the next. There is light on dark water in the stream; on a red house in green countryside. But what really got me here are his paintings of fog and night.

Rhomboids of grazed white and grey, that might be taken for enlarged, single brushstrokes, illuminate slab walls of black, the barest indications of a building's planes. These dancing shapes are sometimes interrupted by a skinny vertical or two, denoting the bars of a window, and the odd, denser fleck of white to indicate a striplight or a bulb behind sheer curtains. What are we doing in front of these windows – looking for trouble? These paintings beg a story, but Katz isn't giving us one.

Another recent cityscape shows the top of a building, sharp as a guillotine against the night, one yellow-lit window, the sky huge above. Another shows a park. I try to get my night vision in the bright gallery but the dark canvas swallows my



Untitled Cityscape (2014) by Alex Katz.
Photograph: Readsreads.info/Serpentine Gallery



📹 [Alex Katz: 'I had to figure out painting by myself'](#)



eye among bare tree-trunks, the white lights through the trees, the jumble of bushes in the distant gloom. The near branches could thwap you in the face.

A big, broad painting – 18ft across and 9ft high – fills a wall with almost nothing but pearly whiteness, vague foliage and trunks coalescing out of the luminous fog. It is a wonderful thing, and painted with the same acute curiosity as a face, light on leaves, the fall of Ada's hair. Katz is always the same, but makes it new every time.

- Alex Katz: Quick Light is at the Serpentine Gallery, London, until 11 September.